

DIVINE ECONOMY, DIVINE LITURGY: Liturgical Theology as a Retrieval of Figural Interpretation

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Now turn from the ancient to the recent, from the figure [*typon*] to the reality [*aletheian*]. There we have Moses sent from God to Egypt; here, Christ, sent by His Father into the world; there, that Moses might lead forth an oppressed people out of Egypt; here, that Christ might rescue a world buried under sins: there, the blood of a lamb was the spell against the destroyer; here, the blood of the unblemished Lamb Jesus Christ is made the charm to scare evil spirits: there the tyrant pursued even to the sea that ancient people; and in like manner this daring and shameless spirit, the author of evil, followed you, even to the very streams of salvation. The tyrant of old was drowned in the sea; and this present one disappears in the salutary water.

Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses* I.3.

What is going on in the above passage? Is Cyril interpreting scripture, or is Cyril interpreting a Christian rite? Is Cyril interpreting scripture liturgically, or liturgy scripturally? I propose that the answer is yes; such an answer speaks to the nature and task of

“liturgical theology.” When “theology” means “exegesis,” then liturgical theology names a kind of contemplative engagement with scripture that assumes the divine service as its entry point, and here divine service means the divine economy construed as the “cosmic” liturgy. When we contemplate the divine economy, and the divine life itself, as the most proper meaning of the word “liturgy,” then what the tradition calls figuration and mystagogy represent two modes of discourse about the same theological reality. Liturgical theology engages discourse about that shared economic reality, retrieving *both* mystagogy and figuration; in so doing, it provides boundaries to both. This research envisions liturgical theology as part of the post-critical retrieval of ancient Christian approaches to scriptural interpretation.

I must make a few preliminary qualifications. My points are not likely to convince those who worry about figural reading in Christian theology.¹ De Lubac used the term “spiritual sense.” Frei and, more recently, Scott Hahn² say typology. I use the term “figuration,” following Augustine. It avoids the word “spirit,” which often turns off academics with its connotations in English. It simultaneously gathers up broader meaning than “typology” alone, but includes it. Many scholars who worry “typology” would not worry other traditional figurative senses, e.g., the tropological sense used by every preacher to our own day. I understand my proposal to follow Henri de Lubac’s retrieval of the pre-modern theological unity of exegesis, contemplation and Trinity (or the

¹ There is a vast body of literature available for those who are open to being so convinced. E.g., Henri de Lubac: *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), and Hans Frei: *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) and the many works they inspired.

² Scott Hahn, *Letter and Spirit*, (New York: Doubleday, 2005).

“doctrine” thereof, or, better the “rule of faith”).³ The complete argument after future projects will conclude that, as liturgical theology finds one of its foundations in the work of de Lubac, current liturgical theological conundrums find resolution when re-contextualized within de Lubac’s total retrieval. All that the limitations of this article allow me to address is the link of liturgical theology with de Lubac’s retrieval of exegesis. This essay is a proposal, and therefore preparatory in nature, and I know that it will bring up unanswered questions. I beg the indulgence of the reader: these questions are best addressed in the process of putting this approach into action, concretely, upon biblical texts. The conclusion presents plans for future projects that engage biblical texts in the manner sketched here and provide, thereby, an opportunity to address the issues this article brings up.

In what follows, I start with a sketch of some key problems brought against liturgical theology in recent scholarship: what grants the discipline proper boundaries? what keeps it *liturgical*? what keeps it *theological*? The sections that follow deal with these issues respectively. First, I work out the meaning of the word “theology,” arguing that if theology is the interpretation of scripture, then any definition of theology needs to be, if not primarily, at least substantially hermeneutical in nature. Then, I work out the meaning of the word “liturgy,” arguing that the divine economy, and even the divine life itself, is the most proper meaning of the word “liturgy.” At that point I take a brief detour into what the ancients called “mystagogy,” arguing that mystagogy is the wider discourse that encompasses the figurative reading of scripture. This allows me to assert that “liturgical theology” contemplates scripture, whereas the rule of faith’s narrative summarizes a cosmic liturgy. I will conclude with what I hope this

³ Again, see the multi-volume work of de Lubac: *Medieval Exegesis*. For an excellent summary review on the most recent English edition, see Aaron Canty “Balancing Letter and Spirit,” *The Living Church*, February 27, 2011.

might entail for liturgical theology in particular, and post-critical retrieval of figuration in general.

THE “PROBLEM” WITH LITURGICAL THEOLOGY

Schmemmann⁴ inaugurated liturgical theology with the work of liturgical renewal in general and the respective work of Dom Gregory Dix and Henri de Lubac in particular. Dix’s and de Lubac’s retrievals overlap and implicate one another. Indeed, Dix’s “shape,” combined with de Lubac’s *corpus verum*, provided the womb from which Schmemmann would midwife “liturgical theology.” If liturgy makes the church (de Lubac) and the liturgy has its own internal dialogic (Dix), then that internal dialogue is the church’s fundamental theology (Schmemmann). Recent criticism has called into question both the roots of liturgical theology and synthesis that it is.

I find three major concerns in the literature critical of liturgical theology.⁵ One concern is that liturgical theologians reflect upon liturgy in a way that abstracts the ritual mysteries from their concretion in history and as human expressions (ritual theory). In other words, the worry is that liturgical theology is too abstract, too generalizing and not *liturgical* enough. This line of criticism throws into doubt what seems to be too romantic a view of liturgy found in the “shape” approach inherited from Dix. A related criticism, one which comes from the point of view that historiography provides a superior approach to liturgics, questions the chronological validity of the notion that liturgy represents *theologia*

⁴ Recent scholars have named a “Schmemmann-line” of liturgical theology. Different scholars include different theologians in this family lineage. M. B. Aune’s is the longest. “The Current State of Liturgical Theology: A Plurality of Particularities,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 53 (2009), 48.

