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Liturgy in the Broadest Sense

Vincent Lloyd

Abstract

Theologians interested in postmodernism and contemporary culture have recently turned to liturgy as a resource. However, these scholars often overlook the rich tradition of philosophically and theologically sophisticated reflection on liturgy of the past few decades. The result is that essential features of liturgy are overlooked. These features include the authoritative nature of liturgy for theology, and the impossibility of fully expressing the content of liturgy in propositional theology. By turning to the work of liturgical theologians, including Alexander Schmemann, Aidan Kavanagh, and Geoffrey Wainwright, I suggest that the attempt to grapple with contemporary issues by appealing to liturgy will always be compromised unless liturgy is understood in a modest, not broad, sense. I argue that recent work by Catherine Pickstock and William Cavanaugh, among others, ignores the authoritative nature of liturgy. These recent enthusiasts of liturgy promote a 'liturgical culture', but in the process their work takes away what makes liturgy most potent.

Keywords

ritual, liturgy, social norms, Radical Orthodoxy, political theology

Over the past decade, there has been a resurgence of interest in liturgy amongst theologians, particularly those interested in postmodernism and in politics. These theologians suggest that liturgy offers an escape from postmodern nihilism, one that does not fall back on the discredited philosophical foundations of modernity. And they suggest that liturgy can be a building block for genuinely religious political intervention, untainted by compromise with secular liberalism yet dynamic and distinctive.

In light of this rampant enthusiasm for liturgy, it is easy to be blinded to the subtler distinctions that give the concept of liturgy its theological import. For instance, the very basic question of how ritual and liturgy differ has rarely been addressed by liturgy's new enthusiasts. The careful, historically grounded, theoretically subtle

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reflections on liturgy that flourished just a few decades ago have largely been ignored by recent enthusiasts. Alexander Schmemann, Aidan Kavanagh, Geoffrey Wainwright, and others developed an account of liturgy which was powerful but ultimately modest, an account that refrained from making the sweeping philosophical and historical claims that have been made on behalf of liturgy in recent years. I have great sympathy for the philosophical, political, and theological goals of recent scholars of liturgy, but I will argue that appropriating the language of liturgy for their claims obscures the unique potency of liturgy when liturgy is understood in the narrow, modest sense. Specifically, I will argue that the valorization of, and aspiration for, a 'liturgical culture' undercuts the *authoritative* nature of liturgy. Liturgy, understood rightly, stands apart from social norms; social norms must be revised in light of liturgy, but social norms will always remain imperfect, requiring continual revision in light of liturgy.

Liturgical Theology

It is astounding how little dialogue there is between recent writers on liturgy – who I will call the New Liturgists – and the debates about liturgical theology of the 1960s and 1970s, not to mention the Liturgical Movement of the 1920s and 1930s.[1] Moreover, theologians who are producing new work in the field of liturgical theology often ignore and are ignored by the New Liturgists. Perhaps there is a (largely accurate) perception that scholars of liturgy are more interested in practical questions – the significance of the sacraments for daily life, regional variety of devotional practices, etc. – than in critical reflection on the significance of liturgy in general. By turning to the work of Schmemann, Kavanagh, and Wainwright – three of many participants in the vigorous debates about liturgical theology of the 1960s and 1970s – I suggest that the New Liturgists could gain theoretical resources, and perspective on their enterprise, through greater awareness of the tradition in which they stand.

The Liturgical Movement is the label applied to an amorphous increase in interest in liturgy that reached a high water mark between

[1] There is some implicit dialogue: for example, William Cavanaugh acknowledges (and has biographical connections to) Geoffrey Wainwright, and Catherine Pickstock draws on Gregory Dix's historical work. This lack of historical reflectiveness is particularly worrying as Jewish writers join in the recent enthusiasm for liturgy, apparently without appreciating the distinctively Christian heritage of the concept. For example, Steven Kepnes's recent book purports to be a Jewish 'counterpart' to Catherine Pickstock's *After Writing*. Kepnes, *Jewish Liturgical Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Cf. Randi Rashkover and C. C. Pecknold (eds.), *Liturgy, Time, and the Politics of Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

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the World Wars.[2] It involved theology as well as popular piety, Catholics as well as Protestants and Orthodox, and Christians across the globe from the United States to Europe to India. Stale church life could be revived, social changes accompanying modernity addressed, and neoscholastic theology circumvented by grounding Christian piety and life 'in the fundamental truths that constitute the soul of the liturgy.' As the Belgian monk Lambert Beauduin exuberantly put it: 'Let us change the routine and monotonous assistance at acts of worship into an active and intelligent participation; let us teach the faithful to pray and confess these truths in a body: and the liturgy thus practiced will insensibly arouse a slumbering faith and give a new efficacy, both in prayer and action, to the latent energies of the baptized souls.'[3]

Ecclesiastical institutions responded ambivalently to this renewed interest in liturgy, although many scholars see the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council as at least indirectly resulting from the Liturgical Movement. What is most relevant here is the reaction to the Liturgical Movement, and to the institutional and popular reforms it prompted, among theologians. In the wake of Vatican II, many theologians reflecting on liturgy articulated their mixed feelings about the renewed interest in liturgy by carefully separating the (desirable) turn to liturgy as an authority for Christian life from the (undesirable) reduction of liturgy to the whims of historically and temporally specific cultures. The question for liturgical theologians became how to reconcile culturally specific forms of liturgical piety with the timeless authority which liturgy was understood to hold.

