

The significance of liturgical acts: Using Victoria Welby's semiotics as a method for liturgical theology

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**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LITURGICAL ACTS:
Using Victoria Welby's Semiotics
as a Method for Liturgical Theology**

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Introduction

Significant in the history of liturgical theology is the figure of Alexander Schmemmann. On this field of study, he remarks: “Liturgical theology, as the name itself implies, is *the study of the theological meaning of Divine Worship*.”¹ This pithy definition provides a useful point of departure for the present study, which seeks to explore and investigate methodological questions concerning the discovery of liturgical meaning. His definition is so appealing because it is, at least at first consideration, very clear, very simple (if not tautological), and does not rely on jargon or neologisms to make his point. But appearances can be deceiving. While we take for granted that we know what his sentence means on the surface, it hinges on a very important but very easily overlooked word: meaning. What does Schmemmann *mean* by the word “meaning”?

While this question might initially seem at first to be overly pedantic or at least merely semantic, a brief probing of the word “meaning” demonstrates the very complicated backstage behind the curtain of simplicity. For example, one might ask, “What does [that word] mean?” One could also ask, “Did you mean [that word]?” Or still, “What did you mean by [that word]?” In all three examples, the word “mean” is trying to get at something not initially present on the surface of the sentence—a definition of a word, the earnestness of another’s words or actions, and the intentionality behind those words and actions, respectively. To ask the question of meaning is at minimum to inquire about something that is not not immediately knowable from the surface of a word, action, or symbol. In all three examples, the one-seeking meaning wants to know something that has not been explicitly disclosed. Yet, in all three examples the nature of the something-not-explicitly-disclosed is very different. Trying to learn a word’s definition is a

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, “Liturgical Theology: Its Method and Task,” *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (October 1957): 20. Emphasis original.

very different undertaking than learning the earnestness of people's words, or of uncovering their intentions. We use the word "meaning" so frequently and often unreflectively that in a statement like Schmemmann's definition of liturgical theology, we presume to know what he is getting at, but on further reflection, his seemingly attractive definition begins to fall apart due to its ambiguity.² Is liturgical theology the discipline which seeks to know the definition of "Divine Worship" as a kind of *terminus technicus*? Is liturgical theology a discipline which tries to grasp the earnestness of Divine Worship? Is it a discipline which tries to get at the intention behind why the Church engages in Divine Worship in the first place?

Here is where a remark from Margaret Mary Kelleher provides important insight into the project before us. She observes: "The nature of the unknown in each case plays a major role in shaping the method."³ Using her insight to pull apart Schmemmann's deceptively simple definition, we can ascertain that the object of study is the liturgy itself, and the unknown is its meaning. According to Kelleher's thesis, one's understanding of the nature of this unknown "meaning" will "play a major role in shaping the method" to examine its content. Thus, the various methods that liturgical theologians use to study the liturgy are rooted in how they think about and approach the question of meaning. Kelleher, following Bernard Lonergan, believes that this essential first step of considering the "meaning of meaning" will help determine the kind of method(s) that the object of study requires for satisfactory examination. For Kelleher, methods must be "dynamic" processes which are "designed for the purpose of transforming something that is unknown into something that is known. In constructing a particular method, one must first designate the unknown..."⁴ As such, asking methodological questions before asking questions

² Later on, we shall see that the question of meaning itself, regardless of the way it is used is an inherently ambiguous undertaking. See p. 17 below.

³ Kelleher, "Liturgical Theology: A Task and a Method," 2.

⁴ Kelleher, "Liturgical Theology: A Task and Method," 4.

about the “nature of the unknown” puts the horse before the cart. One cannot ask questions of how to proceed through a field of inquiry without first asking the question of what one doesn’t know at the outset.

Theologians who investigate the liturgy indeed try to explore all of the questions posed above and countless other questions in their explorations, and thus to engage all of the various valences of the word “meaning.” Liturgical theologians certainly want to know how and why the Church engages in worship, where and what the boundaries of time and space are around what we call worship, and certainly the degree of authenticity and integrity with which the Church performs her worship. But before engaging with any individual rite or its components, liturgical theologians must clarify the kind of meaning they seek to explore.

Deciding on the nature of meaning will shape the method used to investigate it. Yet, for the most part, even the most careful and thoughtful theologians—such as the ones we will examine in Chapter Two—all rely on a tacit understanding of meaning. This is not to say that their understanding of meaning is wrong, unhelpful, or taken for granted without any kind of reflection. In the background of their understandings lie the works of philosophers such as Lévi-Strauss, Freud, Ricoeur, and others. However, they do not explicitly investigate this meta-question in their work. Liturgical theologians are not approaching their investigations without a sense of what the word meaning means. However, they do assume everyone operates with their same, particular, albeit tacit, definition. If Kelleher’s thesis is correct—namely that the nature of the unknown shapes the method—then by examining the methods that liturgical theologians have used, we can come to some understanding of how they approach the question of meaning.

Whether one examines the Fathers of the Church, Gregory Dix, Josef Jungmann, Alexander Schmemmann, Robert Taft, Aidan Kavanagh, or David Fagerberg, their focus is always on what and how *liturgy* means. Here the reader might be tempted to discard the present study as

making a point so obvious that it borders on insulting, but deeper engagement with this point will show it is significant, and more importantly, that this particular object of focus (viz. the liturgy itself) need not be liturgical theologians' exclusive area of focus at all.

The theologians mentioned in the previous paragraph and many others have devoted their lives and careers to the study of the symbolism, the historical development, the structure, and the usage of the texts, symbols, gestures, and rites used in Christian worship. By probing these various loci, they mine scripture and tradition to attempt to synthesize what the liturgy itself is, means, and says. Yet for all their insight, nuance, truly ingenious synthesis, and beautiful explanations which genuinely do help the Church at worship know herself better, less frequently do these (or other) liturgical theologians engage the people *for whom* the liturgy has meaning, and *to whom* it means. Put more directly: when theologians want to know the meaning of the liturgy, why do they turn to the liturgy itself to answer the question rather than asking the people who engage in it?⁵

One obvious reason, at least for those whose primary focus is the historical development of liturgy, is that it is not possible to ask the dead about their liturgical experience of God. It is therefore unfair and irresponsible to ask a Dix or a Jungmann why they have not thought to inquire from the faithful about liturgical meaning.⁶ Historical analysis of the liturgy and its development will always be needed and is an essential aspect of the study of the Church's liturgy—not only because new artifacts and theories continue to emerge and new insights about

⁵ Aidan Kavanagh and David Fagerberg have posited a fictional “Mrs. Murphy” who serves as a stand-in for the congregation in their investigations. Such a move shows that at some level, they are deeply aware that the congregation is an important, and often-missing, aspect of consideration. Yet, what is significant is that instead of using *actual people* who engage in worship, they rely on a fictional person who happens to agree with all of their basic assumptions. See Walter Knowles “Burying Mrs. Murphy: *Theologia Secunda*: Contemporary Sense and Historical Avatars,” [liturgicalstudies.org](http://www.liturgicalstudies.org/docs/papers/Knowles-2012-Burying_Mrs._Murphy.pdf), accessed January 30, 2020.

⁶ To some degree, Taft does attempt this project in his *Through Their Own Eyes: Liturgy as the Byzantines Saw It* (Berkeley: InterOrthodox Press, 2006).

old stories can be told, but the knowledge of the past adds a richness of depth and texture to present liturgical practice, and links the present worshiping body not only to the past, but to the future as well. Historical research into the liturgy's past is an expression of the timelessness that liturgy celebrates. Historical research is also important, as we will see in our discussion of Taft, because history is not really about past events at all, but rather about present *ideas* about events of the past.⁷

Yet even less exclusively historically focused theologians rarely, if ever, ask the Church—the Holy People of God—what their liturgy means. They are not actively avoiding or dismissing the perspective of the faithful in the pews, but are rather seeking answers to questions which can be always and everywhere true of the liturgy and the subjective concerns are less germane to this task. However, this perspective uncovers a very particular conception of meaning out of which these theologians work, which has deeply shaped their methodology.

My goal in this thesis is to lay the philosophical and theological groundwork of and arguments for a methodological approach to liturgical meaning that engages the faithful's experience of liturgy. The groundwork and argument is first philosophical because, as should be immediately obvious, I too am working out of a very particular conception of meaning. Where some conceptions of meaning remain implicit, I must make mine explicit. The groundwork is theological because the liturgy is fundamentally a locus of encounter between God and God's people. Many theologians look at the liturgy itself to see where God is active—to see, as it were, where God has left fingerprints. Mine is to do that, and then to look at the people. It is necessarily true that each individual person in each individual church, chapel, or oratory around the world will have vastly different experiences of the liturgy. Therefore, the project I am

⁷ See discussion on p. 47, below.

proposing has significant hurdles to overcome. But the presence of these hurdles is not an argument for a flawed premise.