⁵ Aune summarizes these amazingly well in the article mentioned above and also in a series of two articles: “Liturgy and Theology: Rethinking the Relationship.” *Worship* 81 (2007): 61-5.

prima (issues concerning the catchphrase *lex orandi lex credendi* fall under this category as well).

Another concern is that liturgical theologians have reduced the liturgy too much to an expression of a given community rather than as an act of God on behalf of God's people. In other words, the worry is that liturgical theology is too immanentizing and not *theological* enough.⁶ Such questioning calls into doubt how helpful a return of the church to *corpus verum* is for theology. If we make the church the true body, do we not reduce God to an expression of local community? A related question deriving from the concrete study of history concerns whether or not we should translate "liturgy" as "the work of the people." The worry is that such a translation furthers what is already an over-emphasis on human community. Recent etymological developments are seen as a boon in helping to mitigate against this.

The chief concern is the way in which both these "mistakes," that is to say, abstract and arbitrary "shape" together with a reduction of God to the community, combine and generate a "liturgical theology" that is boundless. What could delineate or define such a discourse? How would one know when one was successful or when one failed? And how would or could such discourse be held accountable? Wouldn't it be meaningful only to the local community that generated the given reflection? If so, as interesting as it might be for that community, how could it contribute to a scholarship that would be shareable? What could define the rules of such a discourse, so as to generate something rigorous enough to call "academic?" Such questioning forces us to ask whether Schmemmann's project is an historical dead end.

The "solution" usually granted to the first and final set of concerns is to turn to the concrete, the particular, and study it historically and perhaps

⁶ Again, Aune is the key and best expresser of this concern.

sociologically or anthropologically. If there is any theology left over, then focus on the transcendent and avoid reduction to community, thus solving the second concern. If there is no theology left over, well, more is the pity for so-called “liturgical theology,” but all the better for the advancement of sound liturgical scholarship.

Although I see each one of these critiques as legitimate in its own way, I do not agree with the solutions most recently proffered.⁷ The rest of this paper develops a different response to these legitimate doubts. Let us begin by looking at what theology is in the first place.

WHAT IS THE “THEOLOGY” OF “LITURGICAL THEOLOGY”?

“Theology”⁸ means “exegesis”; it names contemplative engagement with scripture. If theology is the interpretation of scripture, then any definition of theology needs to be, if not primarily, at least substantially hermeneutical in nature. Hermeneutics and its “circle” maps human understanding to the relationship between parts and wholes. Parts make sense within a whole. The whole is understood by comprehending the parts. Entry into the circle is made possible only with at least an initial grasp of the whole. Liturgical theology names the “whole” which grants comprehension: *liturgy*.⁹ And the parts

⁷ I mean here, again, Aune’s excellent articles.

⁸ “Theology,” of course, means lots of things, and lots of different things throughout history. See the now famous article by Frank Whaling, “The Development of the Word ‘Theology,’” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981). The classical meaning of “theology” is itself cultic. Theology is finding the words appropriate to hymning the deities. In this sense there is no distinction between *theologia prima* and *secunda*. I am indebted to a conversation with Walter Knowles for this point.

⁹ See Joyce Ann Zimmerman’s excellent work with this regard in her book on Ricoeur: *Liturgy as Language of Faith* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988), and in her summary of this topic, *Liturgy and Hermeneutics* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

discerned are themselves often concrete liturgies, but also the Christian life, call, and gospel. Which is to say that liturgical theology interprets scripture. But before I make my case I need to explain this approach to theology as hermeneutics.

Recall the foundational hermeneutics of Augustine's *de doctrina Christiana*.¹⁰ Augustine identifies a fundamental difference between signs and things. All signs are things but not all things are signs. Within this sign-to-thing relationship, Augustine relates the parts of scripture to the whole of scripture. The initial grasp of scripture comes through the rule of faith, and that as summarized by Christ in his person, and verbally in the summation of the law. But the scriptures themselves are a part of God's created reality as a whole. Entry into reality as a whole comes only through the imitation of the saints. Under this hermeneutic, figuration occurs when the context of the canonical scriptures as a whole is construed to be the divine economy—accessible, through contemplation, to saints, and, by imitation, to Christians, in any point of earthly history.

Now, not all rectangles are squares, but all squares are rectangles. These squares and rectangles provide an excellent analogy for hermeneutics. Modern hermeneutics rediscovered that human being recognizes patterns in behavior and that such recognition is itself behavior.¹¹ Understanding itself is an action. Squares are rectangles, but not all rectangles are squares. I take the rectangle-to-square distinction to be a contemporary restatement of Augustine's point about things and signs. All signs are things but not all things are signs. All discourse is behavior but not all behavior is discursive. Not all action is understanding but

¹⁰ Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, trans. D. W. Robertson (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1958).

¹¹ So, for example, Ricoeur's event and understanding, Gadamer's play and being "called up short."

understanding is an action. Not all patterns are recognition but all recognition is a pattern.

Are actions meaningless until understood? Not necessarily. Is understanding impotent until enacted? By definition.¹² Meaning proceeds from act, and speech and ritual are both actions. Action is primary. It is the outward correlate of the will. This is why Christianity ultimately did not become a Gnostic cult. It is love (which, of course, requires and generates knowledge), and not knowledge (alone) that saves.

Which is foundational, act or understanding? One of the real gifts of liturgical theology has been the reassertion of this hermeneutical claim of the foundational ontology of action over understanding, event over meaning. This is the real importance behind the claim that liturgy is *theologia prima*.¹³ It is not an historical or procedural claim, and neither is it in competition with such claims. It is a categorical claim about human nature made from a Christian theological and modern cultural anthropological point of view.¹⁴

But our picture of theology would not be complete without also emphasizing that, unlike almost every other kind of human discourse or science, theology is

¹² This understanding of the need for enactment to render understanding is still compatible with a strictly Thomistic (and Aristotelian) account of the centrality of contemplation when we construe contemplation as the chief human goal or act. Even if contemplation has no immediate this-worldly concretion, it is nevertheless only achieved through an *act of the will*.