Alexander Schmemann, a Russain emigrant to France and then to the United States, Orthodox theologian, and dean for two decades of St. Vladimir's Seminary, was acutely aware of this tension between liturgical piety and liturgical theology. Schmemann charged that when scholars of liturgy focus only on cataloging and reflecting on existing practices of Christian worship, they elide the crucial question of what happens in worship.[4] This led Schmemann to differentiate 'liturgical theology' from 'theology of liturgy.' In the latter, liturgy is seen as an

[2] John R. K. Fenwick and Bryan D. Spinks, *Worship in Transition: The Liturgical Movement in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Continuum, 1995); Alcuin Reid, *The Organic Development of the Liturgy* (Farnborough: St. Michael's Abbey Press, 2004); Aidan Nichols, *Looking at Liturgy: A Critical View of Its Contemporary Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996).

[3] Lambert Beauduin, O.S.B., *Liturgy the Life of the Church* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1926), cited in Alexander Schmemann, *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemann*, edited by Thomas J. Fisch (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), p. 2.

[4] Schmemann uses the distinction between the question of 'how' worship is done and 'what' is done in worship to frame his study, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996).

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object studied and governed by theology. In the former case, liturgy is a source for theology. For liturgical theology, what can and cannot be said about the Christian faith is determined, at least in part, by liturgy. Liturgical theology is not a descriptive enterprise, and it is not the project of governing liturgical practice. Liturgical theology recovers resources from liturgy that inform – with normative, not simply advisory, force – theology as a whole.

According to Schmemann, moving from theology of liturgy to liturgical theology is a move from scholastic to patristic understandings of liturgical experience: 'The Fathers do not "reflect" on liturgy. For them it is not an *object* of theological inquiry and definition, but rather the living source and the ultimate criterion of all Christian thought.'[5] Schmemann emphasizes the patristic maxim *lex orandi est lex credendi* which he interprets as underscoring the force of liturgy to affect belief. Scholasticism severed this connection, turning theology into an exercise in reason detached from practice. At most, on the scholastic view liturgy is considered as 'data,' according to Schmemann, but the method scholastics used for selecting and studying the data of liturgy was predetermined by rational reflection independent of liturgical practice.

Unlike the New Liturgists, who we will shortly encounter, Schmemann is very careful to distinguish liturgy from ritual and 'cult.' These latter terms are premised on 'a radical distinction between the "sacred" and the "profane",' he charges. Ritual is understood to be simply a means of sanctifying a community, making some of the profane sacred.[6] This is a distinctive feature of Christian *leitourgia*, as opposed to the pagan *leitourgia* to which the New Liturgists often make reference. Although both Christian and pagan liturgy are public ritual-like practices, Schmemann would hesitate to consider Christian liturgy as ritual. To do so would flatten the distinctiveness of Christian liturgy; it would overlook the special role which Christian liturgy has as 'the actualization in this world of the "world to come".'[7]

The difference that Schmemann notes between liturgy and ritual is key for understanding his account of liturgy, and perhaps it can be put in less mysterious terms. In academic discourse, there is a usually unspoken sense that liturgy is an 'insider's' concept while ritual is an 'outsider's' concept. Superficially, Schmemann could be read in this way: ritual and liturgy are the same, except for the uniquely Christian association of liturgy with a 'world to come' – visible only from Schmemann's perspective as a Christian insider. In other words,

[5] Schmemann, *Liturgy and Tradition*, p. 12.

[6] I am substituting ritual for cult without harm, I think, to the point Schmemann is making (he seems to have Durkheim in mind, who closely links ritual and cult). Ibid, p. 16.

[7] Ibid, p. 16

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on this reading Schmemann would accept that, from a sociological perspective, or the perspective of a non-Christian more generally, ritual and liturgy are the same.

But perhaps there is a subtler way of understanding the distinction Schmemann makes, one that does not collapse into the insider/outsider difference. Ritual involves distinctive practices of a community set apart and sanctified. There are social norms governing ritual, just as there are social norms governing the life of the community as a whole. Schmemann argues that liturgy is *not* governed by social norms. Instead, liturgy has an authority that can challenge and change social norms. This is the crucial difference between ritual and liturgy: ritual performance may reinforce community bonds, but ritual performance never substantively alters social norms; liturgical performance may also reinforce community bonds, but liturgical performance always has the potential to substantively alter social norms. Both ritual and liturgy can be dynamic, can and do evolve with each repetition, but only in liturgy is it not only liturgical practice that is altered but also social norms independent of liturgical practice.[8]

The distinction between ritual and liturgy, then, has to do with *authority*.[9] Liturgical practice is authoritative in the same way that asking an expert is authoritative: what an individual thinks about a certain subject will normally be revised once the view of an authority on that subject is known. When the view of someone without authority is known, it is a mere opinion; it does not cause a decisive change in the beliefs of the inquirer. Understood in this way, the difference between ritual and liturgy has nothing to do with the difference between an insider's perspective and the perspective of an outsider: it is possible from any perspective to distinguish liturgy and ritual based on which is treated as an authority. Does this understanding of the difference take away from the uniquely Christian character that theologians attribute to liturgy? First, it is not clear that Schmemann intends his account of liturgy to be uniquely Christian. Second, just because it is authoritative status that makes a practice liturgical does not mean that there is no room to talk about liturgy as a foretaste of a 'world to come.' This could be precisely the reason that liturgy is treated as authoritative: Christians believe that liturgy offers a foretaste of the world to come.