I have already stated the methodological move that I believe is essential in the study of liturgical meaning: using the people as a liturgical “text.” Since the definition of meaning is so expansive, complex, and even elusive, and has already shaped the methodological move I have suggested, it is essential to begin our study by approaching it head-on. To do so, we will explore the work of a little-known, but important and influential Victorian semiotician Victoria Lady Welby, whose area of interest was the nature of the meaning of symbols and signs, particularly in the field of language. While she was not Catholic nor a theologian, her work in semiotics provides the architecture which I will use for grappling with the question of liturgical meaning in the Roman Catholic liturgy.⁸

Chapter One will begin an exposition of Welby’s major philosophical contribution to semiotics, namely, the discipline she calls signification. This relatively unknown field posits that all signs act on three levels as they signify: ‘sense,’ ‘meaning,’ and ‘significance.’ ‘Sense’ is the immediately observable features of the sign itself and “is associated with the senses, with feelings, with the sentiments or passions.”⁹ ‘Meaning’ engages the question of the intention behind the sign-user’s use of the sign and its desired effect and “concerns rational life, the

⁸ Although Welby was not a theologian, she began her professional life exploring questions of religious significance, particularly with regard to interpretation of scripture. In *Victoria Welby and the Science of Signs* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2015), xx, Susan Petrilli notes “Welby’s studies on sign and meaning ensued from her initial concern with problems of a religious, moral, and theological order. She focused on problems of interpretation related to the Sacred Scriptures, and then her interest in ethical-theological discourse and in social and pedagogical issues merged with her linguistic-philosophical studies and found expression in a series of writings published toward the end of the nineteenth century.” To this end, in Welby’s bibliography we find titles such as “Three Parables,” “Truthfulness in Science and Religion,” “The Return of the Prophet and the Psalmist,” “An Appeal. From a learner to all who teach in the name of Christ,” and “Child Thoughts on the Christianity of the Nineteenth Century.” See Susan Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding: Reading the Works of Victoria Welby and the Signific Movement* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 952-958 for a complete bibliography of Welby’s published works.

⁹ Susan Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 538.

intentional, volitional aspects of signification.”¹⁰ ‘Significance’ is the sign’s import and its ability to change the life of the sign-user and it “implies both sense and meaning and transcends them to concern the import and value that signs have for each of us; it refers to the overall bearing, maximum implication, and ultimate power of words (and as such it also involves the concept of responsibility).”¹¹ This chapter will conclude with a theological argument for why her analysis is appropriately applied to the field of liturgical theology.¹²

With Welby’s architecture in place, we can then move to an analysis of the methodology of Alexander Schmemmann, Robert Taft, and Aidan Kavanagh in their exploration of liturgical meaning. In these theologians, we do not encounter the meta-question of “the meaning of meaning” as they begin their investigation of liturgy.¹³ I choose to focus on these three, because they all cluster around a very particular and significant methodology—and thus conception of meaning—in approaching the liturgy: structuralism.¹⁴ Structuralism looks beyond the surfaces of seemingly different (or even similar) liturgical acts to try to uncover the deep structures that unite them. The structuralist approach has been an important approach to liturgical theology since Schmemmann first looked into the question of the Ordo. Unlike approaches that focus on the details of the liturgical acts themselves (such as a purely textual approach), structuralists seek out

¹⁰ Susan Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the Science of Signs: Significs, Semiotics, Philosophy of Language* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2015), 179.

¹¹ Susan Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the Science of Signs*, 179.

¹² Moving forward, it is essential to distinguish between Welby’s technical words (sense, meaning and significance) and the many other ways in which they can be used. As such, when using these words in Welby’s technical way, they will always appear in this fashion: ‘sense,’ ‘meaning,’ and ‘significance.’

¹³ This question is not entirely missing from all contemporary liturgical theologians. For example, the work of Graham Hughes in *Worship as Meaning: A Liturgical Theology for Late Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Nathan Mitchell in *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, Sacraments* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2006) both address this question specifically. Their attempts to question the nature of meaning itself produce fruitful reflections not only on methodology in liturgical theology, but also on how theologians might grapple with the question of liturgical meaning. We will deal with both of these authors more in Chapter 2 below.

¹⁴ Structuralism is certainly not the only way of approaching the liturgy, but is a significant one worth examining. Taft is careful to note that his method is not in strict adherence to the philosophical school of Structuralism. Of his method he notes it is “Structural not Structuralist.” Yet here, to avoid either a neologism or confusion, I simply refer to the method which seeks to discover the deep structures of liturgy as “structuralism.” See Robert Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” *Worship* 52, no. 4 (July 1978): 314.

the organizing principles or the system that undergirds acts across liturgical rites and even liturgical traditions. After an exposition of the methodology of these three theologians, in the second part of chapter two, we can attempt to extract their understanding of meaning. From there, we will see how Victoria Welby might address structuralism, particularly with regard to the distinction we will see in Kavanagh between *theologia prima* and secondary theological reflection.

In a Welbian understanding of signifying, moving liturgical theology forward will involve exploring the question not only of liturgy's 'sense' and 'meaning' but also its 'significance.' Therefore, following Welby, to fully appreciate and understand the liturgy's signifying power, we must consider not only its *ability* to change the lives of those who "commit" it but whether it actually does.¹⁵ Without this move, liturgical theologians remain stuck asking questions about liturgy's *intended* meaning, rather than the impact it makes on the assembly gathered at prayer. In the first part of Chapter Three, I will demonstrate the need for a new methodology that is able to speak to two different sides present in liturgical theology—structuralism on one side which finds meaning within liturgical acts themselves, and the concerns of late-modernity on the other side which finds meaning in the experience of the worshipper. In the second half of the chapter, I will illustrate what a significant liturgical analysis would look like through the examination of the liturgical act of the congregation's reception of communion. Here, we will see the far-reaching ability of Welby's significs to address concerns on both sides of the divide. Finally, I will show what a Welbian liturgical theology implies regarding three specific aspects of the liturgy: the congregation, the presider, and the ecclesiology of liturgy. Here, we will see the importance not only of history, catechesis, and

¹⁵ David Fagerberg, *Liturgia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2007), 8.

mystagogy but also how ethnographic research into lived religion can help in developing an idea of the 'significance' of liturgy for the congregation.

But first, the question that the liturgical theologian must pose before setting out on this process of discovery is: What does meaning mean?

Chapter 1: Victoria Welby's Philosophy of Meaning

Victoria Lady Welby (1837-1912), is a name virtually unknown in most intellectual circles, even though she was “known for her copious scholarship and voluminous correspondence with the major academic titans of her era, including Michel Breál (1831-1915), André Lalande (1867-1963), Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), Charles K. Ogden (1889-1957), Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), Ferdinand C. S. Schiller (1864-1937), Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936), Giovanni Vailati (1863-1909), Frederik van Eeden (1860-1932), Mary Everest Boole (1832-1916), and Julia Wedgwood (1833-1913)...”¹⁶ She was a Victorian/Edwardian polymath whose publications range from travel journals to education, the nature of pain, psychology, folklore, semiotics, and philosophy of language.¹⁷ She was a painter, musician, public intellectual, and philanthropist. She founded the Royal School of Art Needlework which helped to train soldiers the trade of sewing¹⁸ and established the Welby Prize in 1896 to help understand “the causes of the present obscurity and confusion in psychological and philosophical terminology, and the directions in which we may hope for efficient practical remedy.”¹⁹

It is regrettable that the present chapter cannot be a full exposition of the thought of Victoria Lady Welby.²⁰ Her insights regarding language, education, semiotics, and many other disciplines are surely worth careful examination. Since the goal of this chapter is to understand

¹⁶ Frank Nuessel, “Foreword,” in Susan Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the Science of Signs: Significs, Semiotics, Philosophy of Language* (London: Routledge, 2015), xi.

¹⁷ See Victoria Lady Welby, *Significs and Language: The Articulate Form of our Expressive and Interpretative Resources*, ed. H. Walter Schmitz (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1985), ccxxiv-cxxxiii for a complete bibliography of Welby’s nearly 100 publications.

¹⁸ See Ana Carden-Coyne, *The Politics of Wounds: Military Patients and Medical Power in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 267.

¹⁹ Victoria Lady Welby, “Advertisement of the Welby Prize,” *Mind* 5 No. 20 (October, 1896): 583.