¹³ Introduced by Aidan Kavanagh, see *On Liturgical Theology*. *Theologia prima* has been under a lot of attack in the recent criticism. See the excellent defense of this term, when properly moderated, by Robert F. Taft in the following article: "Mrs. Murphy goes to Moscow: Kavanagh, Schmemmann, and 'The Byzantine Synthesis.'" *Worship* (November 2011).

¹⁴ Aune (53) quotes Paul Bradshaw "when believers come to worship on a Sunday morning, they do not come with their minds a *tabula rasa*": "Difficulties in Doing Liturgical Theology," *Pacifica II* (1998): 191. This shows a semantic gap between historical and theological study of liturgy, or, perhaps simply a category error. *Theologia prima* is not about whether any one individual or even group of individuals in a local church is *aware* that liturgy precedes theology. It is about squares and rectangles. Behavior is primary, discourse, is a behavior, and, although necessary, still a lesser part of behavior as a whole. It is a logical, not a chronological claim.

about allowing for, even expecting, transcendent causality and transcendent accounts of reality. Now we can combine the squares and rectangles insight about human science, even human nature, with the point that theology looks for transcendent patterns. The result delivers a pretty good tentative definition of what Christians understand theology to be. Christian theology searches for the highest humanly possible level of pattern recognition: transcendent, even divine, pattern recognition.

When we combine the hermeneutical insight of squares and rectangles with the theological goal of discerning transcendent patterns, we discover the chief logic of theology: analogy. Transcendent patterns are recognizable through immanent manifestations. Taking on non-competition, theology regains the paradox wherein divine initiative does not destroy but entails, enables, empowers, renders possible and real, human participation in transcendence, even divinity, without a reduction of such transcendence to mere human immanence. Such non-competitive participation includes not only human rites become mysteries, human persons become saints, but human language itself when become the gift of theology (as contemplation). Non-competition retains the discrete otherness of creatures within the Creator. Analogy, with respect to human language, only follows a radical apophatic imperative.¹⁵ Analogical contemplation is not glib, for it entails ontological depth.

The rule of faith names theology's chief guiding analogy. And the chief analogy for "liturgical theology" is that the whole is analogous to a ritual mystery. "Theology" means "exegesis." Theology names contemplative engagement with scripture. So what liturgical theology applies its analogy to is

¹⁵ Such an approach to theology is possible following de Lubac's retrieval of a non-competitive relationship between nature and grace, creation and divinity. That work continues with David Burrell, especially his work *Creation and the God of Abraham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and Kathryn Tanner: *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2004).

scripture, primarily, and then and only then to concrete human enactments of the ritual mysteries. The rule of faith summarizes the divine economy, providing an initial grasp of the whole of scripture. Liturgical theology takes the rule of faith as the summary of (a) liturgy.

Strengthening our sense and use of the word theology in an exegetical manner addresses the concern for keeping liturgical theology well-grounded and bounded. The word liturgy is the adjective in the phrase, and not the most important word. Because liturgical theology is a *theological* discipline, it is important that the noun define its adjective, “liturgy,” in a theological way, keeping it more about transcendent realities that earthly realities participate in and manifest, rather than about immanent and particularistic concretion. What I mean by strengthening the use of the word theology is, of course, this retrieval of a focus on biblical interpretation, construed as the retrieval of figuration. Part of the “solution,” then, to recent worries about what gives liturgical theology stability is to allow theology its own integrity as a discipline. Theology has its own discrete traditional practices and modes of reasoning.

Thus the recent scholarship that worries about an overemphasis on “community” in liturgical theology are spot on. The recovery of the *corpus verum* formed a significant source behind the populist “power to the people” (here construed as the laity) and “grass roots” edginess of some liturgical theology.¹⁶ Perhaps it has led more immanentizing theologians, concerned with pacifying Christianity’s cultured despisers, to focus on “community” and some kind of immediate, this-worldly social-justice pay-off “relevant” to ever increasingly local

¹⁶ Kavanagh especially represents this approach and all following Schmemmann have a kind of critique of modern dogmatic and systematic theology. Joris Geldhof points out this particular edge to liturgical theology in his article “Liturgy as Theological Norm: Getting Acquainted with Liturgical Theology.” *On Liturgical Theology*: 93-4. Kavanagh says that liturgy is “*proletarian* rather than elitist, *communitarian* rather than individualistic or idiosyncratic, *quotidian* rather than random or infrequent.”

and specific bodies of Christians. Perhaps. Perhaps much recent liturgical theology may thus be judged not theological enough.

But the solution is not to reject the insight of the return to the *corpus verum*, because what such immanentizing liturgical theologies are doing is not true to the initial insight of the retrieval of the *corpus verum*. The gathered body is the body of Christ, but the work is Christ's and not the community's.¹⁷ It belongs to the community only insofar as they are *in Christ* (in the Pauline sense). The retrieval of the *corpus verum* makes liturgical theology more theological, not less.

The answer to the possible problem of spelling out the insight of *corpus verum* in a libation to immanent relevance and particularity is not to ignore it, but to return with de Lubac also to scripture. The content of the *corpus* is only revealed apocalyptically. A given Christian community or rite is incapable of exhausting or encompassing its own reality. The point of retrieving the *corpus verum* was not to reduce God to the local, the communal. The point was to open the local community to the transcendent patterns all local and historic Christian communities are capable of sharing through the divine patterns of the ritual mysteries. Liturgical theology can reclaim de Lubac's insight with its original apocalyptic force. What is that apocalyptic force? Let's now look at what liturgy is within a Christian theological context.

