

THE LITURGIES OF CHURCH AND STATE

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Today the most significant misunderstanding of the Christian liturgy is that it is sacred. Let me clarify. The problem is that “sacred” has been opposed to “secular,” and the two are presumed to describe two separate—but occasionally related—orbits. The problem is not simply that this separation leaves the church’s liturgy begging for relevance to the “real world.” The problem is rather that the supposedly “secular” world invents its own liturgies, with pretensions every bit as “sacred” as those of the Christian liturgy, and these liturgies can come to rival the church’s liturgy for our bodies and our minds. In this brief essay I want to explore in particular some of the liturgies of the American nation-state. I will suggest first that such liturgies are not properly called “secular,” and second, that the Christian liturgy is not properly cordoned off into the realm of the “sacred.”

National Liturgy Is Not Secular

We are accustomed to speaking of an American “civil religion,” but less accustomed to speaking of a national “liturgy.” The original meaning of the word *leitourgia*, however, is simply “an action by which a group of people become something corporately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals.”¹ Central to liturgy are ritual language and gesture, “memory-inducing behavior that has the effect of preserving what is indispensable to the group.”² Liturgy in a basic sense enacts and maintains community by the ritual remembering or re-presentation of foundational narratives, thereby helping to construct the perceived reality in which each member of the community lives. In this general sense, then, it is not difficult to see why commentators point to the “liturgical” nature of patriotic rituals that reinforce American group identity and an American view of the world.

There is a general agreement that we live in an unliturgical age, and in many ways that is true. The rites and customs that structured the hours, days, and seasons of traditional societies have largely faded in the face of Western individual freedoms. Where this generalization does not apply, however, as Eric Hobsbawm points out, is in the public life of the citizen. Here modern societies are every bit as liturgical as traditional ones. “Indeed most of the occasions when people become conscious of citizenship as such remain associated

with symbols and semi-ritual practices (for instance, elections), most of which are historically novel and largely invented: flags, images, ceremonies and music."³ Rituals that many people assume to be ancient are in fact the product of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when rituals were invented in Europe and the United States to stoke a nascent sense of exclusive national loyalty, supplanting previously diffuse loyalties owed to region, ethnic group, class, and church. In time such rituals would become not simply expressions of a deeper reality but constitutive of reality. We would come to judge events by how well they conformed to the enacted myths of patriotic ritual. As Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle say of the American myth, "Our criteria for judging and remembering history are liturgical."⁴

For anyone familiar with Benedict Anderson's famous definition of a nation as an "imagined political community," this should come as no surprise. According to Anderson, "It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."⁵ Anderson shows how texts such as daily newspapers helped create a sense of communion among the scattered people of emergent nations. For Anderson, the fact that the nation is imagined does not imply that it is unreal, or somehow false. People do extraordinary things in the real world—most remarkably kill and die in war—because they imagine themselves as participating in the enacted drama of the nation. There is a close affinity to the liturgy here, for the liturgy is a passage into imagining the world in a certain way. As Alexander Schmemmann writes, liturgy is "the journey of the Church into the dimension of the Kingdom" such that "our *entrance* into the presence of Christ is an entrance into a fourth dimension which allows us to see the ultimate reality of life."⁶ The community called forth in the liturgy is an imagined community, just as the nation is. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, those who approach the altar approach much more than meets the eye:

You have not come to something that can be touched. . . . But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festive gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb. 12:18; 22–24)

If the nation and the church were merely parallel instances of communities imagined by ritual action, it would not necessarily challenge the division of labor between the sacred and the secular. In fact, however, the nation competes with the church on the same "religious" grounds. For as Anderson points out, the nation in Western civilization in many ways replaces the church in its role as the primary cultural institution that deals with death. According to Anderson, Christianity's decline in the West necessitated another way of dealing with the arbitrariness of death. Nations provide a new kind of salvation; my death is not in vain if it is for the nation, which lives on into a limitless future.⁷

According to Marvin and Ingle, the sacrifice of life on behalf of the nation

not only gives death meaning, but is in fact the very glue that holds the social order together.

