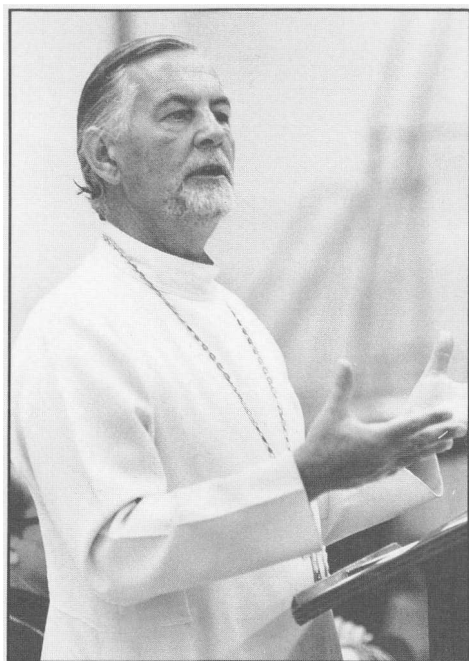


LITURGY
AND
TRADITION



Theological Reflections of
Alexander Schmemmann

THOMAS FISCH, Editor

Theology and Liturgical Tradition

The problem of the relationship between worship and theology is on the theological agenda of our time.¹ Several factors, moreover, seem to indicate that it is an urgent problem — the victorious growth of liturgical movements in practically all Christian denominations, the ecumenical encounter,² the rediscovery of symbolism as an essential religious category, and, finally, the theological revival with its radical *examen de conscience* concerning the very nature of theological inquiry. The *leitourgia* of the Church has become for the theologian a challenge that has to be evaluated and answered in theological terms. And even those who denounce this growing interest in worship as dangerous (e.g. Karl Barth) must do so on theological grounds, within a consistent theology of worship.

Although the existence of the problem is certain, it is still difficult to define it. There is much confusion and ambiguity in the use of certain terms. One speaks, for example, of liturgical theology, of a liturgical “resourcement” of theology. For some, this implies an almost radical rethinking of the very concept of theology, a complete change in its structure. The *leitourgia* — being the unique expression of the Church, of its faith and of its life — must become the basic source of theological thinking, a

1. From *Worship in Scripture and Tradition*, edited by Massey Hamilton Shepherd, Jr. Copyright © 1963 by Oxford University Press, Inc. Reprinted by permission.
2. According to Professor Joseph Sittler, it acknowledges “the fact that the way Christian people worship is declarative of what they believe. This declaration as made in worship may well be of a depth and fullness seldom attained in credal propositions.”

kind of *locus theologicus par excellence*. There are those, on the other hand, who, while admitting the importance of the liturgical experience for theology, would rather consider it as a necessary *object* of theology — an object requiring, first of all, a theological clarification of its nature and function. Liturgical theology or the theology of liturgy — we have here two entirely different views concerning the relationship between worship and theology. And this difference implies much more than a difference of emphasis. Our attempt here is designed to clarify, very briefly and, so to say, tentatively, at least a few of these implications.

I

To understand the real nature of the two tendencies mentioned here, we must remember that both have antecedents in the past, and are based to some extent on a conscientious desire to recover positions that are supposed to have been held previously. And, indeed, one can discern in the history of the Church two main types or patterns of relationship between theology and the *leitourgia*.

(1) *The patristic type*. The recent revival of patristic studies shows that one of the major characteristics of the Fathers is precisely that of an organic connection between their theological thought and their liturgical experience. *Lex orandi est lex credendi*: this axiom means that the liturgical tradition, the liturgical life, is a natural milieu for theology, its self-evident term of reference. 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: “Our opinion is in accordance with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn establishes our opinion,” said St Irenaeus.³ We shall have to deal with this position later on. At this point let us simply state that it

3. *Adv. haer.* iv, 18, 5: *Nostra autem consonans est sententia Eucharistiae, et Eucharistia rursus confirmat sententiam nostram.*

existed, and that there is nothing fortuitous in the claim sometimes put forward by the liturgical movement that it constitutes a return to this patristic ideal.