¹⁷ There has been some recent criticism of the old etymology of "liturgy" as "work of the people" (Aune, 61-5). Such critique does not significantly alter, but only helps the task of liturgical theology. Rather than "work of the people," Christians adopted the word liturgy because it represented an *economic gift* on the part of a wealthy patron giving money, goods, or beasts for a notable act of public service. This often (but not always) involved sacrifice and festival. Such a redefinition is a boon to a liturgical analogy for the economy: God the Father offers the sacrifice of his Son on the altar of the earth as the "public service" that benefits the city of God.

WHAT IS THE “LITURGY” OF “LITURGICAL THEOLOGY”?

Sometimes an adjective in front of the word “theology” focuses on a particular aspect of divinity, a particular person of the Godhead, God as triune, or a divine act. In this case it designates a particular appropriate sub-topic of the theological enterprise. But often the adjective does not name a person or event. In this case I propose that an adjective in front of the word “theology,” names the operating analogy that generates theological contemplation.

Now let’s turn to our adjective. What does a theologian mean by the word “liturgy” when it is turned into an adjective and placed in front of the name of his or her subject matter? There are various historical and sociological definitions of “liturgy.” Liturgical theologians, as *theologians*, need not be confined to the definitions provided by historians or sociologists. Theologians ought to mean at least what they mean but can and should mean a lot more. The divine economy, and even, by further analogy removed, the divine life itself, is the most proper meaning of the word “liturgy” within a liturgical *theological* context. The economy is not foreign to liturgy. Ritual manifests the economy. Liturgical theology bares the insight that an appropriate, significant, perhaps even (the) central analogy for the divine life and economy is that it is *like* human liturgy.

The “liturgy” of “liturgical theology” is not so much an assembly of concrete human ritual acts on earth as it is a construal of the divine economy as an act of worship in the heavenly places. Liturgical theology nevertheless reflects on earthly human worship. But when it does so, it reflects on human worship as participating in and manifesting the divine economy, and that construed under the analogy of a cosmic formal act of worship, liturgy. Theologically speaking, then, human rites are “liturgy” only insofar as they manifest this fundamental reality, this fundamental divine service, this fundamental “liturgy.”

De Lubac's retrieval of the centrality of scripture to the nature of Christian theology haunts me. If theology is the interpretation of scripture, what should it mean, then, to place the adjective "liturgical" in front of such an understanding of the theological task? A related sub-concern to this one is the way in which de Lubac and de Lubac-inspired scholarship urges the centrality of the interpretation of Old Testament scriptures to Christian theology—and especially the traditional figural interpretation thereof.¹⁸ Why do I see so little incorporation of the Old Covenant scriptures into the liturgical theologies I read and love?

Recent scholarship on the Old Testament and ancient Israelite worship has discerned a kind of warp holding together the various threads of woof that make up the elaborate tapestry of the Old Covenant canon.¹⁹ I will call it the "temple-mythos." By temple-mythos I intend that shared transcendent cosmology assumed across the Old (and New) Covenant scriptures. I do not use the word "myth" pejoratively. I mean by the word "myth" here human narrative about transcendent reality or realities. I do not mean "pagan" or "heathen" "lies," nor do I mean to compare or reduce Judaism or our own Judaic inheritance as Christians to such (in the main unhelpful) construals of non-Biblical religion.

¹⁸ See, for example, John Behr's magisterial retelling of the development of theology and doctrine in the early church as primarily the development of, and attempt to remain faithful to, an inherited approach to the interpretation of scripture (and that chiefly as the LXX) in his works, *The Way to Nicaea* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001) and *The Nicene Faith*, 2 vols. (Crestwood, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004).

¹⁹ The two scholars that have informed me the most with this regard are Margaret Barker and Jon D. Levenson. See especially Barker's *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), *The Lost Prophet* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1998), *The Great Angel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992); and Levenson's *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale, 1993).

I need this term, “temple-mythos,” in order to avoid other terms. For example, the term “biblical world-view,” conjures up representational reductionism, privileging cognition over practice. “Apocalyptic,” or “apocalypticism” connotes both more and less than I intend. More, because of contemporary connotations, less because “apocalyptic” represents only one kind of literature that shares a *modus operandi* with other types of literature within the Old Covenant canon (indeed, within ancient Mediterranean culture in general). The old contrast between “apocalyptic” and “oracular” prophecy breaks down when it becomes clear that these are different literary types demanded by historical exigencies, rather than products of different ritual-mythological practices. Apocalyptic itself is a kind of disenfranchised wisdom literature: what those who possess “wisdom” see when they are in exile, rather than in the court of the king.²⁰ The ritual actions described in the Old Covenant form the ritual counterparts to this shared cosmology. The foundational narratives of Genesis may be read as the discursive counterparts to these very rituals. The phrase “temple-mythos” expresses the ritual-narrative patterns that these various forms of literature share.

The temple-mythos operates in a cosmos that is (a service of) worship. What cosmos *is*, that is to say “beautiful order,” is a divine service before its creator. The service *is the cosmos*: its liturgy renders cosmos out of chaos. This cosmic liturgy has a cosmic *ordo*: and that *ordo* is what the Christian tradition calls the *economy*. Ritual mysteries do not accidentally manifest a reality altogether foreign to them. It is fitting that a (human) ritual act of worship should manifest the economy because the economy itself is an act of organized (if celestial) worship.

Much of the recent temple-mythos literature available seemed at first to me, as a Christian theologian, to assume a far too *in illo tempore* feel. I struggled with

²⁰ Levenson. *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*. p. 32.

what this might mean. If the LORD separates the waters in the heavenly places to render cosmos out of chaos, does that turn Jesus into just another, albeit important, among many historical manifestations of an eternal truth? In other words, I felt the weight of the historical uniqueness of Jesus. I had not yet “reversed” the analogy.²¹

In a Christian theological context, Jesus (his incarnation, life, teaching, and paschal mystery) *is the cosmic liturgy*, the physical touch-down, the entry or manifestation, the *parousia*, of the LORD, the Son of the Most High God in his work as high priest over the cosmic liturgy. For the priest must come to the altar (earth) in order to offer the appointed sacrifice (himself). This Christian theological reading of the temple-mythos leads, therefore, to a theological and, in this case, economic, definition of liturgy. A theological take on the temple-mythos connects the rites of the Old and New Testaments, opening new ground for liturgical theological contemplation.