Americans generally see their nation as a secular culture possessed of few myths, or with weak myths everywhere, but none central and organizing. We see American nationalism as a ritual system organized around a core myth of violently sacrificed divinity manifest in the highest patriotic ceremony and the most accessible popular culture.⁸

For Marvin and Ingle, death in war—what is commonly called the “ultimate sacrifice” for the nation—is what periodically re-presents the sense of belonging upon which the imagined nation is built. Such death is then elaborately ceremonialized in liturgies involving the flag and other ritual objects. Indeed, it is the ritual itself that retrospectively classifies any particular act of violence as *sacrifice*.⁹ Ritual gesture and language are crucial for establishing meaning and public assent to the foundational story being told. The foundational story is one of both creation and salvation. At the ceremonies marking the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day in 1994, for example, President Clinton remarked of the soldiers that died there both that “They gave us our world” and that “They saved the world.”¹⁰

Whether one accepts Anderson’s more textually based account or Marvin and Ingle’s more bodily and bloody thesis, it is not difficult to see that national ritual is not adequately categorized as “secular.” Carlton Hayes has written

Curious liturgical forms have been devised for “saluting” the flag, for “dipping” the flag, for “lowering” the flag, and for “hoisting” the flag. Men bare their heads when the flag passes by; and in praise of the flag poets write odes and children sing hymns. In America young people are ranged in serried rows and required to recite daily, with hierophantic voice and ritualistic gesture, the mystical formula: “I pledge allegiance to our flag and to the country for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” Everywhere, in all solemn feasts and fasts of nationalism the flag is in evidence, and with it that other sacred thing, the national anthem.¹¹

Francis Bellamy, author of the Pledge of Allegiance, commented on how the pledge was meant to sink in with schoolchildren through ritual repetition, and added “It is the same way with the catechism, or the Lord’s Prayer.”¹² Examples could be multiplied here, and many others are given in the other essays in this issue. Even Supreme Court Justice Rehnquist has acknowledged, in supporting a proposed amendment against “desecration” of the flag, that the flag is regarded by Americans “with an almost mystical reverence.”¹³

Here the word “almost” is crucial, for American civil religion can never acknowledge that it is in fact religion. To do so would be to invite charges of idolatry. Here liturgical gesture is central, because gesture allows the flag to be treated as a sacred object, while language denies that such is the case. Everyone acknowledges verbally that the nation or the flag are not *really* gods, but the crucial test is what people do with their bodies, both in liturgy and in war. It is clear that, among those who identify themselves as Christians in the United States, there are very few who would be willing to kill in the name of the Chris-

tian God, whereas the willingness, under certain circumstances, to kill and die for the nation in war is generally taken for granted.

Christian Liturgy Is Not Sacred

Christian liturgy knows no distinction between sacred and secular, spiritual and material. To participate in the liturgy is to bless God as God blessed all of material creation, to respond to God's blessing by blessing God. And as Schmemmann says, "in the Bible to bless God is not a 'religious' or a 'cultic' act, but the very *way of life*."¹⁴ As such, liturgy is the *natural* (not simply *supernatural*) act of humanity, to imagine the world as God sees it, and to return the world to God in praise. All of creation is "material for the one all-embracing Eucharist," at which humanity presides as priest.¹⁵

It is only because of our fallen condition that it seems natural not to live eucharistically, to accept the reduction of God and God's blessing to a small reservation of life called "sacred."¹⁶ When this happens, what remains outside the sacred is not simply the "secular" or the "natural," stripped of God, disenchanted, and functioning on merely material principles. For the Bible does not know the material as some self-sufficient substrate upon which is overlaid the spiritual. There is no such thing as pure nature devoid of grace. Of course there is the denial of grace. But what remains when humans attempt to clear a space of God's presence is not a disenchanted world, but a world full of idols. Humans remain naturally worshipping creatures, and the need for liturgy remains a motivating force, as we have seen in supposedly secular space. Christ came not to start a new religion but to break down the barrier between human life and God. Therefore to be redeemed from our fallen condition means to resist the imagination that would bifurcate the world into sacred and secular. Casting away this division means seeing also that Christian liturgy and the liturgies of the world compete on the same playing field, and that a choice between them must be made.

There is a sense in which the Christian liturgy can properly be called sacred, insofar as it facilitates the very presence of God, who is absolutely other than creation. As Hebrews makes plain, the liturgy is an ascension to heaven and therefore a separation from the world as it is. But the church does not simply forget the world but remembers it to God, offers it to God in the hope that God will transform it, and that we will partake in the world to come. As Schmemmann says, "this is not an 'other' world, different from the one God has created and given to us. It is our same world, already perfected in Christ, but *not yet* in us."¹⁷ In ascending we are able to gain enough height to see the world as a whole. In the liturgy we are able to see the world—to imagine it—as it really is, which is to say, as it will be and already is in the eyes of God. This is why the Eucharist is understood as the eschatological anticipation of the heavenly banquet.

