

Reviews



J. Aaron Simmons, Bruce Ellis Benson and Neal DeRoo, eds., *Philosophies of Liturgy: Explorations of Embodied Religious Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), pp. xvi + 309, ISBN 978-1350349308. £39.99

Over the last decade, an increasing number of analytic and continental philosophers of religion have turned their attention to address philosophical questions that arise out of religious practices; particularly the scripted communal practice known as ‘liturgy’. For example: What is the relationship of liturgy to religion, worship, or spirituality? How can Christian liturgies include those who have been traumatised or marginalised? What are the intended goals of specific liturgical practices (e.g., corporate silence, blessing objects, chanting)? This volume succeeds in solidifying this trend by providing a state-of-the-art collection of essays by both analytic and continental philosophers and theologians. Out of eighteen essays, two have been previously published.

The collection starts with an erudite and very densely written foreword by Jean-Yves Lacoste, which provides a defence of treating the ordinary term ‘liturgy’ as a concept worthy of philosophical investigation. I did not find this to be the most accessible opening, but any concerns about the volume’s readability were quick assuaged. The Introduction, co-authored by the three editors, helpfully contextualises the volume within recent literature and provides an overview of each of the chapters and their organisation into four parts.

Part I consists of four essays “On Spiritual Practice”. Clare Carlisle kicks off with an essay asking “What is Spiritual Practice?” Carlisle makes a series of helpful distinctions: between religious and spiritual practices, between practices and habits (updating her previous work), and between the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of practices. The ‘how’ of practices is further specified into three kinds: as a skill with a determinate end, as an art form with an indeterminate end, or as a form of spirituality with an indeterminate end and an expanded sense of agency. The challenge for philosophers, Carlisle concludes, is that, if liturgies are taken to be spiritual practices, then



liturgies ‘cannot be exhaustively understood according to the paradigms of skill practice or art practice’ (p. 22). Carlisle ends her essay with a warning that dogmatic religious exclusivism – such that one tradition’s way of finitising our infinite desires is seen as the only way – risks reducing liturgies, not only to art or skill practices, but even to idolatrous addictions.

In Chapter 2 Christina Gschwandtner argues not only that philosophers should concern themselves with liturgy, but that the way that philosophy of liturgy has proceeded thus far – as represented by the work of Jean-Luc Marion and Nicholas Wolterstorff – is still too concerned with questions of epistemology and language. Gschwandtner argues that by focusing on liturgical texts, philosophers have so far overlooked the most significant ways that liturgies make sense of the world; namely, the corporeal, sensory, and affective dimensions of liturgy. If such a judgement was ever true, the discussion of these topics within this volume means that, in some sense, Gschwandtner’s argument is already redundant.

John Cottingham’s argument for the ‘primacy of praxis’ (pp. 50–51) opens with a memorable real-life comparison between two famous analytic philosophers: Thomas Nagel and Hilary Putnam. Both men have expressed agnostic or atheistic beliefs regarding the existence of God, but also confessed to having a general religious temperament. Whereas Nagel remains atheistic in his beliefs, Putnam became a regular adherent of the Jewish faith, after having decided at the age of fifty to start attending weekly services and say the *daven* daily. Cottingham uses this example to show the transformative power of practices, even when chronologically prior and logically independent to beliefs. Cottingham argues that spiritual praxis works by immersing practitioners into a new way of looking at the world, training their sensibilities, and inculcating an allegiance to the good. As such, spiritual practices (such as liturgies) are not only taken by Cottingham to be the lifeblood of religious faith, but also to be constitutive of morality itself.

The most fun contribution to read in this volume is John Sanders’ “Liturgical Jellyfish”. Drawing on 4E cognition and conceptual metaphor theory, Sanders seeks to highlight the importance of human embodiment for how we think. He does this by imagining what liturgical scripts other animals might have devised (if they were so inclined). For example, ‘Liturgical crabs might say they look sideways (not “forward”) to the

resurrection' (p. 61). He ends with a 'translation' of the Nicene Creed for jellyfish.

