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**Worship as Meaning:
A Liturgical Theology for Late Modernity**

Graham Hughes

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003

302 pages, \$37.95 Softcover

This is an important book for liturgical theology. It is not that such books have not been written before. The last few years have witnessed important works by liturgical scholars like Gordon Lathrop, Don Saliers, and others. What is different about Hughes' book, however, is the *way* in which it seeks to pursue the task of liturgical theology. The author seeks to ground his approach in an overall theory of meaning: in this case, dominated by the semiotics of Charles Peirce. In doing so, Hughes also places his thought in a context. The backdrop for his work on meaning is not the arbitrary world of continental post-structuralist theory and post-modernist thought (although the author is conversant with these and treats them in nuanced ways), but "late modernity." As such, the question is not how to do liturgical theology in an arbitrary Christian ghetto that walls out the (equally arbitrary) post-modern world, but how to articulate what liturgy can and does mean both as we "find" it in late modernity and "make" meaning with it.

The outline is tripartite. Part I focuses on the making of meaning. It identifies by means of a hypothetical worshiper's visit to church the nature of the problem(s) of meaning in worship. Its chapters also deal with the more general philosophical problems of meaning in modernity and its comprehension. Part II uses some exemplary worship situations to surface the problem of identifying liturgical signs. This same section then goes on to contrast continental semiotics with Peirce's semiotic theory in order to identify three key signs useful for the liturgical-theological task: icons (dependent on shared similarities, e.g., the picture and that which it represents), indices (dependent on contiguity, e.g., the weathercock and the wind), and symbols (arrived at by convention or tradition, e.g., the traffic sign). Hughes then considers the value of Peirce's semiosis for liturgical theology and how matters of sign production and sign reception actually work with the kinds of meaning they engender. Part III represents the payoff for all the hard theoretical slogging through the first two parts. Here Hughes lays out a liturgical theology

that looks at meaning “at the edge of the known.” For Hughes, liturgical theology is about “making sense of God in a disenchanted age.” The result is an approach that goes beyond merely “church theology” (the liturgy says what it says and acts as if it were unaware of late modernity), “evangelical theology” (modernity in any form is inimical to Biblical authority and is the “foil” for belief), and “mainline Protestantism” (modernity is the place where we seek to identify God’s presence). For Hughes liturgical theology assumes that late modernity is important because it provides the means by which meaning is made. Nonetheless, as Hughes notes, late modernity is a place of disenchantment and thus forces liturgical theology to move to the boundaries, to mystery in order to be true to its own theistic frame of reference. While it can make no claims to finality or completion, it can represent a “best account” that is meaningful for those who both discover meaning in liturgical signs and make meaning with them in late modernity.

This is indeed an important book; yet it is also a challenging book to read. On the one hand, this is due to the subject matter. Peirce’s semiotic theory, for example, is demanding – as not doubt Hughes himself would acknowledge. Yet Peirce’s promise for Hughes’ ambitious undertaking is clear: here we have a semiotic theory that does not subsume gesture under linguistic sign as continental semiotics does. On the other hand, however, the critique also applies to the *structure* of Hughes’ subject matter. The author is not content to leave us either in antipathy to or mere sympathy with modernity. Occupying this tensive space for the sake of liturgical meaning, however, we are required to engage in a kind of thought to which liturgical theology has been hitherto unaccustomed. Perhaps for this reason most of all, *Worship as Meaning* is worth the effort.

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