Some might worry that this temple-mythos (and the figurative reading it empowers) is perhaps “Platonic,” or “Platonizing.”²² I could agree with this at a general level but not in its specificity. The temple-mythos entails the ancient *modus operandi*, shared by many differing philosophies and local cults, that earthly realities participate in and (sometimes willy-nilly, especially, e.g., apocalyptic literature) manifest heavenly realities that transcendently exceed

²¹ I mean here the way in which, for example, Denys the Pseudo-Areopagite first builds up radical apophatic denial of any finite analogies from creation for attribution of God before “reversing” the analogy: that which is denied about God becomes affirmed when God is suddenly understood to be the actual and only proper referent of the given “name,” creation itself forming, now, the analogue to God. Here, instead of “names” or attributes, I use liturgy, the cosmic liturgy as a whole, as an analogue for the divine economy, and eventually even the divine life itself. (See the “Divine Names” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press. See also the present author’s work: *Theology as Ascetic Act*, Peter Lang, 2010. pp.121ff.)

²² For example, in *Mystagogy: A Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), Enrico Mazza calls the shared background of ancient mystagogy, “Platonism” (168ff.).

them. Plato's philosophy expresses such a mode of being in the world, but is not its only or even ultimate (ancient) expression. I would accept that such a move is Platonizing only if apocalyptic itself, for example, were considered "Platonic." In fact I would go so far as to say that Plato's dialogues and ancient apocalypses shared a similar background in this regard. They are parallel literary structures within the ancient Mediterranean basin that cut across cultural-linguistic differences. It is not about the philosophical system *per se*, but a cosmos in which there are chains of reality that permeate, participate in, and manifest one another.

The historical doubts that recent liturgical scholars have cast on the "shape" of the liturgy are spot on. The "shape" cannot be grounded historically. Treating the "shape" as though it were an historically provable or discernable reality was never really the point of the discovery of the internal dialogic of Christian ritual mysteries. The point is that concrete Christian ritual mysteries are enacted with the expectation that their shape corresponds to and manifests thereby the worship of God in the heavenly places and on the last day. We should not be surprised when realities that transcend the concrete, the historical, the merely human, wind up erupting into human reality, history, and concrete ritual performance in pluriform and performatively incompatible ways. Acknowledgement of such does not end liturgical theology. It only makes more plain, in a Christian (post-critical) context, its very need. Theology looks for transcendent patterns, not immanent chains of causation.

For example, Dix's insight into the shape of liturgy is sound scripturally and theologically. Many scholars tear down the work begun by Dix with the claim that his description of the shape of liturgy cannot be grounded *historically*. Dix complicated things for his own future interpreters by not delineating the differences between his historical and more theological claims. But, to be charitable, such distinctions were not being made in liturgical scholarship at that

time. His fundamental insight into the shape of the anaphora, for example, regardless of whether or not it can be grounded historically, is substantially grounded in the way in which the so-called “words of institution” of Christ recorded in the *canonical scriptures* show us a *shape* that some of the most important concrete and textually attested Christian liturgies conform to. As an argument correlating *scripture* to *rite*, this is a *theological* and not historical claim (and, in my opinion, a still valid and helpful one). Dix’s gift of the shape of the liturgy or the *ordo* to Schmemmann, and therefore to liturgical *theology*, remains valid and valuable to this day. This correlation of scripture to rite is important in liturgical traditions that need liturgical theology not only to affirm concrete (earthly) liturgical traditions, but also provide criteria for their reform.

Liturgical theology need not abandon the shape of the liturgy and reflection upon it. But it may need to ground the shape in something other than historicity. That shape finds its ground in that which grounds all theology worthy of the name: *scripture*. The narrative shape of the cosmic liturgy of Christ’s incarnation and paschal mystery grounds the shape of the liturgy. *Ordo* is not Dix’s reconstruction of a shape of an historically consistent liturgical line that goes back to Jesus in some kind of historically obvious or at least (historically) reconstructable way. Rather, the *ordo* is the cosmic liturgy discerned by triangulation from scripture (as the chief narrative compliment to Christian rites) and the rites of the Old and New Covenants as manifestations thereof.

Abandoning talk of “shape,” or *ordo*, and focusing on ever increasing levels of concretion is not the way to make liturgical theology more liturgical. The answer, again, is to turn to scripture and here in terms of its liturgical content as found in the shared world of the temple-mythos. I am not saying that this was Dix’s discovery. I am saying that a focus on the temple-mythos is an example of how liturgical theology can continue to look for ways in which Christian rites enact on earth patterns in the (heavenly) liturgy found in scripture.

Liturgical theology not only makes an analogy from what (anthropologists and historians agree that) we call “liturgy” for the life and economy of God; it also *reverses* the analogy. The *theological* meaning is the *primary Christian meaning* of “liturgy.”²³ What we call liturgy on earth is (a) ritual participation in this cosmic hymn of praise. The economy is the liturgy: the work of the Son of God, our great high priest, on behalf of the people of God. Liturgical theology needs such a theological definition of liturgy, that is, a definition that makes God the actor and God’s mighty deeds the main action, in order to approach the task *theologically* rather than as thoughtful religious gloss on history or historical (or sociological) study. The rule of faith summarizes a liturgy. Such an exegetical and scriptural approach was assumed rather than stated by the ancient producers of the earliest commentaries on the Christian mysteries: mystagogy.