[8] On the 'performativity' of ritual, see Amy Hollywood, 'Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization', *History of Religions* 42 (2002), pp. 93–115. On a similar point made about liturgy, see Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo Pub. Co., 1984), pp. 73–4.

[9] Schmemann makes the confusing claim: 'Liturgical tradition is not an 'authority' or a *locus theologicus*; it is the ontological condition of theology…' (*Liturgy and Tradition*, p. 18). The point he is making here is just that the relationship between *lex orandi* and *lex credendi* is bi-directional: liturgy and theology both function as authorities for each other.

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Schmemann complains that, since the patristic age, liturgy has regressed to the status of cult, of ritual. Theological concern has shifted to the question of what happens to the elements, the bread and wine, in the Eucharist, neglecting the question: 'what happens to the *Church* in the Eucharist?'[10] The Liturgical Movement's revival of interest in the liturgy was inadequate to counter this tendency because the Liturgical Movement replaced an overly rational understanding of liturgy with an overly emotive understanding of liturgy. Schmemann sharply rejects the entanglement of 'liturgical piety,' understood as affect, with liturgy and theology. Whether liturgical practice is understood as an insular ritual that symbolizes something (be it heavenly parousia or earthly community) or as an insular religious (or aesthetic, or therapeutic) experience of personal devotion, the Church, the Christian community as a whole, is not affected.

Although Schmemann was clearly and strongly an advocate of an 'organic' connection between liturgy and theology, the workings of this connection remain rather opaque in his work. Aidan Kavanagh and Geoffrey Wainwright both largely agree with Schmemann about the importance of the connection between liturgy and theology, and they each clarify this connection. However, Kavanagh and Wainwright disagree about how to explicate the maxim *lex orandi est lex credendi*. Kavanagh prefers *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*, emphasizing the priority of liturgy to theology, while Wainwright prefers *lex orandi, lex credendi*, emphasizing the bi-directional relationship between liturgy and theology.[11]

The pithy but simplistic label of 'Yale School' brings to mind the names of George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, and their students. Aidan Kavanagh, a member of the Order of Saint Benedict, is curiously forgotten, despite his presence as a professor at Yale from 1974–1994, including a stint as acting dean of the Divinity School. And Kavanagh's connection with the Yale School is more than biographical: Kavanagh's emphasis on the priority of liturgical practice to theological doctrine resonates strongly with Lindbeck's better-known work (Kavanagh's *On Liturgical Theology* was published in 1984, the same year that saw the publication of Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*).

Kavanagh dedicated *On Liturgical Theology* to Alexander Schmemann, and the task of Kavanagh's book can be understood as that of clarifying and strengthening Schmemann's insights. For Kavanagh, liturgy does not just inform theology, liturgy constitutes theology, which always takes a subordinate position. Etymologically, orthodoxy

[10] Schmemann, *Liturgy and Tradition*, p. 19.

[11] Wainwright offers a detailed defense of his choice, and a discussion of the historical context of the Latin phrases, in his *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life: A Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 219–225.

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is first about 'right worship,' only later about 'correct doctrine.' Kavanagh describes his understanding of theology as 'proletarian,' privileging the perspective of 'charwomen and shopkeepers' over 'pontiffs and professors.'[12] The former participate in *theologia prima*, liturgy, while the latter participate only in *theologia secunda*, formalized theology which is necessarily derivative. In liturgy one finds not just the raw material for a type of theology, but the root of all theology.

Like Schmemann, Kavanagh is peeved by instrumental understandings of liturgy, by descriptions of courses on liturgy that advertise: 'How to creatively use liturgy, liturgical robes, banners and stoles in both worship and church school. Discover exciting "tools" for spreading the Good News!'[13] Instead of being instrumental, Kavanagh argues that liturgy is dialectical. Worshipers are continuously changed by liturgy, and liturgy continuously changes through its performance. In this process, Kavanagh agrees that 'belief does indeed shape and influence the law of worship,' but the flow from worship to belief is qualitatively stronger.

The crucial clarification that Kavanagh makes involves exploring the disconnect between language and liturgical practice. The 'act' of liturgy 'is not reducible to conceptual propositions.'[14] There is a clear temptation that Kavanagh is opposing to take the words spoken during liturgy as fully conveying the significance of liturgy, as fully translating the practice into propositions. Kavanagh argues that liturgy always has a 'rich symbolic ambiguity.'[15] Schmemann, similarly, was careful to distinguish the underlying, historically continuous structure (*ordo*) of liturgy and its 'comprehension' at different historical moments. This gap Schmemann relates to 'the discrepancy between the symbolic interpretation of the liturgy and the liturgy itself.'[16] In other words, as soon as the gap between language and practice in liturgy is forgotten, liturgy loses its authoritative character and descends into ritual, for language and symbolism are bound up with social norms while liturgical practice is only accountable to liturgy itself.

This point has drawn surprisingly strong – and misguided – resistance. In a recent book, Graham Hughes complains about how Kavanagh and other liturgical theologians ignore 'the impact of the worshippers' modern condition.'[17] Hughes detects an 'apparently

[12] Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, p. 75.
[13] Ibid, p. 47.
[14] Ibid, p. 100.
[15] Ibid, p. 106.
[16] Schmemann, *Liturgy and Tradition*, p. 121, 117.
[17] Graham Hughes, *Worship as Meaning: A Liturgical Theology for Late Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 227.

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unquestioned optimism in the theological efficacy of the rites themselves,' and he worries that the role of 'recipients' as 'contributors or agents' is being ignored.[18] This optimism rests on an assumption that there is 'unmediated (uninterpreted) reality' – an assumption disproven by C. S. Peirce, deconstructionists, and others, according to Hughes.