²⁰ Susan Petrilli, whom Frank Nuessel calls “a world-renowned semiotician in her own right” (“Foreword” in Petrilli’s *Victoria Welby and the Science of Signs*, xi) has several works on Welby which can provide a more detailed presentation and analysis on her work. Namely, *Signifying and Understanding: Reading the Works of Victoria Welby and the Signific Movement* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009) and *Victoria Welby and the Science of Signs: Significs, Semiotics, Philosophy of Language* already mentioned provide outstanding reflections on and careful treatment of Welby’s work.

the definition of meaning out of which I am working, we must focus our attention on the general features of Welby's philosophy of meaning, which she coins signifiics. We will first look at this field more broadly considered, and then move to a detailed description of the three levels of signifying that all signifying processes employ according to Welby's analysis.

I. Welby's Signifiics

Susan Petrilli believes that Welby coined the term 'signifiics' in around 1894 but "officially introduced it into her publications" in a two-part essay published in the journal *Mind* in 1896 entitled "Sense, Meaning, and Interpretation."²¹ In 1903 she published her first monograph dedicated to the subject of meaning in *What is Meaning? Studies in the Development of Significance* and then explored the idea even more in her second major monograph in 1911, *Signifiics and Language: The Articulate Form of Our Expressive and Interpretative Resources*. Between the publishing of these two monographs, she wrote numerous pieces including articles, dictionary and encyclopedia entries, and responses, in addition to her voluminous correspondence written to the "significant personalities" of her time, much of which has since been published since Welby's death in 1912 dealing with the subject of meaning and signifiics.²² Here, we will focus our attention on Welby's piece in *Mind* as well as her two monographs on the question of meaning.²³

²¹ Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 253.

²² Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 137.

²³ It would certainly be fruitful to examine all of her texts to help develop a more complete and nuanced sense of Welby's philosophical project. Petrilli attempts such an endeavor in her second chapter of *Signifying and Understanding* where she draws primarily on Welby's correspondence as well as other works. Of particular note here is Petrilli's comment that all of Welby's work in signifiics "has its starting point in her quest for an updated interpretation of Christian doctrine in the light of progress in the sciences." 152-153. In addition, Welby's 1881 book *Links and Clues*, where she reflects on the four principles of interpreting Sacred Scripture (see Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 153) may be of added benefit. There, Welby notes the importance of ambiguity, which will be an important feature of her wider understanding of meaning: "Ambiguity is surely a fundamental principle of all training. Think of the ambiguity of circumstance in our lives; they may mean a hundred things. All things seem to say what they do not mean, and mean what they do not seem to say." Welby, *Links and Clues*, 291, cited in Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 153.

Welby is, of course, not the first scholar to ask questions of meaning with regard to signs, symbols, and other signifying processes. She is deeply aware of the major trends in these fields, and in particular in the field of linguistics. Welby decides on language as the focus of her study of meaning, though it is very clear that signification is a practice that can inform all different kinds of signifying processes beyond language. In coining the term signification, Welby proposes an altogether new way of looking at the question of meaning and the process of signifying. This new discipline called signification is to be a “science and educational method based upon the importance of realizing the exact significance of terms and conceptions, and their influence on thought and life.”²⁴

Signification is “the framework of [Welby’s] theory of meaning...”²⁵ It is a discipline which “claims to centralise and co-ordinate, to interpret and inter-relate, to concentrate and actualize the efforts of all true teachers to bring out the meaning of experience in every form.”²⁶ Welby herself calls her field of signification a “practical extension”²⁷ of semiotics in a letter that she wrote to C. S. Peirce and “concerns the practical mind, e.g. in business or political life, more closely and inevitably than it does the speculative mind.”²⁸ For Welby, signification has wide-ranging possibilities and notes that it is “either of universal application or of none; it is a tool, an

²⁴ *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, vol. IX, part I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1919), 38. Petrilli notes that this definition was approved by Welby herself. See Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 253.

²⁵ Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 20.

²⁶ Victoria Welby, *What is Meaning?* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1983 [1903]), 54.

²⁷ Cited in Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 272.

²⁸ Cited in Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 274. At this point, it is worth drawing some attention to the fact that Welby and Peirce maintained extensive communication through letter writing. In one such letter, Peirce writes that he agrees with Welby on her distinguishing sense, meaning, and significance and finds them roughly similar to his own immediate, dynamical, and final interpretants in his scheme. Petrilli’s “Sign, Meaning, and Understanding in Victoria Welby and Charles S. Peirce” *Signs and Society* 3, no. 1 (Spring, 2015) is an excellent piece that explores the relationship between the “father-” and “mother-founders” of modern semiotics. She notes that “both Welby and Peirce evidence the public, social, and intersubjective dimensions of signifying and understanding, and hence also the importance of intercorporeality, dialogism, otherness, ambiguity for healthy communication, and interpersonal relations.” (71, in the abstract). Schmitz believes that Peirce and Welby’s “theories of signs differ right from their conception. Whereas Lady Welby gains her concepts ‘through a prodigious sensitiveness of Perception’ by proceeding from communication processes and informative intentions and interpretations they entail, Peirce’s approach is more general and tends to be more extracommunicative...” (Schmitz, cli).

instrument which appeals to the needs of all men everywhere and at all times.”²⁹ In fact, “there is no imaginable form of human interest and activity which it does not concern and could not raise in value.”³⁰ Her very clear description of this discipline at the beginning of *What is Meaning?* is useful here:

For the thinker may go on through all his life turning over his own or others’ thoughts and working them logically out. But the man of action must translate thought into deed as fast as ideas come to him; and he may ruin the cause he would serve by missing the significance of things. All signifies to him, ‘matters’ to him, interests him. As the word implies, ‘Significs’ sums up what for the ‘man in the street’ *signifies*; whatever does not signify, he will tell you, is nothing to him; and he well understands that the value of a sign is not that it may mean anything you like, and thus be used to confuse, bewilder, mislead, or that it means what is no concern of his, but that it means somewhat which in some sense has interest either for him or his fellows: he knows that it is his business to find out what this is. He knows also that signs of all kinds must point beyond themselves, must in that sense ‘mean’ something, or they would not be signs at all.³¹

In this description of significs, we see that Welby is deeply concerned about the so-called “man on the street” and his perspective. Significs tries to approach what the non-technician understands about meaning, but not simply in the mental sphere, but more importantly in the practical sphere. For the man on the street, something that does not signify “is nothing.” What has no importance, no practical value, no lived response—no significance—has no meaning in the broad sense of the term. It is simply “nothing.”

Significs is a field that is synthetic of many different perspectives, including scientific and philosophical. It is about

raising of our whole conception of meaning to a higher and more efficient level; a bringing cosmos out of the present ‘chaos’ of our ideas...[and] involves essentially and typically the philosophy of Interpretation, of Translation, and thereby of a mode of synthesis accepted and worked with by science and philosophy alike.³²

²⁹ Welby’s preface to *What is Meaning?* viii.

³⁰ Welby, *What is Meaning?* 4.

³¹ Welby, *What is Meaning?* 8.

³² Welby, *What is Meaning*, 161.

Welby sees her project as providing order to the chaos which characterizes semiotics and semantics which are concerned primarily (or even exclusively) with questions of denotation and definition. We shall see below that her characterization of her project as cosmic is not merely a clever turn of phrase, but a way of orienting significs toward the end it seeks.

The linguistic approach of German philosopher and mathematician Gottlob Frege detailed in his work “Sense and Reference” plays an influential role in the development of the philosophy of language.³³ Semanticists like Frege are in the background of Welby’s work, since she is trying to expand the scope of the field of linguistics. For Welby,

Significs studies the conditions that make meaning possible, its principles and foundations, keeping account also of the biological basis of signifying processes...[it] eschew[s] a purely descriptive attitude for a critical approach to signs, values and behaviour, verbal and nonverbal...By contrast with dominant trends across the twentieth century, Welby aimed to expand traditional epistemological-cognitive boundaries into a ‘significal’ framework, where sign theory and value theory, signs and values are interconnected.³⁴

Where Frege’s approach looks primarily at the reference behind the proposition that a particular word or sentence expresses, and attempts to rely on descriptive analysis to explain how language “hooks onto reality,” Welby’s approach seeks to expand the question of meaning to consider value, importance, and behavior beyond simple description.³⁵ It is important to recognize that “Lady Welby’s theory of signs and meaning can only be comprehended from the premise that she did not set to work with a theoretical interest in drafting an abstract theory of meaning, but rather started from her own experience of a number of inadequacies in language and in the idea of language.”³⁶ Thus, significs begins from a different perspective and has a different goal in

³³ Colin McGinn, *The Philosophy of Language: The Classics Explained* (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2015), 1. Frege’s paper, “Über Sinn und Bedeutung,” translated “Sense and Reference,” was originally published in 1892.