BRIEF EXCURSES ON MYSTAGOGY

The ancients named divine pattern recognition with respect to the Christian ritual mysteries *mystagogy*. Mystagogy names that discourse that identifies the ritual mysteries as manifestations of and initiations into the mystery of the divine economy itself. Scholarship on the nature of patristic mystagogy²⁴ has in general drawn the following analogy: mystagogy is to the sacraments as figuration is to scripture.

²³ With that as the case, then liturgical theology can make the following kinds of claims: The life of God is a kind of liturgy unto itself. The divine economy is (a) liturgy. The incarnation is *the* liturgy of atonement. Theosis is human participation in Christ’s cosmic liturgy, our participation in divine *service*, etc.

²⁴ Again, see Mazza’s work. Hahn has shown the formal and material unity of mystagogy, figuration and a patristic approach to the divine economy. My point compliments his but my point is more directly theological: the divine economy *is the liturgy*, at least; it is the liturgy that forms the adjective in the phrase “liturgical theology;” and that just exactly because it is theological.

If, however, we remember our squares and rectangles, then mystagogy must name the ground of the figurative reading of scripture itself. If liturgy is the behavior (rectangle) and scripture is its native discourse (square), then discourse *about* the liturgy, namely, mystagogy, grounds the discourse that engages those scriptures read *within* liturgy. Which is just to say the reading of scripture, figuratively. In other words *figuration* names the *mystagogical reading of scripture*. When we read the scriptures figuratively, we read them with the assumption that they, like Christian rites, manifest realities that infinitely exceed them yet nevertheless behave in discernable and imitable patterns. Mystagogy and figuration are one, because *the scriptures are a part of the divine service*, just as *discourse is a part of human behavior*.

At this point I would like to take up a possible objection or worry to the line of reasoning represented by this project. And that would be the worry that this project either ignores, downplays, or does not give due reverence to the particular and the concrete with respect to liturgy, whether diachronically through historical study or synchronically through anthropology or sociology (ritual theory). Such a line of objection corresponds to the general worry that liturgical theology floats too free of the historical and the concrete.²⁵ How could this approach to mystagogy and liturgical theology honor modern historical consciousness? How could it honor the fact that God honors history through an historical incarnation? Let us first look to mystagogy and then deal with the issue as a whole.

There are differing and even seemingly incompatible mystagogical treatises that survive. We cannot give a unified *historical* account of what mystagogy was,

²⁵ Such criticism is reflected in Bradshaw's accusation that liturgical theology is based upon "bad history, or no history at all" (Aune, 193).

is or should be.²⁶ This is because of the nature of mystagogy. Its goal is the contemplation of things that, from beyond human historical experience (much less human historiography), give human life and “history” meaning and transcend it (and in the case of the triune God, infinitely transcendent it). We can, however, give a unified, or, at least, general or unifying, account of what mystagogy is *theologically*. Theologically, mystagogy names that discourse that identifies the ritual mysteries as manifestations of and initiations into the mystery of the divine economy itself.

Given such a theological definition, it makes sense that there could never be a single unifying historical definition. The historical diversity we find should be expected from its shared theological reality. Allowing for mutual and even incompatible contemplations is a sign that what we are engaging in is catholic. You cannot simultaneously perform the anaphora of St. John Chrysostom and the Roman Canon of the Mass. That does not make them “incompatible.” It makes them catholic.

This account of mystagogy provides an exact analogue that responds to these same worries with regard to the post-critical project of liturgical theology as a whole. The questions asked assume that the particular and the concrete are in conflict with that which theology studies—that they are in competition with one another. Studies of immanent realities and their origins in terms of concrete chains of immanent, earthly causality in no way conflict with theology’s task of discerning the manifestation of transcendent, heavenly, patterns therein. It is a category error to think so.

But, moreover, in a theological context, without such “myth,” history itself has no (transcendent) reality—it becomes one damn thing after another. History, and

²⁶ Mazza makes it clear that “it proves difficult to formulate a general [historical] theory that would account for all the aspects that have emerged from analysis of” ancient mystagogical texts (165).

concrete rites for that matter, become real “by dint”²⁷ of their relationship to something that is not historical or particular. If the cosmos is a liturgy, then, like liturgy there is both a logic and a “chronologic” to that rite. There is myth, and there are histories. The relationship of the performance of a rite to its ritual logic forms an analogue to the relationship of “myth” to history. This does not mean that theological reasoning can contradict or ignore historical and other concrete studies. It does mean that its goals and methods differ. From the point of view of Christian faith, the concrete ritual mysteries have no *historical* or concrete reality. They only have historical and concrete *enactment*. Their reality is *transcendent*. The job of the theologian is to study that reality, discern those patterns, and reveal where they are breaking through in Christian life.

That said, discernment of transcendence within immanence is not contrary to the study of the particular; on the contrary, it gives it life. Liturgical theology studies the particular, the concrete, and the local. It does not start and end there.²⁸ It moves from the transcendent, through the immanent, and back again. The ground of such seemingly speculative work is found in the examination of the Christian revelation, the Holy Scriptures. And those same scriptures are interpreted within each concrete, historical act of Christian ritual mystery.

The Christian tradition affirms that God and the realms of reality that transcend the earthly and visible, which is to say, the heavens, the invisible, and their occupants, are more real than the flux and change of history this side of the *eschaton*. Jesus is the radical eruption of that plane of reality into our own. Through Jesus, God and the heavens give human life and history reality. God has become incarnate in Jesus the Messiah, but that does not *reduce* God to

²⁷ Here I must make it clear that I am only standing on the shoulders of that giant of post-critical Hebrew biblical studies, Jon Levenson (*Sinai and Zion*, 103-110).

²⁸ That would represent Fagerberg's theology “from or about” liturgy. “Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?” *Liturgy Training Publications* (2004): 54ff.

history, nor trap the LORD within it, any more than it reduces God to the flesh. History is honored because Jesus is the one new thing, the one thing that is not one damn thing after another. Jesus is the blessed one: “Behold, the new creation” (2 Cor. 5.17).