Clarifying the issue that Hughes raises is crucial for understanding Kavanagh's claims – especially because the concern about 'unmediated reality' inflects the work of the New Liturgists. What Hughes misses is the gap between liturgical practice and propositional theology. Kavanagh's claim is that liturgy is *theologia prima*, but in effect that is only an aspiration because liturgy can never be adequately expressed in words or concepts. Put another way, any attempt to express the theology enacted in liturgy will necessarily get it wrong. Every attempt to speak *theologia prima* errs, yet is necessary, because liturgy 'does not wait upon absolute certainty,' it 'takes risks.'[19] The 'optimism' which, as Hughes rightly points out, characterizes Kavanagh's thought is subtle: Kavanagh is profoundly pessimistic about theological discourse ever getting theology right, but optimistic that liturgy provides a fount from which the enterprise of attempting to get it right can be rejuvenated. Modernity was doomed by its self-confidence, but the postmodernism that Hughes urges us to take into account is equally doomed by its self-confident pessimism. Liturgy, understood as Kavanagh understands it, provides a means of escaping this problematic which threatens melancholia.[20]

The impossibility of worldly words and concepts ever getting liturgical practice right is what leads Kavanagh to understand there to be an asymmetric relationship between liturgy and propositional theology (what he would call *theologia secunda*) – and what distinguishes Kavanagh from Wainwright. From Kavanagh's perspective, Wainwright thinks of theology as 'architectonic and "critical" with respect to liturgy,' while in fact '[t]he language of liturgy is not just religious rhetoric in need of disciplining by the scientific rigor of secondary theology.'[21] Wainwright's project of constructing a systematic theology organically connected with liturgy, 'written from a liturgical perspective,' does not adequately appreciate the 'risks' of liturgical

[18] Ibid, p. 228.

[19] Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, p. 125. Kavanagh helpfully puts this point another way: 'The liturgy is neither structured nor does it operate in such a way as to provide doctrinal conclusions. These are distilled from liturgy by theologians according to the general principle that data are not *given* but must be consciously *taken*', p.126.

[20] Gillian Rose makes a closely related point in her *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Cf. Vincent Lloyd, 'The Secular Faith of Gillian Rose', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36 (2008), 683–705.

[21] Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, pp. 123–4.

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theology, the impossibility of adequately reading theology off liturgy, according to Kavanagh.[22]

Wainwright aspires to establish 'at least a consistency, if not an identity, between the belief expressed in worship and the belief expressed in the forms of reflective theology.'[23] In doing so, he describes in detail what he takes to be the bi-directional influence of liturgy and belief: 'Worship influences doctrine, and doctrine worship.' The task of Wainwright's *Doxology* is to explore 'that interplay.'[24] He notes, for example, how in the writings of St. Paul we find 'corrective guidelines for liturgical practice' because '[t]he spontaneous assembly requires a certain authoritative control.'[25]

Wainwright positions his project as a Protestant alternative to the Catholic- (and Orthodox-) dominated field of liturgical theology, and he attributes the difference between his bi-directional approach and the asymmetric approach to the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism.[26] I do not mean to adjudicate the argument about liturgy between Kavanagh and Wainwright, or to address the larger issues on which this dispute rests. However, I want to discuss Wainwright here because his attempt at integrating liturgy, theology, and Christian life presages the attempts of the New Liturgists to understand liturgy in the broadest sense. Even a distinctively Protestant liturgical theology like Wainwright's acknowledges the normative force of distinctively liturgical practices, the force that those practices have to influence the whole of a Christian's life. This is precisely what is missing from the work of the New Liturgists.

Veering away from Schmemann and Kavanagh, Wainwright does not strictly distinguish liturgy and ritual. Instead he uses something like the insider/outsider distinction to differentiate the two and to relate them both to 'worship,' though this is not made especially clear. He writes, 'Worship is better seen as the point of concentration at which the whole of the Christian life comes to ritual focus;' 'I mean ritual in the descriptive sense of regular patterns of behaviour invested with symbolic significance and efficacy;' and 'liturgy (and, much less often, cult) is here used of the public worship of the Church.'[27] It appears that Wainwright is saying that liturgy is specific to Christians,

[22] Wainwright, *Doxology*, p. ix. Wainwright is clearly aware of the humility necessary for the theological enterprise, but he does not associate this humility especially with liturgical theology: 'It is hard therefore to see how absolute certainty could attach to any doctrinal conclusion drawn from the worship of the Church. Such conclusions will possess varying degrees of probability and must remain open to revision. But that is the case, I suspect, with all doctrinal statements', p. 250.

[23] Ibid, p. 57.

[24] Ibid, p. 218.

[25] Ibid, p. 160.

[26] Ibid, pp. 251–2.

[27] Ibid, p. 8.

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and that liturgy consists in ritual, which focuses 'the whole of the Christian life.' Of course, ritual in the classical sociological sense focuses the whole of any community's life, so it appears that the only distinction that Wainwright is making between ritual and liturgy is that liturgy is uniquely Christian. Indeed, Wainwright seems to use the phrase 'Christian ritual' interchangeably with 'liturgy.'[28]

With Wainwright's interest in integrating liturgy and Christian life we move towards the work of the New Liturgists. Wainwright includes chapters in *Doxology* on "Ethics" and "Culture," topics not directly addressed by Schmemann and Kavanagh. According to Wainwright, 'The sacraments are meant both to resume and to inform existence as a whole.' Christians begin liturgical practice with 'ethical presuppositions' that they bring from their life in their world. These presuppositions are inflected by liturgy, for liturgy has 'ethical consequences.'[29] In his investigation, Wainwright makes use of scores of hymns, prayers, and creeds to support, and be supported by, the doctrinal positions around which his systematic theology is organized. These liturgical texts he uses literally, taking the meanings of the words that compose them to have direct theological significance. For Wainwright, there are no insuperable gaps between liturgical practice, theological doctrine, and the significance of practice and doctrine for life.