³⁴ Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 2.

³⁵ McGinn, *Philosophy of Language*, 1.

³⁶ Achim Eschbach, “Significs as a Fundamental Science” in *What is Meaning?*, xvii.

mind than pure semantics, even though the work of semanticists is of some limited use, albeit only on the descriptive level of a sign's meaning.

For Welby, the purely abstract approach is not only limited and incomplete, hence the need for a new way of approaching the way language, and indeed all signs, work, but also attempts to paint a picture of language (and all signifying) which is too inflexible. On this matter, Eschbach notes that Welby desires to push back against the

tendency observable everywhere to tie down an inherently openended process such as the constitution of meaning by assuming the existence of fixed meanings; that we thus make this process manageable and bring it within our reach because we would like to set limits to our world in every respect so as to be better able to orientate ourselves within it.³⁷

In fact, on this point Welby herself believes that “ambiguity...is the condition of the highest forms of expression.”³⁸ Welby's project is unlike other attempts like Frege's in that she is not trying to eliminate ambiguity, but rather embrace it and even exploit it. For Welby, ambiguity “is understood in a positive sense distinct from ambiguity understood negatively as generating confusion, obscurity and misunderstanding. The capacity for ambiguity understood in a positive sense is a necessary condition for adaptation to new communicative contexts, for interpretation and innovation.”³⁹ When ambiguity is in reference to “flexible connotation,” such as that found in metaphor, that kind of ambiguity is “of course excellent.”⁴⁰ This kind of ambiguity allows for the expansion of interpretation and that

the more interpretive-translative processes multiply, the more the signifying universe expands, and with this our understanding of life...the more the sign translates into different spheres of thought, branches of science, and fields of practical experience, ready always to

³⁷ Eschbach, “Significs as a Fundamental Science,” xvii.

³⁸ Welby, *What is Meaning?*, 74. In the same volume she notes, “Meaning is sensitive to psychological ‘climate.’ But the kind of ambiguity which acts as a useful stimulant to intelligence, and enriches the field of conjecture, is very different from that which the intellectual sphere begins and ends in confusion, or in the moral sphere begins in disingenuousness and ends in deliberate and successful imposture.” 2.

³⁹ Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 360.

⁴⁰ Welby, “The King's English,” cited in Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 129.

transcend its own limits, the more it is 'plastic,' the higher the degree in signifying potential and significance.⁴¹

This kind of ambiguity is deeply positive since it allows for a wider application of a sign's importance to ever-widening groups of people. When the kind of ambiguity that is inherent in language is exploited, as in metaphor, poetry, analogy, etc., the richness and texture of life increases.

Ambiguity can indeed be seen as a negative, but only when that ambiguity is used to add confusion rather than to open up possibilities of interpretation. Welby has little patience for any kind of ambiguity used deliberately to cause confusion and calls this kind of ambiguity "pernicious."⁴² Pernicious ambiguity comes in three types for Welby:

(1) "defective 'tuning' of language...resulting from neglect to ensure that perfect relation between every element of Expression which out to reign in the articulate as in the musical world...(2) We have the defective mental ear and eye on the part of the 'performer.' This he shares with his hearers and readers so that neither the one nor the other discovers the true cause of the general inability to bring the greatest of thoughts into definite consciousness, or realizes the endless confusion which at present to our shame prevails. (3) We have distorted organs of instruments of expression, preventing the full use of our true articulate and graphic powers."

In this view of ambiguity, Welby wants language to be used with such precision that it mimics the precise tuning of instruments in an orchestra. Without such tuning a person will "discover that what he had till then called music was not worthy the name."⁴³ Her second point is to chastise a performer whose lack of an "ear" has an effect on those who listen to his poor music. Finally, she recognizes that education is essential for the training of the significant "ear" since underdeveloped (i.e. "distorted") organs are incapable of listening with precision.

In *Significs and Language*, Welby recognizes that the field of significs "can only as yet be written in that very medium—conventional language—which so sorely needs to be lifted out

⁴¹ Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 533.

⁴² Welby, *What is Meaning?* 75.

⁴³ Welby, *What is Meaning?* 74.

of its present morass of shifting confusion and disentangled from a rank growth of falsifying survival.”⁴⁴ Her work is a plea for the more precise use of language so that it can more adequately and fully describe reality—not for its own sake but for the case of knowing its significance:

All I care for is first and always that Significance which is reached through sense and meaning, and which (if you give these free play) must ultimately involve and induce beauty of sound and form. I am quite ready for the most drastic changes as well as for the most scrupulous and anxious preservation of our existing resources all over the world. I want Greek; I want Chaucer; I want Esperanto, or rather its worthier successor when that shall appear. I want the Zulu clicks. I want modes of expression as yet unused, though we must not say undreamt of, since there are many scientist’s and idealist’s diagrams, symbols, and other ‘thinking machines’ all ready and in order, to rebuke us.⁴⁵

Thus language is not the problem, but rather the exclusive attempts at either change or preservation of it. Significs does not want to abandon descriptivism, but to contextualize and develop it. In fact, she believes that language must continue to develop so that it can become more and more precise. Because of its richness and elegance, here it is useful to quote Chapter XXIII of *Significs and Language* in its entirety:

Language might in one aspect be called articulate music. And we may be grateful to the so-called stylists, although in their efforts after beauty they sometimes sacrifice instead of transfiguring significance, and always tend to defeat themselves by making significance secondary. For at least their work recognizes some analogy between the ordered harmony of music which we call attunement, and the true ideal of language.

And thus we are reminded that as yet language in ordinary use barely rises above the level of noise, and only suggests the perfect natural harmony which ought to be its essential character. The reason for this, however, is not merely that in language we have failed to develop a full control of our ‘singing’ power, or that we are still content with the rude instruments of ancient days, although this is to a great extent true. We may put it in another way and, as already suggested, may say that in civilized speech we have acquired linguistic instruments of real complexity and implicit power to render subtle forms of harmony, but that it has never occurred to use to tune them together, to attune them. And we may suppose ourselves to have told one who suggested the need of this that the proposal was pedantic, and that to tune an instrument was to restrict its scope, as the ambiguity of tone and conflict of intention which reduces music to noise means a valuable freedom secured. We are liberating music by ostracizing the tuner, enriching the language with grunt, squall, yell, squeal, and excruciating discord!⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Welby, *Significs and Language*, vii-viii.

⁴⁵ Welby, *Significs and Language*, 83-84.

⁴⁶ Welby, *Significs and Language*, 72.

To abandon precision in language is to surrender to those “grunts, squalls, yells, squeals and discord.” Yet she always holds the importance of tuning or attuning as secondary to the function of significance, which we will see is necessarily communal, aesthetic, and ethical. For Welby, connection cannot be made without first navigating the “morass” of ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’ that language creates. And yet, in some ways, this morass is all we have. Without language, how can we connect in meaningful ways? Welby believes that the entire study of meaning is one that not only begins in a communal setting, but *culminates* in a response that is essentially ethical and thus communal. Lucidity is of ethical value and not simply intellectually valuable.

Welby’s insight is that the systematic and precise study of language—and all symbols for that matter—actually *frees* us to have greater encounters through a fuller embrace of significance. In the same way that tuning a musical instrument frees that instrument to play in harmony with other instruments in the orchestra, or in unison with other instruments in its section, attuning language allows us to encounter the other in greater harmony or unison.

II. The Three Components of Significs: ‘Sense,’ ‘Meaning,’ and ‘Significance’

Welby begins to articulate the architecture of her theory of meaning by proposing three structural levels through which one moves while considering signifying processes. She first systematically addresses these levels in the essay published in the journal *Mind* in 1896, though her thought on this topic can be traced back much further in her work, and continues to develop and mature as she continues to write. These three levels, already described briefly in the Introduction, are: ‘sense,’ ‘meaning,’ and ‘significance.’ Each level is “higher” than the previous—since they engage higher levels of human intelligence—and “deeper” than the previous—in the sense of getting to the heart of a sign’s signifying power for the one engaging

the sign.⁴⁷ ‘Sense,’ ‘meaning,’ and ‘significance,’ then represent ascending levels of value according to Welby’s technical understanding of value.⁴⁸ In her later work, Welby moves from a more general description of ‘sense,’ ‘meaning,’ and ‘significance’ that we see in the essay in *Mind* to a more specifically linguistic approach to the question of meaning in her books, *What is Meaning?* and *Significs and Language*.