Mystagogy and figuration are one, then, because the scriptures are a part of the “divine service.” For when we contemplate the divine life and economy as the most proper meaning of the word “liturgy,” then what the tradition calls figuration and mystagogy represent two modes of discourse about the same theological reality. Mystagogy is the wider discourse encompassing the figurative reading of scripture. Figuration performs mystagogy on scripture. Thus liturgical theology forms an essential part of a post-critical retrieval of both mystagogy and figuration.

WHAT, THEN, IS “LITURGICAL THEOLOGY”?

Perhaps “liturgical theology” names a kind of post-critical retrieval of ancient mystagogy.²⁹ It is true, of course, that the two are close and even inherently related. Liturgical theology is not, however, mystagogy *redux*. Liturgical theology, rather, names a retrieval of the ancient theological, economic, and cosmological background, what I have been calling the temple-mythos, that manifested the twin ancient discourses of mystagogy and figuration in the first place. Liturgical theology is the contemplation of the divine life and economy, and even the cosmos itself as (a) liturgy. Therefore, liturgical theology retrieves *both* mystagogy and figuration.

Theology names faithful Christian exegesis of *scripture*, not interpretation of ritual *per se*. An adjective in front of the word “theology” gives an analogical

²⁹ Mazza calls mystagogy an ancient “liturgical theology” (xii.).

construal of the *rule of faith*, which serves as the entry point of a given Christian contemplation of sacred text. In our case, then, “liturgical theology “must necessarily be a biblical theology.”³⁰ The “liturgy” of liturgical theology is the divine life and economy presented, biblically, as a “temple-mythos.” That temple-mythos is, then, the “whole” of our liturgical theological hermeneutical circle.

Figuration occurs when Christians construe the context of the canonical scriptures as a whole to be the divine economy—accessible through contemplation to saints in any point of earthly history. Mystagogy occurs when Christians understand the ritual mysteries to manifest and initiate the Christian into the mystery of this divine economy. In both cases, the realization that the divine economy (the temple is God’s house) *is* the Divine Liturgy retrieves figuration and mystagogy, for God’s temple (house) is the cosmos as a whole.³¹

So liturgical theology names and contemplates the whole *as liturgy* in order to expound both rite on the one hand (mystagogy) and scripture on the other (figuration) as parts of the one reality they manifest: the divine service of Jesus Christ. Mystagogy expounds the ritual pattern, figuration the ritual discourse of the service of the Word, the Holy Scriptures. Liturgical theology, as the grounding analogy for both mystagogy and figuration, becomes contemplative, imaginative, never-definitive meditation upon the scriptural cosmology of the temple-mythos enacted in Christian rites and read in Christian scripture. The goal is contemplation, not system, meditation, not totalizing discourse. Such reductionism could not be its goal, for in taking “liturgy” as its analogy liturgical

³⁰ Mazza, (135).

³¹ Even if this is not the only or exclusive way to construe the divine economy (and, of course, it is not) it is still at least sound and, I would argue, central way of doing so, due to the centrality of the love of God in worship, corporate worship, and liturgical worship in scripture and the tradition.

theology remains ever open to other contemplative analogies³² that, through challenge, intersection, or enrichment together move theology towards its endless goal: the contemplation of a triune God.

Reading the rule of faith as a narrative summary of a cosmic liturgy brings together traditional readings of the mysteries, the canon as scripture, and critical scholarship on the ancient temple-mythos. Post-criticism assumes the importance of historical readings without criticism's reductionism. In this case, a post-critical approach reintegrates the kind of historical construction that uncovers a temple-mythos in the ancient Levant with traditional readings of the canon because it allows for the possibility that the transcendent realities discerned within the mythos, and the scriptures and rites believed to place us in contact with them, may be real, and not (human) projections.

Dix's "shape," combined with Lubac's *corpus verum*, provided the womb from which Schmemmann would midwife "liturgical theology." I have summarized the history of liturgical theology in this way in order to make the retrieval of figuration as central as the retrieval of *corpus verum* on the one hand, and a (re-) discovery of the temple-mythos as central as the (re-) discovery of the *ordo* on the other. I do not suggest these things as a new direction.³³ Liturgical theology's retrieval of figural interpretation of the Christian canon (of both scripture and rite) characterizes its (so far) brief but pyrotechnic history. Liturgical theology explosively infuses figuration and mystagogy back into the arid nominalism of modern Christian thought. Such interpretation of liturgical theology brings forward its historical origins in a manner consistent with its own past and in

³² E.g., pastoral, political, moral, ascetical, "missional," etc.

³³ I am tempted to generate a neologism, "mystagogical theology," but I see this project as both theologically and historically continuous with that of liturgical theology in general. If it is necessary in order to distinguish from what liturgical theology has, in some cases, become, then perhaps I will have to employ a new phrase. I hope not.

correspondence with more recent scholarship. I hope only to make the implicit explicit, to discover the tacit to be the *telos*.

Recall the key concern that there are no bounds to liturgical theology. What grants the discipline proper boundaries? What keeps it *liturgical*? What keeps it *theological*? Theology reflects upon the highest level of pattern recognition that human beings are capable of achieving. Theology has the capacity, therefore, to discern layers of web-like causality that include but transcend the immanent. What keeps such wild speculation on target? Revelation. What revealed discourse can we trust? The scriptures. And this is true for theologies that have an adjective in front of their names. It is therefore true of "liturgical theology." Liturgical theology, as theology, finds its ground in the scriptures.

The answer to the worry that liturgical theology has no bounds is not more theory or more history but more *theology*: and that means more exegesis, more scripture.³⁴ Scripture is that which theology contemplates. Liturgical theology, therefore, is a liturgical reading, approach, meditation, upon scripture. As with any figuration, then, it is bound on the one side by the limits of the canon and its *sensus literalis* and the rule of faith on the other. Liturgical theology places the adjective "liturgy" in front of this: a liturgical analogy for the rule of faith and an assumption that the scriptures formally (canon as liturgical performance) and substantially (*sensus literalis*) are liturgical in nature.