This reflection on liturgical theology, as developed in the work of Schmemann, Kavanagh, and Wainwright, offers two essential, though contested, insights: liturgy is authoritative, and liturgical practice cannot be perfectly translated into theological language.[30] Liturgy is authoritative because reflection on liturgical practice results in changes to theological discourse. This would be a simple matter if it was possible to directly translate liturgical practice into theological discourse, but this is not possible. The authoritative nature of liturgy can be understood in two ways, one strong, one weak. On the weak interpretation, liturgy informs theological discourse, but the insights gleaned from liturgy do not have binding force; they are weighed amongst other considerations. On the strong interpretation, theological discourse must be changed in light of liturgical practice: the insights of liturgy are binding. Either understanding of the nature of liturgy's authority is compatible with the position that liturgical practice cannot be adequately translated into theological language. Note that this presentation shifts the focus of the debate (e.g., between Kavanagh

[28] See, for example, Ibid, p. 135.

[29] Ibid, pp. 406, 399.

[30] I am clearly using the language of translation metaphorically: it is not from one language to another but from a practice to a language. Another way to put it would be in Robert Brandom's idiom of making explicit the norms implicit in practice. The claim I am discussing is that all attempts to make norms explicit will be inadequate.

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and Wainwright, who characterizes it as a debate between Catholics and Protestants) away from the question of whether the influence of liturgy on theology is one-directional or two-directional. Mapping the earlier discussion onto this conceptual framework: Schmemann holds that liturgy is authoritative, Kavanagh holds that liturgy is strongly authoritative and liturgical practice does not translate, and Wainwright holds that liturgy is weakly authoritative and liturgical practice does translate. I will argue that the New Liturgists reject the authoritative nature of liturgy, even on the weak interpretation of authority, and they also reject the position that liturgical practice cannot be translated.

The New Liturgists

According to the New Traditionalists, as described by Jeffrey Stout, modernity and tradition are incompatible; we must choose which of the two receives our allegiance.[31] According to the New Liturgists, postmodernity and liturgy are incompatible; we must make a choice. Liturgy offers a means of escaping the postmodern problematic – for Catherine Pickstock, in philosophy; for William Cavanaugh, with respect to globalization.[32] Theologians such as these use the concept of liturgy in a broad sense, and I will argue that when liturgy is used in this broad sense its defining features are lost. Liturgy, ritual, and tradition all blend into a fuzzy mixture – leaving no authority to which theologians can appeal, and making the theological attempt to escape postmodernism through liturgy an ultimately doomed enterprise.

Catherine Pickstock's work is the most ambitious and philosophically sophisticated of the New Liturgists. She offers a sweeping account of the 'liturgical consummation of philosophy,' including critical engagements with the work of Jacques Derrida, an examination of the social implications of Duns Scotus' theology, a discussion of necrophilia in postmodern philosophy, and an explication of the Roman Rite.[33] Pickstock's project attempts to give liturgy an extraordinarily broad sense: human existence has a fundamentally liturgical character, she claims. She sets herself the task of unveiling this

[31] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). I hope that the New Liturgists I discuss are of a less phantasmal nature than the New Traditionalists whom Stout imagines.

[32] I would suggest that Charles Mathewes, with respect to political theory, could be added to this list, though his project differs in significant ways from the work of Pickstock and Cavanaugh. See Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[33] Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

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liturgical character which has been concealed from the late Middle Ages through modernity and postmodernity.

By liturgy Pickstock does not mean a specifically Christian practice. Her investigation of liturgy in *After Writing* begins by re-reading Plato's *Phaedrus*, emphasizing Plato's appreciation for liturgy. She suggests that even secular modernity in a way involves liturgy, although Pickstock argues that this is a 'parody' of genuine liturgy, an 'anti-liturgy liturgy' which does not do the philosophical and cultural work that genuine liturgy does. So Pickstock is not using liturgy just as an 'insider's' term for ritual; she positions her argument to be accessible to anyone.

For her choice of the term 'liturgy' as opposed to 'ritual,' Pickstock offers two explanations. First, ritual connotes 'a specific activity within a delimited sphere rather than a pattern infused through social action as a whole.'[34] Like Schmemann's unease with ritual because of its association with a division between sacred and secular, Pickstock worries that designating the religious practices which she is interested in rituals relegates them to a corner of their practitioners' worlds, limiting the role religious practice plays in the life of a practitioner. Second, Pickstock is interested in situating religious practice within narrative, but ritual can mean 'merely mechanical repetitions perhaps divorced from any informing reason or narrative.'[35]

Both of the reasons that Pickstock offers for her terminological preference involve issues of concern to liturgical theology. Recall how Schmemann and Kavanagh were interested in understanding the creative, non-mechanistic nature of liturgy, and recall their unease with the sacred/secular divide. Conspicuously absent from Pickstock's reasons for preferring liturgy is any reference to liturgy's authoritative character, any mention of the way that theological propositions must be altered in the face of evidence from liturgy. This, I suggested, is the defining feature of liturgy from the perspective of liturgical theology, and in its absence Pickstock's terminology slips back and forth between ritual and liturgy (for instance, she writes of the 'ritual or liturgical' character of human life, and she sometimes describes medieval culture as 'ritual' and at other times she describes it as 'liturgical').[36] For her, the difference between the terms is one of connotation rather than denotation: ritual brings to mind different associations with religious practice than liturgy does. Ritual and liturgy are not different sorts of things, they are different ways of looking at the same thing. This methodological point reflects a substantive point central to Pickstock's project: she rejects the division of language into sense and reference, favoring instead a uniquely inflected

[34] Catherine Pickstock, 'Liturgy, Art and Politics', *Modern Theology* 15 (1999), p. 159.
[35] Ibid, p. 159.
[36] Ibid, p. 160; *After Writing* p. 170.