(2) *The scholastic type.* By “scholastic” we mean, in this instance, not a definite school or period in the history of theology, but a theological structure which existed in various forms in both the West and the East, and in which all “organic” connection with worship is severed. Theology here has an independent, rational status; it is a search for a system of consistent categories and concepts: *intellectus fidei*. The position of worship in relation to theology is reversed: from a *source* it becomes an *object*, which has to be defined and evaluated within the accepted categories (e.g. definitions of sacraments). Liturgy supplies theology with “data,” but the method of dealing with these data is independent of any liturgical context. Moreover, the selection and classification of the data themselves are already a “product” of the accepted conceptual structure.

From the point of view which interests us here, it is of paramount importance that, in spite of all the developments and variations of Christian theology, it is this second type that has had a monopoly from the end of the patristic age up to our own time. A good example is the Eastern Orthodox Church, justly considered to be the liturgical Church *par excellence*. The student of Orthodox theology knows that in all its post-patristic developments — late Byzantine theology (with the possible exception of the “hesychast” movement), the school of Kiev in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, Russian “academic” theology, contemporary Greece, etc. — liturgical tradition has played practically no role, and has been almost totally ignored, even as a *locus theologicus*. Liturgy and theology have peacefully co-existed — the former in its traditional form, the latter as a sacred science — with no attempt made to correlate their respective languages.

In the West the situation was somewhat different. Instead of a

peaceful co-existence, there was a direct impact of theological speculation (medieval, post-tridentine) on the very forms of liturgical life. The changes were so substantial that, according to some Roman Catholic leaders of the liturgical movement, nothing short of a real liturgical reformation can restore the true liturgical tradition. The Reformers protested against the medieval theology of worship, but in spite of their desire for a return to the primitive tradition, they actually replaced this medieval doctrine by another theology of worship, so that in the Protestant Churches the *leitourgia* remained a function of its theological conception and interpretation. Subsequent developments in Roman Catholic and Protestant theology did not alter this situation. Intellectual or anti-intellectual, liberal or pietistic, theology not only remained internally independent of worship, but claimed the right to control it, and to form it according to the *lex credendi*.

The liturgical movement is the first attempt to break this monopoly, to restore to liturgical tradition its own theological status. In this it radically differs from all ritualistic or pietistic revivals of the past, with their emphasis on the psychology or the edifyingly mystical atmosphere of worship — on the “mood setting devices made available by the application of psychological categories,” to quote Professor Sittler. Its fundamental presupposition is that the liturgy not only has a theological meaning and is declarative of faith, but that it is the living norm of theology; it is in the liturgy that the sources of faith — the Bible and tradition — become a living reality. The leaders and participants of the liturgical movement advocate a return to what they consider to be the essence of the patristic age, and in the name of this return denounce the other, the scholastic type, as a deviation from the genuine Christian norm of theology.

II

It is at this point that the question must be asked: Can either of

these two attitudes, in their pure expression, be acceptable to us today, and be the starting point of a reconsideration of the relationship between worship and theology? It seems to me that in the modern discussion of the liturgical problem, one essential fact is very often overlooked, or at least not given sufficient attention. Yet it is this fact that makes the liturgical problem of our time much more complex than it may seem. I define it as the *metamorphosis of the liturgical consciousness*.

When we speak of "liturgical tradition" of the early Church (the one implied in patristic theology) we must keep in mind that this tradition was constituted by two basic elements, equally essential for its proper understanding: (a) a formal continuity of Christian *leitourgia* with the Jewish worship, which supplied the Church with the basic liturgical structures (the "*ordo*" or "*typos*," the liturgical language); and (b) the radical transformation of the spirit of worship — i.e. of the meaning attached to these structures and forms. Both elements have been studied and stressed in many recent works on the history of Christian worship, but it seems to me that not all the necessary conclusions have been drawn. Yet it is only when these two fundamental categories are seen in their relationship to each other that one can understand the real nature of the patristic use of liturgy, and also of the *metamorphosis* which marked the post-patristic liturgical development.

