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Review of *Reviving Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language. Second Thoughts on Christ in Sacred Speech*, by Gail Ramshaw

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Recommended Citation

Connell, Martin, "Review of *Reviving Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language. Second Thoughts on Christ in Sacred Speech*, by Gail Ramshaw" (2000). *Theology Faculty Publications*. 100. https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/theology_pubs/100

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hem has opened Eden: come, and let us see. We have found joy in secret: come, let us take possession of the paradise that is within the cave. . . . Therefore let us hasten to this place where now is born a young Child, the pre-eternal God." The tradition is the real guide to the image, but if additional doctrinal or historical background is useful Baggley provides it unobtrusively (iconoclasm, Arianism, biblical typology, hesychasm, essence and energy, etc.)

Icons are not still lifes; they are in liturgical motion. "Word and sacrament and image are the means by which the revelation is transmitted and appropriated through the work of the Holy Spirit within the Church." (158) An icon is liturgical art because it is art which functions liturgically, and Baggley invites us to discover working icons. Or, as one Orthodox believer explained to him, "Orthodox people don't really *look* at icons." (5) This reflective book helps us also do more than just look.

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Reviving Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language. Second Thoughts on Christ in Sacred Speech. By Gail Ramshaw. Akron, Ohio: OSL Publications 2000. Pages, xiv + 181. Paper, \$15.00. ISBN 1-878009-36-2.

The textual literalism of the Christian faithful in the U.S. continues, in general, to increase over time. Against the findings of two centuries of textual and historical criticism, most preachers and formation programs for aspiring ministers continue to promulgate the notion that all biblical texts were written by eyewitnesses and that the truth of the Bible and its proclamation in assemblies comes from exact replications of historical events — as if such were possible even from eyewitnesses — rather than in representing the complexity of Christian faith and of believers confessing it, which can be wrought only by metaphor and symbols. Into this foray of American reduction and straitened simplicity has come a refreshing updating of an invaluable fifteen-year-old book that addressed contemporary issues of the language of Christian life, and of the language employed in worship in particular. The author candidly confesses her conviction about the power of language: "I believe that metaphors are miraculous: they not only superimpose a new interpretation onto an old reality, but they can actually effect changes toward the Promised Land." Amen. Good news indeed, inspiring and accessibly rendered by author Gail Ramshaw.

I had not read the author's *Christ in Sacred Speech*, the earlier version, before reading this redaction. The author and her publisher came to an agreement about updating the 1985 version: "[W]e would reprint the original book, but with an essay added onto each chapter, on how much

thinking has evolved.” In addition to its clear contribution to the church’s consideration of the nature of language, *Reviving Sacred Speech* is a strong and accessible text for undergraduate theology classes. It is as much a primer on the nature of theological language in general as it is of liturgical language. Some of the most profound contributions are rendered in startlingly accessible statements.

The following ideas were striking, and, though weakened by excision, I juxtapose them to demonstrate to readers the breadth and profundity of the work: “Religion, which is perpetually trying to speak beyond normal categories, is replete with metaphor” (xii); “it is more accurate to think of liturgy as speech than as words” (1); “superb syntax approaches beauty” (6); “[w]e do not magically harness God; rather, our faithful praise discovers God’s gifts already given” (17); “[a]lthough there is a private dimension to religious experience, Christianity is essentially corporate” (41); the “task of retranslation implies not an afternoon of substituting the word ‘God’ for ‘he,’ but a several-decade effort to discover the vernacular way to declare the liberating gospel” (78); on receiving the body of Christ, “I am not convinced that hearing my first name murmured by someone who softly touches my palm will enhance my communal understanding of the baptized life” (127); “[t]he identity of the Church is always determined by its identification with the suffering of the world” (136); “the intercessions should be objective, nondirective and comprehensive” (142); “to be baptized is to worship God, to assemble weekly, and slowly, slowly, to grow deeper into that baptized life of grace” (146–47); “the liturgical homily . . . is mystagogy, catechesis for the faithful, instruction in how this sacred speech and these holy symbols can be incorporated into contemporary life” (157); “[a]s metaphor the words are not mere labels. They are harbingers of the resurrection, signs of life seen anew” (163). Just great.

Since coming upon it, I have myself been steadfastly preoccupied with the “Yes-No-Yes” description of the author’s assessment of liturgical language in the chapter on “The Paradox of ‘Sacred Speech.’” It is one of the best descriptions of the faith life of critical thinkers that I have found. It expressed an answer to a question I have had from my own experience of seeing the perspectives of atheists in my classes so different from those of many students who are confessing Christians.

Three contrary matters: First, I would challenge the author to reconsider one of her main points about liturgical language. Among her retractions, the author does not seem inclined away from the warm, mannered, lofty, even stately character of speech that she finds appropriately characteristic of liturgical language. She writes that “[l]iturgical rhetoric ought to suggest to us not so much Jonathon Edward’s sermons — monologues declaimed — as a public conversation between the President and the Queen: signifi-

cant speech exchanged warmly” (10). I could not disagree more. Human beings are not moved much to put on the mind of Christ or to re-fashion the present world toward that world God creates (and re-creates) by warm, stately, monarchical exchanges, as the author describes. If the language of the church is destined to be like veneered exchanges between world leaders dressed in stiff outfits — presidents, prime ministers, royals — I would genuflect in the aisle and happily wave goodbye for good. Liturgical language, unlike warm “public conversation” between, say, a President Rodham and a King Charles, should sometimes aggravate, challenge, inspire, and upset. It should also sometimes comfort and encourage, but not so all the time. The language of liturgy should not be so benign.

Second, a minor historical qualification. The author writes of Arius as the one “whose language about the subordination of Christ to God suggested polytheism.” (150) Scholarly work on the soteriology of Arianism and the Homoians of the fourth and fifth centuries would have this description befit the more virulent Nicenes than Arius and his followers.

Third, I expect that the author chose OSL Publications as the publisher for good reasons. But the book is not well served by the easy dissembling of the pages. My copy now looks more like a semester’s worth of class notes rather than a book to be used as a resource for years to come. The content makes it the latter, but the OSL binding gives it the mien of the former. But because the book makes such a convincing and well reasoned contribution to academic and pastoral life, these matters are insignificant and virtually unnoticeable.

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Bodies of Worship: Explorations in Theory and Practice. Edited by Bruce Morrill. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press 1999. Pages, v + 180. Paper, \$15.95. ISBN 0-8146-2529-0.

Bodies of Worship is a rich compilation of essays that comes from a conference, “Liturgy and the Body,” in which the writers were challenged to write about the centrality of the body in the liturgy of the church. In the preface, Bruce Morrill, the editor, writes that in the latter part of the twentieth century there has been a growing awareness of “human bodiliness . . . in all aspects of life — familial, sexual, economic, legal, religious, political, and ecological.” Speaking to the church, Morrill understands that one of the primary places that the human body is primary is in our “ritual bodiliness” which is the focus of the very liturgy of the church (p. ix). This is because we worship God not only with our minds and souls, but with our bodies.



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