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version of Derrida's understanding of language as a free play of signifiers. 'Ritual' and 'liturgy,' she might argue, necessarily slip into each other; to try to fix separate references for them would be to fall captive to the discredited metaphysics of modernity.

Pickstock puts 'liturgical' on par with 'linguistic' and 'social' as descriptors of the human condition. A liturgical culture makes all activity 'work of the people,' the etymological origin of 'liturgy.' As she puts it, 'All cultures begin in liturgy which fuses the repetition of ideal values, with physical inscription upon bodies, places, times and motions.'[37] Communities that are bound together by liturgy are not held by force, as in mechanical repetition, but rather are held together by participation in rhythm, participation which is peaceful and harmonious.[38] Pickstock offers vivid descriptions of the difference between a liturgically-organized society and a society organized around the false liturgy offered by modernity. In the former, 'every day of the year has its own specific festival,' binding communities 'by an extraordinary rhythmic pattern.' Joys and sorrows are experienced collectively, 'in the context of cosmic patterns which include such tragic [and fortuitous] eventualities.'[39] Charity was given to kin and neighbors, not to anonymous organizations. Cities were both literally and metaphorically 'focused around cathedrals,' for the patterns of life in them refer to a transcendent beyond.[40] In societies organized around false liturgy, like the contemporary West, 'People tend to eat at any time; shops are open all night long; and every week is a week without a Sunday.'[41] There are no more distinctions between times and spaces; all is repeated in mechanical, impersonal patterns. Joys and sorrows are experienced individually, not collectively, leading the atomized subject of modernity to seek escape in television and virtual reality.

Pickstock insists that liturgy is 'organiz[ed] around some privileged transcendent signifier, even if this remains mysterious in character, and open to interpretation.' Once the liturgical nature of social life in general is revealed, it follows that human existence in the world is necessarily oriented towards the divine. It might seem as though Pickstock's acknowledgment of the 'mysterious' nature of the 'privileged transcendent signifier' around which liturgy is organized indicates a parallel between her understanding of liturgy and that offered

[37] Pickstock, 'Liturgy, Art and Politics', p. 160.

[38] Pickstock brings out this point in her essay 'Music' *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999); cf. John Milbank, '"Postmodern Critical Augustinianism",' *Modern Theology* 7 (1991), 225–237.

[39] Pickstock, "Liturgy, Art and Politics," p. 161.

[40] Ibid, p. 167. See generally the section of *After Writing* titled 'The Decline of Liturgical Order', pp. 135–157.

[41] Pickstock, 'Liturgy, Art and Politics', p. 167.

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by Kavanagh, who posits that liturgical practice can never be successfully represented by words or concepts. But there is a crucial difference between Pickstock and Kavanagh that has to do with how they understand the relationship between language and practice. For Pickstock, critically associating herself with the work of Jacques Derrida, the world is signifiers all the way down, as it were. But these signifiers play, they slip, they never signify perfectly, yet in their harmonious play they indicate the presence of a 'mysterious' transcendent signifier. For Kavanagh and Schmemann, in contrast, practice – at least liturgical practice – can never be reduced to signifiers. Every attempt to do so will necessarily fail. It is impossible to say that the signs we read off of liturgy point to God, although we can be sure that God is in liturgical practice.

This difference between Pickstock and Kavanagh has wide-ranging effects. Pickstock contrasts 'genuine liturgy,' 'mediated by subjective representation and appropriation,' with 'the modern pseudo-liturgical order,' which 'bypasses subjectivity altogether,' transforming individuals into 'cyber-intelligences.'[42] This is at the core of Pickstock's broad understanding of liturgy as a mode of human existence, yet it depends on a very specific characterization of liturgy as 'mediated' by 'representation.' Such an understanding is antithetical to the twin insights of liturgical theology: that liturgy is authoritative and that translating liturgical practice into language and other forms of representation is a very 'risky' business. For Pickstock, there is no gap between liturgical practice and representation (concepts or words). Liturgical practice always already involves representation: 'the Eucharist is celebrated *in language*.' Otherwise, liturgy would have an 'extra-linguistic privilege.'[43] Indeed, she describes language as having a 'doxological' character.[44] According to her, uncertainty and mystery is on the plane of representation, not orthogonal to that plane.

Yet Pickstock is not unaware of the Fall: because of it 'liturgical expression is made "impossible".'[45] Humans are made for liturgy, but they are incapable of liturgy – or rather they were. Christ makes liturgy possible for humans again. Even with Christ, liturgy is still difficult – but it is 'not hopeless.' This is how Pickstock differentiates her project from postmodernism: while she acknowledges that language is filled with 'supplementations and deferrals' (which she

[42] Ibid, p. 168. Pickstock is careful to emphasize that she does not mean to suggest that genuine liturgy reverts back to 'pre-modern subjectivity.'