We know today that the cult of the early Church was essentially a Jewish cult, that practically all its forms can be traced back to Jewish antecedents, including the sacramental worship which was for a long time ascribed to the non-Jewish "mystery cults" of the Graeco-Roman world. Every year some new study widens and strengthens our knowledge of the Jewish background and the Jewish connotations of early Christian liturgy. But the liturgiologists and the historians to whom we are indebted for these studies are not always aware that this formal continuity implied a radical transformation in terms of a new content put in the old forms, of

a Christian cult growing from Judaic roots. The Jewish *Kiddusha*⁴ gives its pattern to the Christian Eucharist, the Jewish baptism — whatever it was — to the Christian baptism. But the transformation remains within “cultic” categories; it is a transformation of the cult. In fact, this transformation took place at a much deeper level, and this seems to me the essential fact in the formation of the Christian liturgical tradition.

Paradoxically, to make a long story short, one can say that this transformation consists in the *abolishment of cult as such*, or at least in the complete destruction of the old philosophy of cult. The Christian *leitourgia* is not a “cult” if by this term we mean a sacred action, or rite, performed in order to establish “contact” between the community and God, whatever the meaning and the nature of such contact. A “cult” by its very essence presupposes a radical distinction between the “sacred” and the “profane,” and, being a means of reaching or expressing the “sacred,” it posits all the non-sacred as “profane.” The Jewish worship was a cult in the deepest meaning of this term. In spite of all its uniqueness, of all its opposition to pagan cults, it shared with the latter this basic distinction between the “sacred” and the “profane,” this function of being a means of communication between the “sacred” and the “profane.” It was based on a priestly order, and on the principle of a complete isolation of the cultic action from the “profane” areas of life.

From this point of view the Christian *leitourgia* did not originate as a cult. It was not a cult, because within the *ecclesia* — the royal priesthood, the holy people, the peculiar nation — the distinction between the sacred and the profane, which is the very condition of cult, has been abolished. The Church is not a natural community which is “sanctified” through the cult. In its essence the Church is the presence, the actualization in this world of the

4. The blessings or *berakoth* recited over “the cup of blessing” during the Jewish ceremonial meal.

“world to come,” in this *aeon* — of the Kingdom. And the mode of this presence, of this actualization of the new life, the new *aeon*, is precisely the *leitourgia*. It is only within this eschatological dimension of the Church that one can understand the nature of the liturgy: to actualize and realize the identity of the *ecclesia* with the new *aeon*, of the “age to come.”

Thou didst not cease to do all things until thou hadst brought us back to heaven and hadst endowed us with thy kingdom which is to come.
(Anaphora of St John Chrysostom)

The *leitourgia*, therefore, is not a cultic action performed in the Church, on its behalf, and for it; it is the action of the Church itself, or the Church *in actu*, it is the very expression of its life. It is not opposed to the non-cultic forms or aspects of the *ecclesia*, because the *ecclesia* exists in and through the *leitourgia*, and its whole life is a *leitourgia*. This life is rooted in the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, and the sacraments according to the early Christian understanding are precisely the means of the eschatological life of the Church. They manifest the “coming *aeon*” in this world, and they are themselves but the expressions of the Church as the visible sign of the Kingdom which is to come, its anticipation in time and history.

If the *leitourgia* has not only preserved the form of a cult, but can be described as a real continuation of the Jewish cult, it is to be explained in terms of the same Christian eschatology. The latter has been expressed in the antinomical formula: “*in* the world, but not *of* the world.” The Church belongs to the age to come, but dwells in “this world,” and its proper mission is to witness to the *Eschaton* — the Lordship of Christ until He comes, until the consummation of time. In this world, the *Eschaton* — the holy, the sacred, the “otherness” — can be expressed and manifested only as “cult.” Not only in relation to the world, but in relation to itself as dwelling in the world, the Church must use the forms and language of the cult, in order eternally to transcend the cult, to “become what it is.” And it is this “transition” of the

cult — the cult which itself fulfills the *reality* to which it can only point, which it can announce, but which is the consummation of its function as cult — that we call sacrament.