The Christian liturgy unfolds a different imagination of space and time than the liturgies of the nation. With regard to space, the liturgies of nationalism truncate the imagined community at the borders of the nation-state; one's fellow citizens are other Americans or French or Chinese. The nationalist seeks to exempt his or her nation from being bound by transnational bodies or statutes,

thus establishing a permanent “state of nature” between and among nation-states. The Christian liturgy, by contrast, transgresses the borders of the nation-state and of the world through the participation of the worshiper in the transnational body of Christ both on earth and in heaven. In the liturgy, the imagined community exempts no one in principle, and stretches even to our fellow-citizens in heaven (Phil. 3:20).

The conceptions of time are different as well. Patriotic liturgies are cyclical, constantly establishing the present reality by reference to past sacrifice which has triumphed over chaos. The present tries to re-present a link with the founding sacrifices through ritual. As Marvin and Ingle argue, however, this process is inherently anxiety-producing, since the present ritual can never really reproduce the bodily sacrifice on which it is based. Thus, D-Day celebrations were marked by guilt that the present generation is merely living off the sacrifices of those who died there. There is fear that the “greatest generation” has passed, and the current generation has not undertaken sacrifices to equal those in the Good War. What is needed therefore is a return to the original sacrifice, kicking the Vietnam Syndrome, and new good wars to unite the country. “This is how the totem order regenerates itself, by endlessly seeking to close the gap between present bodies and the blood history that engenders them.”¹⁸ Ritual enacts our debt to the past, which can only be paid through fresh sacrifice, not through ritual. In contrast, the Christian liturgy is not merely cyclical but points forward to the eschatological consummation of history in which violence and division is overcome. The Eucharist is the re-presentation of Christ’s foundational sacrifice, but it does not re-sacrifice Christ, nor is new blood sacrifice demanded of us, for as Hebrews makes plain, Christ died “once and for all” (Heb. 7:27, 9:12, 10:10). Furthermore, there is no gap between ritual and reality, since Christ is really and fully present in the Eucharist. We therefore approach the altar not marked with guilt but “with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (Heb. 10:22), for the altar we approach is not bound by a bloody past, but is a foretaste of a perfect future. The Eucharist is, in John Zizioulas’s fitting phrase, the “memory of the future.”¹⁹

All of this sounds wonderful, but we must confess that it is the shriveling of this vision within the church that has allowed the flourishing of ersatz substitutes. There is a longing in nationalist ritual that bespeaks a desire for communion that is at the heart of Christian liturgy. Patriotic liturgies have succeeded in imagining communities because Christian liturgies have failed to do so in a fully public way. As the church expanded after Constantine, Christian worship was not centered on the parish but on the whole city. No Roman or Greek assumed a city could exist without a public cult. The church sought to replace the pagan cult of the city with the Christian liturgy. Christian worship on the Lord’s Day and other feasts therefore generally took the form of a series of services in churches and public spaces, linked by public processions, totaling six to eight hours.²⁰ Here was the church taking itself seriously as nothing less than “the embodiment in the world of the World to come.”²¹ Much of this way of imagining the world has been lost as the liturgy has shrunken to a short, semiprivate gathering.

If the Christian liturgy is to reclaim its centrality to the imagination of a redeemed world, we must look with a critical eye on liturgies that compete for

our allegiance. We must not quarantine the liturgy into a “sacred” space, but allow it to shape the way we form our mundane communities, our goals, allegiances, purchases, and relationships. As Aidan Kavanagh writes,

in a Christian assembly’s regular Sunday worship, a restored and recreated world must be so vigorously enfleshed in “civic” form as to give the lie to any antithetical *civitas*. . . . The assembly is not a political party or a special interest group. But it cannot forget that by grace and favor it *is* the world made new; that creation, *not* the state, is a theocracy; and that the freedom with which all people are endowed by the Creator is something which by our own choice is prone to go awry.²²

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Notes

1. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988), 25.
2. Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 129.
3. Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions” in Eric eds. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 12.
4. Marvin and Ingle, 155.
5. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 6.
6. Schmemmann, 26–27.
7. Anderson, 9–12.
8. Marvin and Ingle, 3.
9. *Ibid.*, 136.
10. Bill Clinton, quoted in Marvin and Ingle, 138, 140.
11. Carlton Hayes, *Essays on Nationalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 107.
12. Francis Bellamy, quoted in Cecilia O’Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 178.
13. William Rehnquist, quoted in Marvin and Ingle, 30.
14. Schmemmann, 15.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, 16.
17. *Ibid.*, 42.
18. Marvin and Ingle, 136.
19. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 180.
20. Aidan Kavanagh describes this series of services in his book *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984), 56–66.
21. *Ibid.*, 57.
22. *Ibid.*, 175.