[43] Pickstock, *After Writing*, p. 256.

[44] See, among other places, Pickstock, *After Writing*, p. 37. She finds this point in Plato, who did not have Socrates condemn 'poetry as such, but rather . . . the separation of language from doxology', p. 42.

[45] Ibid, p. 177.

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suggests the Roman Rite exemplifies particularly dramatically), this does not 'indicate a suspension over the abyss, but rather, the *occurrence* of the impossible through Christological mediation, which reveals the void as a plenitude impossibly manifest in the very course of deferral and substitution.'[46] While Pickstock locates the 'difficulty' of liturgy in the difficulty of acknowledging Christ's resolution of the aporia of language, liturgical theologians like Kavanagh locate 'difficulty' not in liturgical practice – which is easy, which is the place and time when Christians are in the divine presence – but rather in theological attempts to speak about liturgy.[47]

At first it would seem as though Pickstock characterizes liturgy as in some way authoritative. Social practice in secular modernity is false and should be replaced with liturgical practice, on her account. But this is a completely different point from the insight about the authority of liturgy gleaned from liturgical theology. Schmemann, Kavanagh, and Wainwright examine how liturgical practice influences (and *should* influence) theological discourse; the relevance of liturgy to the secular world was for them only a secondary interest, and one addressed by liturgically-informed theology. The goal, for these liturgical theologians, is not to collapse social life into liturgy, but to harvest insights for theology from a privileged type of practice, liturgical practice. What is missing in Pickstock's work is any discussion of theological discourse – in other words, what is missing from her work is any self-consciousness about the project in which she herself is engaged. Theological discourse seemingly vanishes as social practice and liturgical practice are collapsed into each other. There is nothing left for liturgical practice to inform, and no position left from which to try – with necessary imperfection – to speak of the significance of liturgical practice.

Pickstock's understanding of authority with regard to liturgy sometimes appears to be precisely the opposite of that developed by liturgical theology. With Vatican II in mind (Pickstock is generally hostile to the liturgical reforms it brought), she writes, 'Because of this reciprocal link between life and liturgy, any liturgical reform must take into account the fact that the liturgy which it seeks to revise was as much, or more a cultural and ethical phenomenon, as a textual one.' The only sorts of liturgical reform to which Pickstock is sympathetic 'would either have to overthrow our anti-ritual modernity, or, that being impossible, devise a liturgy that *refused* to be enculturated in our modern habits of thought and speech.'[48] In these passages, the absence of a role for theological discourse in Pickstock's theology

[46] Ibid, p. 178.

[47] See Pickstock's captivating reading of the Roman Rite in *After Writing,* pp. 169–219, especially pp. 197–198.

[48] Ibid, pp. 171; 176.

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(!) is acutely felt. There is no discourse with leverage to critique liturgy; the only way to correctly reform liturgy, Pickstock seems to be saying, is in reaction against secular modern culture. Pickstock is confident enough of the wrong-headedness – and monolithic nature – of secular modernity to use this seemingly amorphous and contestable epithet as a guide for liturgical reform.

Pickstock would be wary of introducing theological discourse as a third term, between secular modernity and liturgy, because theological discourse would then appear to stand apart from the plane of textuality, the plane on which liturgy operates. But for liturgical theologians like Kavanagh, theological discourse is less an Archimedean point than a label for the humble efforts of Christians to speak about God. From this perspective, liturgical reform is necessary not as part of an ontological battle between secular modernity and Christian liturgical culture, but because the efforts of Christians to speak about God are always getting God wrong, leading to occasional misdirection of Christian practice. Liturgical theologians like Schmemann and Kavanagh would be just as wary as Pickstock of liturgical revisions motivated by the supposed demands of secular modernity. But they, unlike Pickstock, would see the occasional genuine need for liturgical reform that proceeds with a spirit of hopefulness and humility. Another way to put this point is to say that Pickstock forgets the essential difference between presence and parousia. Liturgy is but a foretaste of heaven, it is not an enactment of heaven on earth. But by offering vivid images of supposedly liturgical forms of social life and commending the theo-political project of transforming existing secular forms of social practice into liturgical forms of social practice, Pickstock elides the essential gap between liturgical presence and eschatological parousia.[49]

While Pickstock takes liturgy to be a solution to the impasse of postmodern philosophy and culture, William Cavanaugh understands liturgy to be a resource to counter capitalist globalization and totalitarian politics. Secular modernity has told a story about politics, but this story is based on an underlying, unacknowledged theology. The implicit theology of modernity is based on an understanding of the human condition as inherently violent; only secular politics can abate this violence, according to the secular *mythos*. The Christian story, in contrast, is one of original peace and harmony since broken: 'Humankind was created for communion, but is everywhere divided.'[50] It is through liturgy, on the Christian story, that the communion for which humans were created can be re-membered, brought together again. Liturgy thus is positioned in opposition to secular modernity:

[49] This is critique could equally be leveled against some of Milbank's work, for instance his '"Postmodern Critical Augustinianism".'

[50] William Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), p. 9.

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liturgy is the way Christians tell their counter-narrative in the face of the dominant narrative of secular modernity.

The pay-off of this understanding of liturgy is that it allows Cavanaugh to point to liturgy, particularly the Eucharist, as an antidote to the ills of globalization. In the Eucharist the universal and the local meet, spatial and temporal boundaries are collapsed – just as in globalization as conventionally understood. But, instead of reducing the local to a subservient status in the face of the universal, the Eucharist harmonizes universal and local by containing the whole Church – atemporal, aspatial – in each local celebration of the Eucharist, 'the world in a wafer.'