Part 2 offers four contributions under the theme of "Liturgy and Social Existence". Michelle Panchuk examines religious trauma as a socially mediated form of suffering, which can be either perpetuated or alleviated by liturgical practices. In this sensitive and highly nuanced essay, Panchuk argues that in order for Christian liturgies to be spaces of therapeutic healing for victims of religious trauma, liturgies need to incorporate lament and protest, even protest directed at God. Such acts of protest can, she argues, be a way to fulfil the two great commandments to love God and neighbour and so be 'an act of Christian worship' (p. 77). She generously ends this chapter with some examples of how liturgical protest might manifest, including through poetry, artwork (including a picture of her own 'blackout' or found biblical poem, "Troubled Daughters"), and using alternative responses to the Psalms.

Bruce Ellis Benson's chapter, "Religion as a Way of Life: On Being a Believer" makes the compelling argument that 'belief', understood as a form of trust that situates one in a particular community and that community's practices, is more basic (historically and psychologically) than the doctrinal beliefs that analytic philosophers of religion have tended to focus on.

Terrence Cuneo is one of the pioneering figures in the analytic philosophy of liturgy, and he again breaks exciting new ground in a chapter on "Blessing Things". Cuneo notes that Christian liturgies, particularly in Cuneo's own Orthodox tradition, include many examples of blessing ordinary objects (e.g., oil, water, bread and wine). He asks: 'But what is it to bless? Why would it play such a pervasive role in the church's liturgical life? And what does the activity of blessing reveal about the character and role of liturgy?' (p. 117). In answer to the first question, Cuneo argues that blessing is a speech act type of invoking, defined as 'a type of directive in which the invoker exercises her normative standing to call upon an invokee to act' (p. 123). In answer to the second and third question, Cuneo argues that blessing elevates humans 'to the status of co-workers' (p. 127) with God and 'normatively binds human beings to God in relations of mutual responsibility and credit' (p. 129). In contrast to adoration, Cuneo suggests that blessings 'secure union and intimacy between human beings and God' (p. 130).

In the final essay of Part 2, Kevin Schilbrack uses social ontology to argue (somewhat ambitiously) that not only do liturgical groups constitute real ontological entities with emergent properties, but that more amorphous religious groups, such as Christians or Hindus, also constitute single ontological entities. This is because, according to Schilbrack, the individuals within even a global and historically diffuse religious group remain ‘connected to each other in a social structure’, with shared practices and norms (p. 142). Although Schilbrack does not think that ‘religion’ in general can be considered a single ontological entity, he does defend a realist view of ‘religion’, as a genus concept that picks out a real pattern in the world, against recent non-realist proposals from scholars such as Russell McCutcheon, Brent Nongbri and Wouter Hangegraaff.

The essays in Part 3 draw more on a continental style of philosophy in their consideration of “Materiality and Religiosity”. Neal DeRoo’s essay asks about the relationship between liturgy and religion, and can there be non-religious liturgies? He rejects the common assumption that liturgy is the materialisation of a (non-material) religion and uses Husserl’s philosophy to argue that all spiritually expressive phenomena is a form of liturgy. His definition of ‘expression’ and ‘spirit’ is somewhat technical, but in the end rewarding since it clarifies the different ways the concept of ‘liturgy’ is used and the different relationship these meanings have to ‘religion’ and ‘worship’.

In the tenth chapter Wendy Farley offers a heart-felt plea for liturgies to be devoted to truth in these ‘dark times’. Comparing the present to 1930s Germany, Farley draws on continental European philosophers (Husserl, Arendt, Levinas, Marcel, Jaspers, etc.) and twelfth-century heretic/martyr Marguerite Porete to argue for an apophatic form of reasoning. She sets this against the ‘spirit of abstraction’ found in scholasticism and Enlightenment reason, which ‘oversees both a glorious spirit of reform and a logic of domination that justifies colonialism, slavery, and a thousand cruelties’ (p. 182) by failing to see the beauty of all beings in their irreducible particularity.

