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Sacred drama: a spirituality of Christian liturgy

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Sacred Drama. A Spirituality of Christian Liturgy

Patricia Wilson-Kastner

Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1999

154 pages, \$24.80 Softcover

The theological approach to liturgy as drama has a long but slim pedigree, having been defended most recently by Erik Routley (*Music, Words, and the Church*, 1968), and Patrick W. Collins (*Bodying Forth: Aesthetic Liturgy*, 1992). Wilson-Kastner picks up this theme, and gives it an able presentation. She makes three assumptions: first, altar and world are profoundly interconnected; second, the sermon is an integral part of the liturgy, and has the same shape as the liturgy; and third, the liturgy is the locus of the identity formation of the Christian community (4-5). Her point of departure for examining liturgy and drama is that liturgy is a response to the chaos and contingency of life as we experience it.

Liturgy offers shape and purpose for the life of the world. In the liturgy, both individual life and community existence are integrated in a common expression of faith. Liturgy is the core expression of our personal and corporate identity (6-7).

This, then, is a book exploring the dialectic between physical embodiment in worship and our experience of life.

Her chapters follow a sensible progression through the "liturgical house." She begins with sacred drama, then moves to an overview of time and space; next come chapters on baptism, preaching, and eucharist; finally ending with a section on liturgy and eschatology. In the course of this journey, we learn a good deal about the dramatic and experiential (though not emotional) aspects of ritual worship.

She defines drama as "...a representation or mimesis of life, offered in a concentrated and unified form to an audience, in such a way that the audience identifies with the action and characters and moves from its present understanding to a new perception of an important dimension of life" (p.12). She sees five connections between liturgy and drama, all connected to life in its worldly and physical sense: liturgy as imitation of life, cultic drama, cosmic drama, sacrificial meal, and comic drama. This theory sets the stage for her treatment of the aspects of liturgy.

Her discussion of sacred space is helpful. The most important sacred space, she says, is us. Following this, other spaces become known to us. Our worship space gives a three-dimensional incarnation to our beliefs about God. They are the places where we respond to God, and are a sign to us of the unity of heaven and earth - a good insight indeed!

Her interpretation of preaching owes much to Eugene Lowry. In her discussion of preaching, which is central to her view of liturgy and drama, she uses the term "incarnational prayer." Preaching, she says, is never in the abstract, but is a response to the Gospel and people's needs, faithful both to God and to the community. The sermon, she insists, needs to know the people. The sermon for her is the most concrete and particular event in the liturgy, and she places a strong emphasis on the role of the congregation in the sermon.

In her discussion of eucharist, she emphasizes its dialectical nature: human need and God's action of living sacrifice are important. For her, the image of the sacrificial meal best captures this. Through this image of sacrifice, she introduces the justice connection between eucharist and our daily lives. In placing the dramatic motif onto eucharist, she points to Dix's four actions: take, give thanks, break, and share. To these she adds a fifth and sixth: gathering around the table and returning to the world. This, one might observe, moves us from ritual to non-ritual and non-symbolic drama.

She sees eucharist as dynamic and active, re-shaping the community (would that it were always so!). She draws on the story of "Babette's Feast" by Isaak Dinesen, as a model of eucharist, focusing on the eschatological dimension of eucharist; that is, its giving us a dramatic glimpse of the way God intended the world to be. Eucharist is "a tense and varied drama, filled with uncertainty, choices, good and evil" (116).

The book is another "Introduction to Liturgical Worship," of which we have many, but with a special slant towards liturgical spirituality and drama. Although she shows her Anglican roots, the book will be useful to Lutherans who are searching for other ways to describe ritual experience, and for the slant she gives on eucharist and sacrifice. We Lutherans need to re-visit this territory from time to time!

Her ideas on ritual are stimulated less by the current school of ritual studies, and more by the older mythical studies identified with Jung and Mircea Eliade, with their emphasis on sacred places, times, and things. She uses Eliade's poles of "sacred" and "profane" to discuss

liturgical time, both in the sense of weekly liturgy and the liturgical calendar, seeing the time of worship as not so much cyclical as spiral. This is more and more rare today.

On p. 10 she uses a word unknown to this reviewer: *intussusception*. Is this an Anglican term, or a misprint? This aside, Wilson-Kastner, throughout her argument, connects liturgy with life in a coherent, realistic way, and picks her way carefully through the heresies of liturgy as totally unworldly versus liturgy as entirely culturally determined. It is eschatology, finally, which is the key to the “spirituality” of her title. This reviewer, who is sympathetic to the interpretation of liturgy as drama, found the book very helpful and useful, with lots of good ideas for preaching on eucharist. Unhappily, as the back cover reports, Patricia Wilson-Kastner died in 1998.

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An Essential Unity: A Contemporary Look at Lutheran and Episcopal Liturgies

David Veal

Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1998

90 pages, \$13.95 Softcover

A Companion to the Waterloo Declaration

Richard Legett, Editor

Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre, 1999

125 pages, \$16.00 Softcover

For all Lutherans who are interested in the upcoming agreement between the ELCIC and the Anglican Church of Canada, here are two small but useful books. The first, by American Anglican Canon David Veal, provides a comparison between Lutheran and American Episcopal liturgies. He begins by defining some parameters: both churches are liturgical; liturgy is a corporate worship experience; and both churches are based on a common familiarity with the historic liturgical forms. He also points out some well-known differences: the fact that Anglicans