Thus the liturgical tradition of the Church is fundamentally antinomical in its nature. It is a cult which eternally transcends itself, because it is the cult of a community which eternally realizes itself, as the Body of Christ, as the Church of the Holy Spirit, as ultimately, the new *aeon* of the Kingdom. It is a tradition of forms and structures, but these forms and structures are no longer those of a “cult,” but those of the Church itself, of its life “in Christ.” Now we can understand the real meaning of the patristic use of liturgical tradition. The formula *lex orandi est lex credendi* means nothing else than that theology is *possible* only within the Church, i.e. as a fruit of this new life in Christ, granted in the sacramental *leitourgia*, as a witness to the eschatological fullness of the Church, as in other terms, a participation in this *leitourgia*. The problem of the relationship between liturgy and theology is not for the Fathers a problem of priority or authority. Liturgical tradition is not an “authority” or a *locus theologicus*; it is the ontological condition of theology, of the proper understanding of *kerygma*, of the Word of God, because it is in the Church, of which the *leitourgia* is the expression and the life, that the sources of theology are functioning as precisely “sources.”

III

For reasons that have been partially explained and partially are still to be explained, this understanding of the liturgical tradition has not been preserved within the Church, and it is here that we approach the *metamorphosis* of the liturgical consciousness, mentioned above. It is not Christian worship that changed, but it is comprehension by the believers, by the Christian community. In a simplified form one can say that, in the consciousness of the community, the *leitourgia* became once again a cult, i.e. a system

of sacred actions and rites, performed in the Church, for the Church and by the Church, yet in order not to make the Church “what it is,” but to “sanctify” individual members of the Church, to bring them into contact with God. The categories of the sacred and the profane came back, and became categories within the Church itself. One can study this transformation from many points of view — the doctrine of ministry, the forms of Church government, the relations between clergy and laity, etc. — but here we shall limit ourselves to the liturgical sphere proper.

The Byzantine period in the history of the Eastern Orthodox worship is a very good example. It was marked by the progressive “sacralization” of the clergy, the appearance of the iconostasis separating the sanctuary from the congregation, and finally the transformation of the *laicos*, the member of the Body of Christ and the citizen of the Kingdom, into the *cosmicos*, or the “layman” in the actual acceptance of this term. The liturgy became a separate activity, a “means of grace” sharply opposed to all other spheres of Church life — which were, in turn, condemned to a progressive “profanization.”

This *metamorphosis* deeply marked theological thinking. One example is sufficient. In the study of the Eucharist, theological attention was focused exclusively upon the question: what happens to the elements, and exactly how and when does it happen? For the early Church the real question was: what happens to the *Church* in the Eucharist? The difference is radical; it shows perfectly clearly the nature of the change, from the eschatological to the ecclesiological “dimension” of the sacraments. Theology shifted to a purely “cultic” inquiry, which is centered always on the question of the validity and modality of a rite. Considering the sacrament exclusively from the point of view of the elements (transubstantiation, consubstantiation, etc.), theology practically ignored the liturgy itself, considering it as a non-essential, symbolical “framework” for the minimum of action and words necessary

for validity. The whole liturgical action ceased to be understood as *sacramental*, i.e. as a series of transformations ultimately leading the Church, the *ecclesia*, into the fullness of the Kingdom, the only real “condition” of the transformation of the elements.

This *metamorphosis* of the liturgical consciousness makes it impossible to accept the choice between “liturgical theology” and a “theology of the liturgy” as valid. For the liturgy has to be explained once again as the *leitourgia of the Church* — and this is the task of the theologian. But for this task, the real liturgical tradition must be rediscovered — and this is the task of the liturgiologist. If it is for theology to purify the liturgy, it is for the liturgy to give back to theology that eschatological fullness, which the liturgy alone can “actualize” — the participation in the life of the Kingdom which is still to come.

According to the measure of our possibilities,
O Christ, our God,
the Sacrament of thy will,
has been fulfilled and completed,
for we have had the memory of thy death,
we have seen the image of thy resurrection,
we have been filled with thine eternal life,
we have enjoyed this immortal food,
which grant us also in the age to come.
(Final prayer of the Liturgy of St Basil)