According to Cavanaugh, liturgical practice directly thwarts the secular modern understanding of individuals as self-contained, rational, atom-like beings who relate to each other only when it is to the advantage of each. Liturgy involves 'participation in God and in one another,' where participation involves a binding force that overcomes 'our separateness.'[51] The association constituted by liturgy is not like an association of civil society, for it is not a collection of individuals who share a common interest. This association, the Church, is a '*sui generis* social body,' an organic whole not reducible to a sum of the individual human beings who compose it.[52]

With this understanding of liturgy, Cavanaugh might seem to align himself more closely with Kavanagh than with theologians like Graham Hughes who try to understand the 'meaning' and symbolic structure of liturgy. Cavanaugh writes, 'The liturgy is not a symbol to be "read", its "meaning" formally detached from its signs, internalized by the individual, and smuggled as "attitudes" or "values" into another space outside the Church.'[53] But where Kavanagh takes the observation that liturgy cannot be 'read' symbolically as a reminder of the fallenness of the world – the task of understanding the authoritative dictates of liturgy is crucial but will inevitably fall short – Cavanaugh draws a quite different conclusion. In lieu of the symbolic understanding of liturgy, Cavanaugh emphasizes the constitutive role of liturgy: he uses the example of family meals, which do not just symbolize a family but help establish it.[54] In focusing on the constitutive function of liturgy, Cavanaugh neglects the authoritative role of liturgy – what liturgical theologians take to be liturgy's most essential feature. Although Kavanagh, too, notes how the law of prayer 'constitutes' the law of faith, he is careful to acknowledge that the law of faith must be altered to remain in tune with the law of prayer, which is ultimately authoritative. In contrast, Cavanaugh overlooks

[51] Ibid, p. 44, 47.
[52] Ibid, p. 83.
[53] Ibid, pp. 92–93.
[54] Ibid, p. 93.

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the critical role of liturgy, the role that liturgy has in adjudicating disputes of faith.

For all his enthusiasm for liturgy, Cavanaugh offers few clues about how liturgy and ritual differ. We are left to conclude that the difference again reduces to the insider/outsider distinction, with Cavanaugh labeling Christian ritual as liturgy because of his perspective as an 'insider.' He emphasizes the continuity of Christian liturgy with classical *leitourgia*, like Pickstock noting the etymological origin of the term as 'work of the people.' Moreover, he suggests that torture can be understood as 'a kind of perverted liturgy, a ritual act which organizes bodies in the society into a collective performance, not of true community, but of an atomized aggregate of mutually suspicious individuals' (he develops this suggestion in rich detail analyzing Chile under Pinochet).[55] Again, liturgy and ritual seem to be nearly interchangeable: what ritual act does not organize bodies in a society into a collective performance of something or the other?

Cavanaugh might object that the *sui generis* nature he attributes to the Church, as constituted by liturgy, immunizes his discussion from reduction to the insider/outsider distinction. But recall that Durkheim's seminal discussion of religious ritual treats that which is generated by religious ritual as *sui generis*, irreducible to individual ritual practitioners.[56] What is uniquely Christian about the 'social body' Cavanaugh understands to be constituted in liturgy, besides it label as 'Church,' is its aspirations to universality, its imagination of a place outside of space and a time outside of time. But these aspirations are only relevant to 'insiders,' they are not evident to 'outsiders' besides in the rhetoric of insiders.

The New Liturgists might respond to criticism of their broad use of liturgy by noting that when they use the term 'liturgy,' they do so figuratively, not literally. They might claim that they discuss certain practices that share similarities with liturgy, but that they do not intend to replace liturgy in the strict sense with these practices. However, this is a tenuous response because, when the distinction between literal and figurative uses of liturgy is not clearly made (and writers such as Pickstock certainly do not make this distinction clearly), the result is that the distinctive nature of liturgy as authoritative is watered down. When it seems as though some forms of liturgy are governed by norms (be they social or theological), then what makes liturgy uniquely potent, that it is ungovernable by norms and instead forces revision of existing norms, is obscured.

[55] William Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 12.

[56] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995).

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Moreover, the New Liturgists often explicitly oppose taking their use of 'liturgy' as less than literal. Charles Mathewes, for instance, writes that his project 'broadens our understanding of liturgy' to include 'worldly actions' more generally; he writes that 'civic life can be performed in a way that is continuous with the liturgy of the blessed in heaven.'[57] Pickstock discusses in the same breath the narrowly liturgical reforms of Vatican II and a wide range of liturgical phenomena in the broad, social sense. Cavanaugh, too, treats the very specific liturgical phenomenon of the Eucharist as paradigmatic of the sorts of liturgical practices in which he finds oppositional political potential.

The New Liturgists have garnered a wide audience by harnessing the rhetorical force of liturgy when understood in the broadest sense. In doing so, however, they have forgotten the gap between liturgical practice and theological language, and they have forgotten the authoritative nature of liturgy. A return to the work of liturgical theologians such as Schmemann, Kavanagh, and Wainwright would humble enthusiasts of liturgy, and allow them to see the subtle yet mighty potency of liturgy understood in the narrow sense.

Vincent Lloyd
Department of Religious Studies
Georgia State University
1108 34 Peachtree St.
P.O. Box 4089
Email: phlvwl@langate.gsu.edu

[57] Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, pp. 103, 146.

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