Petrilli comments that Welby “reformulated her meaning triad continuously as she explored and developed its signifying implications.”⁴⁹ In his introduction to Welby’s book *Significs and Language*, H. Walter Schmitz provides an excellent chart in which he has gathered all the different ways that Welby characterizes her three terms.⁵⁰ As we look at Welby’s reformulations, we see that she assigns many different terms to each level. Regarding ‘sense,’ Welby uses the terms: tendency, signification, organic response to an environment, instinctive, consciousness, planetary, touch, smell, hearing, geocentrist. Regarding ‘meaning,’ she uses: intention, the specific sense which it is intended to convey, volitional, perception, intellect, solar, metaphor, feeling. Regarding ‘significance’ she uses: ideal worth, essential interest, ideal value, moral, conception, reason, rational, cosmical, sight. These lists of terms help to sort out how Welby thinks of her framework. ‘Sense’ is immediate, ‘meaning’ is mediated, and ‘significance’ is in a way doubly mediated since it involves mediation not only through the senses, but also through the volitional and intentional levels. As the significian moves from the lowest to the highest level, she moves from the planetary (the immediate) to the solar (the mediated) to the

⁴⁷ To avoid any confusion, I will use the term “sign-user” to designate the one who has decided to use a particular sign for a particular purpose and “sign-engager” for the one with whom the sign-user wishes to communicate. When the signs being used are linguistic, it is also appropriate to call the sign-engager the “listener.”

⁴⁸ For Welby, ‘value’ includes “good and evil...since it brings into full play the very nerve, so to speak, of the interpretative function. Thus I would prefer Implication, indirect Reference or intimate Response, and even organic Reaction, to ‘Value’ in describing the finer touch and wider range of the significal exploration.” She does not mean value in the sense of being valuable, but value in the technical sense of what her field of significs is trying to study.

⁴⁹ Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 264.

⁵⁰ C.f. Schmitz, in *Significs and Language*, xcvi-xcvii.

cosmic (doubly mediated). Thus a sign's ultimate meaning has a kind of universal scope to it that cannot be captured in the two lower levels. As we saw above, Welby considers her method as one that brings "cosmos" in its technical Greek sense of "order" to the chaos that seeking meaning can bring about.

Eschbach notes that "Irrespective of how the meaning triad is elucidated, however, two intrinsic features must be taken into consideration: first, that it is not a "quantitative but a qualitative differentiation that is involved in the meaning triad and second, arising from [sic] the first, that the three aspects of meaning do not co-exist on a par but form a graded hierarchy."⁵¹ In her mature work, "...the one crucial question in all Expression, whether by action or sound, symbol or picture, is its special property, first of Sense, that in which it is used, then of Meaning as the intention of the user, and, most far-reaching and momentous of all, of implication of ultimate Significance."⁵² Here is how Welby herself explains the scheme:

[Sense] refers to the perceptual sphere; with the advent of human life, sense also develops into 'meaning' or volitional, intentional, purposive, and rationally idealized sense; and beyond the latter, with reference to the value of experience in the human world, to ethical, pragmatic and ideological sense, also to unintentional sense—but related to both organic sense and meaning sense—the highest value of sense experience is identified in 'significance,' that is, in sense as it emerges in the relation between signs and values, augmented in ongoing translative processes from one sign and sign system to another.⁵³

In moving from one level to the next, it is like moving geometrically from one dimension up to the third: from line ('sense') to plane ('meaning') to three-dimension object like a cube ('significance').⁵⁴

⁵¹ Eschbach, *What is Meaning?* xxv-xxvi.

⁵² Welby, *Significs and Language*, 9.

⁵³ Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 20-21.

⁵⁴ See Welby, *What is Meaning?* 163.

'Sense'

Welby's begins her 1896 essay by describing 'sense' in the following way: "The question where the interpreting function begins: where any stimulus may be said to suggest, indicate or signalize somewhat other than itself, is already to some extent a question of Meaning, – of the *sense* in which we use the very word."⁵⁵ She believes that even plants have to "interpret" reality so that it might "discriminate between the appeals *e.g.* of food and danger."⁵⁶ This interpreting function points to the fact that all life—"every root, as well as the tentacle and even the protozoic surface"—is fundamentally attempting to solve the question of meaning.⁵⁷ For Welby, sense is what human beings have "in common in its organic form with other forms of life..." and is an "organic response to an environment," which can be seen "largely [as] a function of instinct or of direct spontaneous reaction."⁵⁸ Welby recognizes that the word "sense" has many different valences and "relies on three common meanings of 'sense': a) the 'sense' of observation and experiment in opposition to 'senseless'; b) if this first 'sense' is associated with 'meaning', the second is associate with 'judgment' as a rough equivalent; c) 'sense' as 'the starting point and ultimate test of scientific generalization.'"⁵⁹ Because "sense" is a word used so frequently without her technical understanding, 'sense' is perhaps the most difficult of the three levels to explain and understand.

In her technical definition of 'sense,' Welby describes it as being on the lowest level of consciousness, which she calls "instinctive."⁶⁰ In her three-part structure, 'sense' is "the suitable term for that which constitutes the value of experience in this life and on this planet" and thus

⁵⁵ Victoria Lady Welby, "Sense, Meaning, and Interpretation," *Mind* 5, no. 7 (October 1896): 25.

⁵⁶ Welby, "Sense, Meaning, and Interpretation," 25.

⁵⁷ Welby, "Sense, Meaning, and Interpretation," 25.

⁵⁸ Schmitz, in *Significs and Language*, xcv.

⁵⁹ Schmitz, in *Significs and Language*, xlvii.

⁶⁰ Welby, *What is Meaning?* 46.

takes on the valence of being “planetary.”⁶¹ By this, she means that sense is immediate, and directly observable. She notes, “We are full ‘in touch’ (including all sense) with the world we live on, and therefore and thus we live and reproduce life....”⁶² And further on, “All ‘planetary’ knowledge is directly acquired either through observation and experiment, or through processes inductive or deductive.”⁶³ Sensing is inherently an act of an intentional translation of the environment, and so she “does not admit anything like the sense of a word, but only the sense in which it is used—the circumstances, state of mind, reference, ‘universe of discourse’ belonging to it.”⁶⁴ Therefore, she is careful to distinguish between the “verbal” and the “sensal” aspects of a word: “The verbal is a question of symbolic instrument regarded as a thing detached and out of actual use; the sensal is question of value conveyed thereby on any particular occasion. The two are at present hopelessly confused. But no word in actual use is merely verbal: there and then it is sensal also.”⁶⁵ Sense for Welby is an immediate procedure which is conveyed regardless of the intention of the one attempting to convey something. She notes, “...we don’t *mean* (intend) to have or to use Sense; we can only *mean* (intend) *to act upon it*; and we may learn to train Sense in its higher forms as we train our sight or hearing for technical work.”⁶⁶ Here we see clearly Welby’s desire to look at the practical—signs and symbols *in use* and not in the abstract. In Welby’s meaning triad, sense is always taken to include some value which the man on the street knows is latent in signs.

⁶¹ Schmitz, in *Significs and Language*, xcv.

⁶² Welby, *What is Meaning*, 27.

⁶³ Welby, *What is Meaning*, 94.

⁶⁴ Schmitz, in *Significs and Language*, xcvi.

⁶⁵ Welby, *Significs and Language*, 79. In this passage, Welby recognizes the fact that for human beings, ‘sense’ is always inherently tied up in the question of ‘meaning’ and the two can never be completely separated in experience, but only in subsequent reflection on experience. Thus here, “verbal” seems to be synonymous with her technical definition of ‘sense’ and “sensal” synonymous with ‘meaning.’

⁶⁶ Letter of Victoria Welby to Alfred Sidgwick (1908), cited in Schmitz, xcix.

Thus, significant analysis begins by noting the commonality of sense among all living creatures, and from there moves up, in a kind of hierarchy of being, to the human approach to sense, which, moves from sense, to meaning, and ultimately to significance. We have seen that the sensal is not restricted to the so-called five senses or sense organs, and includes the way in which the symbol is used, its “circumstances, state of mind, reference, ‘universe of discourse’ belonging to it.”⁶⁷ In practicing significs, before any kind of analysis can be made, it must be recognized that a symbol is used within an already established and larger context. To analyze the ‘significance’ of a symbol for Welby presupposes the presence of an interpreting community. Since Welby’s concern is not fundamentally directed toward the abstract denotational study of symbols but toward human flourishing within a society, the presence of context and community in the process of interpretation is necessary. The fact that there is a “universe of discourse” that surrounds any symbol points to the fact that there are people engaged in the discourse. Welby is clear that symbols do not have sense in any kind of absolute way, but only a way that a symbol is used. This understanding of ‘sense’ then also presupposes symbol-users and symbol-engagers both linked in mutual communication.

