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Holy things: a liturgical theology

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Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology

Gordon W. Lathrop

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993

236 pp. \$33.75

Declining attendance, declining revenues, denominational cutbacks and restructuring, loss of confidence in the ordained clergy, burgeoning congregational conflicts are but a few of the symptoms of a major spiritual crisis afflicting the entire Christian church. Or so say many people.

But do these factors indicate a wholesale loss of faith, or do they simply reflect a decline in the social hegemony of the church? Now that our society has developed more sophisticated forms of social control like television and strategic unemployment, the church is no longer needed to supply this all-important function. We are like the jilted lover who wakes up to sudden rejection after a long and fruitful partnership. What are we going to do with the rest of our life? Will we try to ingratiate ourselves to our long lost love once again, and hope that the spark of enthusiasm that has died will come back to life? Perhaps if we try some new make-up, make ourselves a little more attractive and accessible, a little more "user-friendly". Maybe then our cool if not sometimes hostile ex-partner might still find some value in us.

This strategy has found favour in many circles where the primary value now is to make the Christian message attractive and accessible to the needs of the larger culture. The church is challenged to speak the language of alien values and ideals, and to follow the lead of symbols and cultural patterns that now dominate society. Worship, the centre of the Christian life, takes its lead from the entertainment industry, and applies all kinds of gadgets and techniques to the project of emotional manipulation and social programming. Worship, in effect, becomes a spin-off of the entertainment industry, subject to forces and pressures that have little to do with a holy encounter with the almighty God, and everything to do with the fickle reactions of public opinion. The holy things of God are trivialized to a point where nothing has meaning outside of that limited universe of what holds the audience's attention.

But is this strategy the only alternative that we face in our current crisis? Not according to Gordon Lathrop, professor of liturgy at the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia. Lathrop proposes that the church return to doing what the church does best, celebrating the mysteries of the mercy of God according to the essential pattern or *ordo* of Christian liturgy. This *ordo* in its very form juxtaposes the meanings inherent in the received rituals and symbols, and thus breaks all human attempts at control and domestication. This juxtaposing and breaking of received symbols opens the Christian assembly to new visions of God's mercy in their world and in their time. This strategy of juxtaposing one thing against another follows the biblical model

of engaging worshippers in a tension through which God's mercy is revealed free of social modification or compromise.

The challenge for churches in this strategy is to recover the strength of the symbols that are at the heart of Christian liturgical *ordo*. The word, the bath, and the meal, set within an assembly that meets on the eighth day, outside of the seven day week, need to fully reflect their life-giving power. They cannot be reduced in significance to serve the conveniences of social expectations, nor can they be overlaid with superfluous ritual that distracts from their essential meanings. Their primary power must be respected, and allowed to shine forth so that God's mercy can order the entire universe centred in that local assembly.

This book presents the case for a church free of social functions and trappings that have no direct relation to this primary *ordo* of worship. If society wants to free us from our social control and legitimization functions, so much the better for us. We can get back to doing what we were meant to do in the first place, bringing the holy things of God to life among the holy people of God.

This transition, however, will involve costs and adjustments. Lathrop questions the need for a professional class of clergy leadership. Some assemblies may need salaried people giving their full attention to ritual leadership, but this is not a required standard in every case. Gone too are chaplains, counsellors, bishops, professors, and all exclusively administrative clergy-at-large whose function is not directly related to a leadership role in the *ordo* as it is enacted in a specific local assembly. Ordination confers no special privilege or license for social functioning beyond that of any other qualified baptized Christian. Everything the church and its clergy do has to be rooted directly in the *ordo* of a local assembly.

As with all books on liturgical renewal, this one implies an assumption that somewhere in a golden past, the liturgy was celebrated in all of its fullness, free from the overlay of popular pieties and agendas. Somewhere in the past everything was pure and clear, and Christian liturgy consistently spoke with the power of ultimate meaning through the forms of penultimate things. Lathrop makes much use of Justin's Apologies to create for us the image of just such a time in the second century. But was this the case? Was Justin accurately describing for the Emperor the details of what actually took place, or was he sharing his vision of what could be? Attempting to recreate a mythical golden past of liturgy that never was can only lead us into greater conflict, and deeper disappointment and disillusionment.

If, however, we can share Justin's vision in the midst of our own assemblies, and if we can discover in Lathrop's vision a sensible alternative to the Babylonian prostitution that characterizes so much of what passes for Christian worship these days, perhaps then we can make our assemblies places of divine encounter where the holy people of God share in the holy things of God. Perhaps our churches can give such a consistent focus for God's mercy that the whole creation is renewed.

Reading this book and putting it on the reading lists of either a worship or systematic theology course would be a start. This vision deserves to be shared with all clergy and laity interested in worship and church renewal.

Daniel Phannenhour
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Imaginal Preaching: An Archetypal Perspective

James A. Wallace

New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995

iv + 151 pp.

"Images work," contends Wallace. "They work for us, against us, in us, and through us. They can transform us in our depths, move us toward the highest truth, motivate us to change the world, and ultimately influence the final outcome when we stand face to face with our God" (p. 18). This high faith in the effectiveness of images is based on the archetypal psychology of James Hillman (*Insearch*, 1979; *A Blue Fire: Selected Writings*, 1989) who, in turn, worked off Jung. Hillman's great concern, according to Wallace, is the recovery of "soul" (*psyche*), "the innermost aspect of the human person, the spiritual principle that informs us" (p. 22). The sphere of "soul" is the sphere of "imagination and heart", and the "language" of soul is images. "[S]oul is 'the imaginative possibility in our natures, the experiencing through reflective speculation, dream, image and fantasy—that mode which recognizes all realities as primarily symbolic or metaphorical'" (p. 25, quoting Hillman). This imaginative/spiritual capacity or dimension of human nature allows Wallace to conceive of images (especially the biblical images) as "living presences that mediate an encounter with Mystery" even as Jesus himself is the perfect image mediating an encounter with God (p. 34f).

Wallace holds that imaginal preaching is a (necessary?) alternative to the rhetorical model of preaching. The rhetorical model, he argues, attempts to persuade, convince, and exhort the listener to believe as the speaker does; an imaginal model, on the other hand, being based on "the psychological experience common to humankind", would be "revelatory", that is, imaginal and psychological rather than conceptual and cerebral (p. 1, 8), and, even more to the point, powered by the archetypes of the personal and collective unconscious.

Greek mythology has been especially drawn upon to identify and describe archetypes (e.g., Oedipus, Narcissus), and Wallace turns to this source too, in order to develop an imaginal homiletic. Mythology, he argues, "is the psychology of antiquity....The various mythic figures reveal the universal patterns that govern the psyche. The gods and goddesses