The hermeneutical circle of liturgical theology is that of concrete sacred texts and ritual behavior to cosmic divine service, and back-linked by discerning webs of overlapping transcendent, participatory causality. The way we enter this hermeneutical circle is through participation in the mysteries themselves, with the faith that they manifest the divine economy. It is fitting that a ritual act of

³⁴ The same work de Lubac did to allay the fears of critical scholars with regards to a retrieval of figuration directly applies today to the fears some historical liturgical scholars have expressed about the nature and boundaries of "liturgical theology."

worship would manifest the economy if the economy itself is an act of organized (if celestial) worship.

The hermeneutical circle of liturgical theology is not, therefore, that of historical or sociological particular to historical or sociological context, and back-linked by discerning chains of immanent, be it either chronological or social, causality. Liturgical theology contemplates scripture under the assumption that, because both the scriptures and the mysteries participate in the realities of heaven, and because the native context of scriptural contemplation is that of the ritual mysteries, being open to the realities that the mysteries place us in contact with will help us to elucidate the meaning of the scriptures, and vice versa.

Now, we may be “caught up short”³⁵ by many things: a passage of scripture about rites,³⁶ or a passage of scripture not seemingly to be about ritual,³⁷ or even one with an anti-ritual tone.³⁸ We are caught up short by concrete acts of Christian liturgy here on earth, or discovered or rediscovered historical texts describing such acts.³⁹ Even so, we return to scripture for insight.⁴⁰ Either way, what completes the circle is the divine liturgy of the heavenly places, the cosmic liturgy of the paschal mystery, and the liturgy that is the life of God: the Holy Trinity. Liturgical theology does not, therefore, meditate upon concrete Christian ritual *per se*, any more than theology is a meditation on concrete

³⁵ This is Gadamer’s phrase for what initiates the need for interpretation in his *Truth and Method*.

³⁶ Say, the Atonement, or the sacrifice of the first-born to Molech.

³⁷ Say, the way in which the Eden story is actually about a primordial temple.

³⁸ Say, the way in which passages in the oracular prophets seem to denigrate sacrifice and ritual worship all together. If liturgy is so central, how do we make sense of these?

³⁹ For example, both concrete and living liturgical traditions and “found” liturgies from ancient texts. Theologically speaking, however, living liturgies must take precedence over “discoveries.”

⁴⁰ For example, the “problem” of how the *Didache’s* thanksgiving constituted a Eucharistic prayer was discovered in Dix’s shape of the anaphora found in scripture.

Christian individuals. It is an exercise in noticing transcendent patterns that these concrete individual realities (are able to) share in and manifest.

CONCLUSIONS

My goal in this essay has been to recognize how liturgical theology takes part in the retrieval of ancient Christian approaches to scriptural interpretation. If figuration and mystagogy are one, then to retrieve one is to retrieve the other. Knowledge of liturgy, that is, the cosmic and economic liturgy, its shape and various manifestations, grants a liturgical approach to the rule of faith for the imaginative process of mystagogy and figuration. Liturgical theology brings them forward as boundaries to one another.

One modern (and perhaps Protestant) worry about figuration has been that it somehow allows us to “say anything” about scripture. Liturgical theology brings forward the shared background of both figuration and mystagogy that enables but also binds both modes of discourse. Mystagogy guides the retrieval of figuration by providing a safe analogical sandbox for its exploration. The exegete cannot “say anything” about scripture. The boundaries are that of the cosmic *ordo*; the work is its discernment.

There is, nevertheless, much more scholarship *about* figuration than actual figural interpretation. The retrieval, at times, seems stalled. My hope is that discerning the identity of figuration and mystagogy *as* liturgical theology will manifest the boundaries of such interpretation so that there may be less need for *justifying* figural interpretation and more actual figuration. In my next project I hope to argue that there is no fundamental difference between the way in which the rites of the Old and the New Covenant participate in the heavenly liturgy, except this: the earthly rites must change with respect to their place along the earthly unfolding of time before and after the incarnation and Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. I will approach this through an exegesis of the binding of Isaac,

among other key texts. Working through this and other such projects will afford me the opportunity to address, among other things: the theological unity of contemplation and (the teaching of the) Trinity, the relationship of criticism to Christian (figural) reading of scripture, a Christian theology of the nature of history, “Platonism” and analogical discourse, the intersection of liturgical and political theology, worries concerning supersessionism and Jewish-Christian dialogue after the Holocaust, worries about “sacrifice,” etc.

Grounding liturgical theology in figural exegesis encourages the instinctual *sensus fidelium* that criticism *alone* “steals Jesus.” It is all too easy for an intellectual critical elite to pour scorn on “fundamentalism.” But the church has the ancient wisdom not to hand theology over to “experts.” One of the gifts of liturgical renewal is the breakdown of a professional-client relationship of clergy to laity. Liturgical theology continues this renewal by breaking down the professional-client relationship implicit in much critical scholarship. Liturgical theology extends the grass-roots edginess of liturgical renewal into biblical interpretation, empowering the laity with scripture as well. The way to get scripture back without fundamentalism is through a transcendent cosmology. Liturgical theology as a post-critical retrieval of figural exegesis unifies and shows respect to both Testaments, and may provide a key to unlock, as if in apocalypse, radical discipleship, ethics, and politics.

The blessed David also advises the meaning of this [eucharistic bread and wine], saying, *you have prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies . . .* Before your coming, [Christ], evil spirits prepared a table for human beings, foul and polluted and full of demonic influence; but since your coming, O Lord, *you have prepared a table before me . . .* that mystical and spiritual table, which God has prepared over against, contrary, and in opposition to the evil spirit . . . And very truly; for that table had fellowship with demons, but this one with God.

Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses* IV.7.