Petrilli sees convergence between Welby and Emmanuel Levinas on this matter. She notes: “With an attitude that recalls Emmanuel Levinas when he privileges commitment over cognition, or art, love, and action over theory, and talent over wisdom and self-possession, Welby too focuses on the ethical implications of meaning for the expressive, interpretive and communicating subject, and their translation into action.”⁶⁸ Significance is “to be found in every sort of consequence deducible by the listener from the word understood, regardless of whether

⁶⁷ Welby, *What is Meaning*, 5.

⁶⁸ Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 281.

the speaker predicted, intended, afterwards recognized these consequences or not.”⁶⁹ In the end, “‘significance’ refers to given values fixed and flourishing in a community.”⁷⁰

‘Meaning’

Even though human beings share sense with all forms of life on earth, since we are “citizen[s] of a greater Commonwealth than this secondary world, this mere planet,” human beings are called to a higher form of “sensing” which Welby calls ‘meaning.’ Welby defines ‘meaning’ in this way: “The Meaning of a word is the intent which it is desired to convey—the intention of the user.”⁷¹ Therefore, ‘meaning’ deals with the “volitional, intentional, purposive, rationally idealized sense.”⁷² Where ‘sense’ was planetary and immediate, ‘meaning’ is “solar” and mediated. The “advent of the sense of meaning” for Welby “marks a new departure: it opens the distinctively human era.”⁷³ Meaning is “one of the most important of our conceptions and indeed that on which the value of all thought necessarily depends...”⁷⁴ She notes that the word “meaning” has two general ways that people use it: first, our intention to do something (“when we say we ‘mean’ to do this and that”⁷⁵); and second, something’s import to us. In the first general sense of ‘meaning’—intentionality—Welby notes that it is teleological, that is, directed toward a particular purpose: when one says “‘it is my intention to do this or that, we may use as an alternative, ‘it is my purpose to do it’: and does not that bring us to a teleological value?”⁷⁶ It is at this point that we can see Welby’s most significant departure from the field of pure semantics. In Welby’s scheme, the denotational and definitional concerns that occupy

⁶⁹ Schmitz, in *Significs and Language*, civ.

⁷⁰ Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 537.

⁷¹ Welby, *What is Meaning?* 5.

⁷² Welby, *What is Meaning*, 27.

⁷³ Welby, *What is Meaning*, 28.

⁷⁴ Welby, “Sense, Meaning and Interpretation,” 25.

⁷⁵ Welby, “Sense, Meaning and Interpretation,” 28

⁷⁶ Welby, “Sense, Meaning and Interpretation,” 28.

semanticians belong not at the level of ‘meaning,’ but at the level of ‘sense.’ Welby’s ‘meaning’ ties together the intention of the symbol-user and the telos of the symbol-user’s use of the symbol.⁷⁷

In asking the question of the ‘meaning’ of a word or symbol, Welby concedes that this question is always one of intent: what does the user intend to convey by it? All of the other ways that “meaning” get used in our contemporary world are to be assigned to a different level in Welby’s scheme. That to which a word refers (its referent) is for Welby “sense” and not meaning, as linguists like Bertrand Russell would suggest. One of Bertrand Russell’s famous contributions to the field of meaning is his observation that the statement, “The current king of France is bald” is meaningless because, since there is no current king of France, the statement has no referent. For Welby, however, when we utter a phrase like this, “we intent to convey what is sheer mistake or sheer nonsense. That is, it is not meaningless (or purposeless) but *senseless*.”⁷⁸

‘Meaning’ regards both “‘intention’ and ‘the specific sense [a sign] is intended to convey.’”⁷⁹ Eschbach considers ‘meaning’ to be “described on the one hand as the expression of sense-experience, and on the other as the expression of that which is expressive of a coherent, orderly, rational, logical meaning.”⁸⁰ When investigators ask the question, “In what sense?” Welby believes them to be inquiring about questions of intentionality and can rephrase the question as “What do you mean by that?” or “What is your intention by using that sign?” In answering that question, the listener

⁷⁷ Here we can understand symbol in its widest sense and would include language (words, syllables, the alphabet) or other signifier/thing-signified relationships.

⁷⁸ Victoria Welby to Bertrand Russell (1905), cited in Schmitz, *Significs and Language*, xcix. Also, note Russell’s pernicious ambiguity!

⁷⁹ Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 265.

⁸⁰ Eschbach, *What is Meaning?* xxvi.

...ascertains by interpretation the specific manner of use of the words in this concrete case by relating them to the circumstances of perceiving and experiencing which are reported on and to the rest of the linguistic context, as well as to the situation in general in which they are used. The sense of the report remains definitely able to be differentiated from its 'meaning' as 'intention' or 'the specific sense which it is intended to convey.' For the interpretational definition of 'meaning' in Lady Welby's works is always oriented toward the respective specific communicative intention...⁸¹

To illustrate this concept more clearly, she notes in an unpublished essay entitled "To What End" that "when a man approaches us with a knife we have to decide swiftly whether he *means*, that is *intends*, to kill us or to release or heal us. His action is ambiguous, because it may have many or least alternative senses."⁸² The same man with the same knife could be a murderer, someone coming to cut ropes that bind us, or a surgeon. Thus interpretation of intentions by using context is essential.

Because interpretation is essential, one of Welby's consistent complaints throughout her work is a critique of what she calls "plain, common sense meaning" or "plain and obvious meaning," which Petrilli calls a "leitmotif in all [Welby's] research."⁸³ For Welby, "one thing meaning is not, and that is 'plain' in the sense of being the same at all times, in all places, and to all."⁸⁴ It is clear at this point in our investigation why Welby would hold to such a position: it "tend[s] toward reductionism and oversimplification, the fallacy that a text may evolve into a single reading, into an absolute and definitive interpretant valid for all time."⁸⁵ In the first case of reductionism, anything that is plain, common, or obvious will tend toward being always true and thus move away from the necessarily ambiguous nature of the wider question of meaning. In the second case of oversimplification, "plain meaning" presumes that everyone observing a

⁸¹ Schmitz, in *Significs and Language*, xcix.

⁸² Cited in Schmitz, *Significs and Language*, cii. Emphasis original.

⁸³ Petrilli, *Welby and the Science of Signs*, 30.

⁸⁴ Welby, *What is Meaning?* 143. Welby's observations about the lack of a plain meaning in signs would conceivably challenge the notion widely held by liturgical theologians that liturgical signs and symbols speak for themselves.

⁸⁵ Petrilli, *Welby and Science of Signs*, 42.

particular phenomenon will interpret it the same way—that its meaning is self-evident, and thus interpretation neither necessary nor possible.⁸⁶

‘Significance’

In the preceding section on ‘meaning,’ we saw that Welby sees “meaning” (used in a non-technical way) as having two common definitions: first, the intention behind the use of a sign (to which she assigns the technical word ‘meaning’) and second, that sign’s import to us. To this second use of the word “meaning,” Welby assigns her third and final term in her framework: ‘significance.’ ‘Significance’ is the term by which Welby refers to “the value conferred upon something, the relevance, import, bearing and meaning value of signs, the condition of being significant, the propensity for valuation. Significance is connected with the pragmatic-ethical or operative-valuative dimension of signifying processes and is enhanced as translative processes develop across different signs and sign systems.”⁸⁷

‘Significance’ is yet another level above (and within) the human experience of the world. She notes that something has significance to us “because it must modify more or less profoundly our mental attitude” and will affect our attitudes toward social problems.⁸⁸ Significance deals with the “special emotional or moral interests either for all intelligent minds or for special groups of these.”⁸⁹ Welby’s technical definition of ‘significance,’ unlike her technical definitions of ‘sense’ and ‘meaning,’ is not altogether different from its everyday use. Something’s

⁸⁶ Petrilli notes the seemingly endless variety of circumstances that can influence the interpreting process and thus short-circuit any “plain” or “common” meaning: “Different factors are at work to condition meaning value in a structure that is never identical to itself...[including] specific communicative context, life context, social milieu, linguistic context, historical-social-cultural factors, cultural and mental background of the interlocutors, inferential procedures, feelings, states of mind, psychological atmosphere, degree and focus of attention, communicative intention, associations, allusions, assumptions, implications, enthymemes, memory, circumstance, linguistic usage, tendency to symbolize or visualize a priori conditions of language, etc.” see Petrilli, *Welby and the Science of Signs*, 43-44.

⁸⁷ Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 272.

⁸⁸ Welby, “Sense, Meaning and Interpretation,” 27.

⁸⁹ Welby, “Sense, Meaning and Interpretation,” 28.