Chapter eleven, on “Compassionate Action” by Sharon L. Baker Putt is an appreciative extension of Farley’s work. Unfortunately, as the author admits, this chapter is only very loosely related to the theme of liturgy. Putt draws on Meister Eckhart, Marguerite of Porete and Wendy Farley to argue for the mutual compatibility, even co-extension, of the life of contemplation and the life of practice – exemplified by the characters of

Mary and Martha. Similarly, Emmanuel Falque's contribution, "After Metaphysics? The 'Weight of Life' According to Saint Augustine" is a fine essay, which makes no explicit connection to liturgy. Falque contrasts Heidegger's, Husserl's, and Marion's interpretations of Augustine's notion of the 'weight of life', and despite in general preferring Marion's reading of the Doctor of Hippo, argues that the 'weight of life' is not solely the result of sin (as Marion suggests), but a feature of finitude (as Heidegger argued).

Part 4 returns to a set of more analytically-inclined philosophers under the heading of "Knowledge, Sound, and Hope". Nicholas Wolterstorff's "Knowing God by Liturgically Addressing God" (Chapter 13) and Sarah Coakley's "Beyond 'Belief'" (Chapter 14) have both been published previously, but deserve their reprinting here, not least because they are two of the most influential essays in analytic philosophy/theology of liturgy. Both Wolterstorff and Coakley argue that liturgical practices provide a unique way in which participants can gain and grow in personal knowledge of God. Wolterstorff outlines different kinds of knowledge and uses James Elkins' *What Painting Is* (1999) to show how practice (painting) can produce subdoxastic objectual knowledge (of paint). Wolterstorff applies this to how the liturgical practice of addressing God can produce subdoxastic personal knowledge of God, even if we neither have direct perceptual encounter with God, nor doxastically assent to belief in God. Coakley's account of liturgical knowledge, by contrast, focuses less on the linguistic aspect of liturgy, but suggests that the 'bodily movement, sensual acuity, affective longing and noetic or intellectual response' of liturgical worship interweaves, so as to train 'the bodily senses in attunement with Christ's presence' (p. 255). To make this argument, she critiques analytic philosopher of religion William Alston, and draws insights from the secular feminist epistemology of Lorraine Code and the patristic tradition of the spiritual senses as found in Gregory of Nyssa.

Joshua Cockayne is one of the most promising younger scholars in analytic theology, who has given sustained attention to the philosophy of liturgy. His essay in this volume, "Corporate Liturgical Silence" offers two accounts of the role of silence in corporate worship. First, silence can be thought of 'as a kind of *inaction* that makes space for God to work' as the primary unifying agent in true worship, and second, 'as a kind of *listening*' to God (p. 258). He concludes with a poignant consideration of the inclusive

power of corporate silence for those who have been silenced, survived trauma, or experience marginalisation.

Brian A. Butcher's chapter considers Orthodox liturgical chanting and provides a theological analysis of three different styles: the monophonic unison of Coptic and Ethiopic churches as an enactment of how many are made one in Christ; the supporting drone voice in Greek, Romanian and Bulgarian traditions as embodying the apophatic and the changeless eternality aspect of worship; and the harmonisation and polyphony of Slavic churches 'to engage, we might say, in a kind of perichoresis' (p. 279).

The final chapter of this collection is by J. Aaron Simmons and Eli Simmons (no relation) on the theme of "Liturgy and Eschatological Hope". Like some of the earlier essays, Simmons and Simmons ask what makes a liturgy *religious* in character. They compare the views of Nicholas Wolterstorff, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and Bruce Benson, whose answers range from identifying liturgy as simply a species of religious worship (Wolterstorff) to seeing liturgy as a (not necessarily religious) way of 'taking oneself up as a work of art' (Benson) (p. 292). Constructively, Simmons and Simmons argue that religious liturgies inculcate eschatological hope – 'a refusal to allow historical possibility to have the final word' (p. 296).

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Bruce Ritchie, *James Clerk Maxwell: Faith, Church, and Physics* (Haddington: Handsel Press, 2024), pp. xxii+474, ISBN 978-1912052851. £15.00

This is a welcome and much needed contribution to the, now at last, growing literature on James Clerk Maxwell. The book itself is very well produced by Handsel Press, with high quality paper; which at 450+ pages makes it literally a weighty tome (I look forward to a Kindle edition). It is also very good value for money. The book is thoroughly researched, and