‘significance’ points to its value, its importance to the sign-user and listener, and how it moves us to act in the social sphere. As such, ‘significance’ is impossible to grasp in its entirety. Not only is it a moving target, but ‘significance’ is “always manifold, and intensifies its sense as well as its meaning, by expressing its importance, its appeal to us, its moment for us, its emotional force, its ideal value, its moral aspect, its universal or at least social range.”⁹⁰

It is a sign’s ‘significance,’ not its ‘sense’ or ‘meaning’ which is of ultimate interest to both the sign-user and the listener. In other words, the sign-user is as interested as Welby’s man on the street in always being attuned to how signs and symbols move them. If they do not move, then they are simply ignored or dismissed. ‘Significance’ is the way of describing a sign’s ability to grasp the inner world of the listener and then to influence the listener in the outside world. ‘Significance’ is where *chronos* becomes *kairos*—where the simple passage of time takes hold on the person and makes it charged with importance.

Welby is careful to note that ‘significance’ is the result of the interpretative/translative process which includes ‘sense’ and ‘meaning.’ Here is where her rigor as a semiotician is clearly evident. While Welby is certainly interested ultimately in a sign’s ‘significance,’ she recognizes that the depth, richness, and texture of ‘significance’ depends on the listener’s engagement with the sign’s ‘sense’ and ‘meaning.’ ‘Significance’ is the fruit of the rigorous process of analysis of signs, not its starting point. We saw above that Welby is deeply committed to a robust analysis and investigation of signs at the level of ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’—like the process of tuning an instrument so that it can play in an orchestra. Without such a commitment, signification could be seen as a merely emotional connection to signs which is completely detached from the sign’s appearance (‘sense’) and how the sign-user intends to mean it (‘meaning’). Welby has little

⁹⁰ Welby, *What is Meaning?* 5-6.

patience with this kind of approach to signs since it completely removes them from the logical, intellectual framework in which they were conceived. Even the man on the street knows that signs point toward something else, and that they have been employed deliberately for that purpose. Thus, ‘significance’ is not merely the importance that a sign has to the listener, but the importance that it has in relation to its ‘sense’ and ‘meaning.’ Thus, the sign-user, the sign-itself, and the sign-engager all have an interconnected relationship of responsibility to one another. In Welby’s view, the interpreter is not free to completely dissociate the sign from the user’s intention, nor from the sign’s appearance; and the sign-user cannot ignore the fact that his intentions will necessarily develop into something else by the sign-engager.

III. A Theological Justification for Welby’s Significs

In the Introduction, I claimed that the methodological move necessary in liturgical theology is to inquire among the people assembled for liturgy about its meaning. We noted that the nature of the unknown—the “meaning” of liturgy—will shape the methods which we use to investigate it. In the first part of this chapter, I have laid out what I take to be the nature of the unknown in the exposition of the architecture of Welby’s philosophy of meaning which she calls significs. It should be clear that significs requires inquiry not only of the signs themselves and the sign-users, but also the sign-engagers regarding the significance that the sign has for them. What remains for the present chapter is to argue that significs is not only an appropriate philosophy for shaping method in liturgical theology, but that it draws deeply from the Church’s self-understanding and its understanding of liturgy.

Before delving into the question of whether significs is an appropriate tool for moving liturgical theology forward from the perspective of Catholic liturgical theology, we must first inquire as to whether Welby herself would consider liturgical theology an appropriate field for significs to examine. Fortunately, such a consideration can be done rather briefly. Significs is a

field that Welby herself believed was one which had practical bearing “not only on language but on every possible form of human expression in action, invention, and creation.”⁹¹ It “provides a perspective and a method for the study for all sign systems and languages at the human being’s disposal, not just the verbal but also the nonverbal: gestural, musical, visual, technological, and so forth”⁹² and “applies to all aspects of life and knowledge not because of some claim to semiotic omniscience, but simply because it turns its attention upon meaning in all its signifying complexity.”⁹³ The liturgy is without question a “form of human expression,” though not exclusively human since the divine is a necessary component of the performance of liturgy and indeed a precondition for liturgy’s performance at all. It employs the use of signs—both verbal and nonverbal—and is therefore a kind of sign system that speaks its own kind of language. It is deeply complex and rich in history, and is engaged intentionally by all those involved. Thus, on Welby’s own terms, it is not strange to apply her theory to the field of liturgical theology.

Yet we might still find ourselves wondering whether there is justification from the perspective of the theologian for using signification as a tool to examine liturgical theology: What business does signification have in the realm of liturgical theology? To answer this question, it is first necessary to see how the Church views the liturgy. Obviously, in our limited scope here, we cannot look at every way that the Church considers the liturgy. In addition, our goal here is not to argue that signification is the only appropriate philosophical framework to shape methodology in liturgical theology. Here, we need only demonstrate that Welby’s perspective can harmonize with the Roman Catholic understanding of liturgy. To accomplish this demonstration, we will examine three areas: 1. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*’s (SC) description of the liturgy as “the font

⁹¹ Welby, *Signification and Language*, ix.

⁹² Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 283.

⁹³ Petrilli, *Welby and the Science of Signs*, 9.

from which [the Church's] power flows"⁹⁴; *SC*'s note that the liturgy has a "didactic and pastoral nature"⁹⁵; and two of the options for the Rite of Dismissal found in the current edition of the *Roman Missal*.

In *SC*, the Church describes the liturgy as "...the summit toward the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows." *Lumen Gentium* refers to the Eucharist in similar language, calling it the "fount and apex of the whole Christian life."⁹⁶ Based on this quotation, people frequently refer to the liturgy as "source and summit" of the Church's life. "Summit" describes an end point—that the liturgy is something toward which the Church always directs her activity. "Summit" language points in the direction of telos and purpose. From this perspective, everything that the Church does culminates in the celebration of the liturgy. Here we can see that the Church uses liturgy on the second level of Welby's system of 'meaning'—the intention behind which signs are used. Yet *SC* also notes that the liturgy is the "font" or source of the Church's power. Before exploring what the "font of the Church's power" might mean, it is first important to clarify what the Council means by "Church" since "Church" can refer to any number of possible people or groups of people.⁹⁷

In *LG*, the Council spends a significant amount of time and energy arguing for the concept of the Church as the "people of God." For the Council, "Church" refers to a very wide group of people, and thus employs a widely expansive view of Church. *LG* remarks, "All men are called to belong to the new people of God...though there are many nations, there is but one people of God."⁹⁸ The Council also notes that it "wishes to turn its attention firstly to the

⁹⁴ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* §10. Hereafter *SC*.

⁹⁵ *SC* III.C.

⁹⁶ *Lumen Gentium* §11. Hereafter *LG*.

⁹⁷ Of course it is not possible to give an exhaustive definition.

⁹⁸ *LG* §13.

Catholic faithful” and that it will use Scripture and Tradition to teach the Church.⁹⁹ Here, the Council singles out the faithful and gives them priority not only in the document, but in the makeup of what it is to be Church. *LG* is careful to observe that “For the nurturing and the constant growth of the People of God, Christ the Lord instituted *in his Church* a variety of ministries, which work for the good of the whole body.”¹⁰⁰ This observation clarifies the role of the hierarchy and the ministries *within* the Church as serving the People of God, not above it.

In Chapter IV, On the Laity, *LG* notes that “Everything that has been said above concerning the People of God is intended for the laity, religious and clergy alike” thus constituting the people of God as lay, vowed, and ordained.¹⁰¹ In the same chapter, *LG* describes the lay apostolate, which is “a participation in the salvific mission of the Church itself” and is a participation to which “all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord Himself.”¹⁰² This is an apostolate to which all the Baptized are called, and “in virtue of the very gifts bestowed upon [them], is at the same time a witness and a living instrument of the mission of the Church itself.”¹⁰³ Thus, the laity are missionaries of the Church in the world, who are called to live lives which are of service to the Gospel.

These two chapters from *LG* point to two very significant insights about how Christians are to consider Church. First, the Church is an extremely large group of people, gathered by the Spirit, and constituted together as the Body of Christ through their Baptism and nourished through the Sacraments. Church is not fundamentally the hierarchy or the ministries established within it, but the people. Second, after clarifying the role of the ministers, the Council notes that

⁹⁹ *LG* §14.

¹⁰⁰ *LG* §18. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰¹ *LG* §30.

¹⁰² *LG* §33.

¹⁰³ *LG* §33.

the laity have a significant apostolate which has been given to them by Christ himself. They have an indispensable role to play in the world and in the unfolding of God's plan in it. From this perspective, we can return to *SC*'s comment that the liturgy is the "font of the Church's power." Thus, the liturgy is a source of the people's power which is to be exercised for the purpose of the apostolate for which they have been commissioned by Christ. The "soul of [that] apostolate" is "charity toward God and man" which is communicated through the sacraments.¹⁰⁴

In *SC*'s third chapter, "The Reform of the Sacred Liturgy," the Council lays out general guidelines and norms for the reform that it has called for. These norms are grouped into several categories: general norms, norms derived from the liturgy's hierarchic and communal nature, from its didactic and pastoral nature, its adaptation to various cultures and traditions, for its promotion in diocesan and parish life, and the promotion of pastoral-liturgical action. Here, it is the didactic nature of the liturgy which is important to examine.

SC observes that "the sacred liturgy is above all things the worship of the divine Majesty, it likewise contains much instruction for the faithful."¹⁰⁵ This observation is related to the conclusions from the nature of the Church and her power. If the liturgy is indeed the source of the Church's power, then it makes sense that the liturgy would contain not only the graces necessary for building up that power, but also instruction on how to use it. It is in this section on the didactic nature of the liturgy that the Council includes the famous lines about the need for a "noble simplicity" regarding liturgical rites that are "within the people's powers of comprehension, and normally should not require much explanation," the exhortation for more reading from sacred scripture, and the wider approval of the use of the vernacular in liturgical

¹⁰⁴ *LG* §33.

¹⁰⁵ *SC* §33.

celebrations.¹⁰⁶ All of these norms point toward the development of liturgical rites that are more accessible to the people of God—the ones for whom the liturgy is celebrated, and the ones who need to draw power from it to exercise their apostolate.

A final point to make here is to observe that the liturgy itself ends with an exhortation (albeit optional) to leave and accomplish the task for which they have been baptized. In the Rite of Dismissal, the priest or deacon has four options at his disposal: “Go forth, the Mass is ended”; “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord”; “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life”; and simply, “Go in peace.”¹⁰⁷ All four options have the imperative, “Go” as a part of their formula. More than a simple reminder that it is time to leave, this word echoes the exhortation of the Lord in Matthew 28:19, “Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations,” and Mark 16:15, “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature” among many other places where Jesus instructs people to go. The second and third options have deep connections to the nature of the Church and the lay apostolate to which the People of God are called: announcing the Gospel of the Lord, and glorifying the Lord by one’s life. As the liturgy ends, the people are reminded of their vocation and exhorted to be faithful to it not merely in words, but in their actions.

From these three points—*LG* and *SC*’s understandings of liturgy and church, the didactic nature of the liturgy, and the way in which liturgy is concluded—it is clear that liturgical celebration, after the priority given to the worship of God, has the formation, exhortation, and inspiration of the people of God as its focus. Given this understanding of what the liturgy is and what it is supposed to do, it makes sense that the study of liturgy would need to consider the people and the import or ‘significance’ that it plays on their lives. If liturgy is indeed the source of the people’s power to exercise their apostolate, then it must have some effect in them and on

¹⁰⁶ *SC* §§34, 35.1, and 36.2.

¹⁰⁷ *The Roman Missal* §144.

their lives. The signs that make up liturgical rites are used so that hearts are moved, and lives are changed. Thus, in order for liturgy to be successful in doing what the Church believes it is doing when it celebrates liturgy, liturgy must have some observable effect in the way that the people who attend it leave. If people's hearts are not changed when "the Mass is ended" by the signs used in the liturgy, is there any hope for them to announce, give glory by their lives, or even go in peace? From this standpoint, it is clear that signification is not only an appropriate tool to help shape methodology in liturgical theology, but might be an essential one for the good of the life of the Church and her mission in the world.

In this chapter, we have seen the way that Victoria Welby frames the question of meaning through her proposed discipline of signification. By engaging both the ambiguity and precision present in signs through the progressive levels of 'sense,' 'meaning,' and 'significance,' Welby believes that signifying processes and human life more generally will be made richer, and that the ultimate value of signs can be explored and embraced. We have also seen that even though as yet no liturgical theologian has used Welby's system, it is both useful and appropriate as a method for doing liturgical theology. From here, we turn our attention to three influential liturgical theologians who have all used some variety of structuralism in their explorations of the liturgy. From there, we will be able to evaluate the structuralist approach to liturgy according to Welby's framework.

Chapter 2: Structuralist Methods and Significal Analysis

With Welby's architecture in mind, we now turn our attention to three influential liturgical theologians of the twentieth century: Alexander Schmemmann, Robert Taft, and Aidan Kavanagh.¹⁰⁸ As mentioned in the Introduction, we focus on these three not only because they loom large over the discussion of liturgical theology generally, but because their insights about the deep structures behind liturgical acts are an important methodological move which not only points to a particular approach to "meaning," but also will eventually help see how their work fits in the Welbian framework. The first part of this chapter will be an exposition of their structuralist approaches to liturgical theology. In Schmemmann, we see his insistence on uncovering the "Ordo," or the logical thread that runs through the wide diversity of liturgical practices to understand liturgical meaning. In Taft, we see a desire to locate the deep structures that underpin liturgical acts so as to understand how they work. In Kavanagh, we see how the movement between structures in one liturgical act to another provides evidence for the presence of the Holy Spirit in the worshipping community in what he calls *theologia prima*.

Unfortunately, none of these three authors explicitly articulates his understanding of meaning. Therefore, we have to attempt to extract their understandings from their methodology. In other words, *how* they have chosen to look at liturgy can betray the understanding of meaning (i.e. Kelleher's "nature of the unknown") out of which they are working. In the second part of this chapter, we will attempt to describe the implicit understanding of "meaning" that is at work in these theologians' approaches to liturgy based in the exposition of their methodology outlined in the first part of the chapter.

¹⁰⁸ Taft himself recalls that Michael Aune refers to the "Schmemmann-Kavanagh-Fagerberg-Lathrop line of liturgical theology," and notes that some would like to put Taft himself in that category. See Robert Taft, Robert Taft, "Mrs. Murphy Goes to Moscow: Kavanagh, Schmemmann, and 'The Byzantine Synthesis,'" *Worship* 80 no. 5 (September 2011): 387.

Kavanagh's contribution provides an opportunity to reflect on a significant question that arises regarding the primary experience of liturgy (Kavanagh's *theologia prima*) and secondary theological reflection on it. In the last section of this chapter, we will explore how Kavanagh's insights raise important questions about the nature of liturgical theology in his primary sense, and what methodologies in the secondary sense are capable of doing.

I. Structuralist Theologians¹⁰⁹

Alexander Schmemmann: Ordo

In the introduction to his *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, Schmemmann addresses the question of “task and method of liturgical theology” by looking to the history of the field of liturgical theology.¹¹⁰ By tracing the development of liturgical theology as a field, he prepares his readers for the new space which he opens up in the remainder of the book. In the opening paragraph he notes that “liturgical theology, has appeared comparatively recently within the system of theological disciplines.”¹¹¹ This is not to say that no one had studied the liturgy in any capacity until relatively recently, but that it is only recently that the word “theology” in any kind of meaningful way can be applied to that study. In fact, he notes that most attempts at interpreting liturgy, particularly by the “school” theologians, represented a “rupture between theological study and liturgical experiences” which he considers a “chronic disease.”¹¹² He believes that in his own Eastern tradition's adopting of Western categories to study the liturgy, it has “been cut off from one of its most vital, most natural roots—from the liturgical tradition.”¹¹³ In its nascent form, the study of liturgy was primarily, if not exclusively kept within the realm of

¹⁰⁹ It should go without saying, but it is impossible to undertake a comprehensive study of the contributions of these theologians to the field of liturgical theology. Instead, my goal here is to show how each of them employs a “structuralist” methodology in their approaches to liturgical theology.

¹¹⁰ Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), 9.

¹¹¹ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 9.

¹¹² Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 10.

¹¹³ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 10.

the discipline known as liturgics. This field employed “a more or less detailed practical study of ecclesiastical rites, combined with certain symbolical explanations of ceremonies and ornaments. Liturgical study of this kind, known in the West as the study of ‘rubrics,’ answers the question how: how worship is to be carried out according to the rules, i.e. in accordance with the prescriptions of the rubrics and canons.”¹¹⁴ Liturgics was by and large “‘supplementary’ or ‘practical’” which was “an applied science of interest for the most part to the clergy, but not to theologians.”¹¹⁵

From this first, practical stage of development, the discipline began to embrace the “historical and archaeological” study of the history of liturgy, which for Schmemmann was an “enormous” development in the field, even though it was not yet in the realm of theology properly speaking.¹¹⁶ He believes that it “was natural that without an explanation of [liturgy’s] historical development there could be no objective understanding of the real nature of worship...”¹¹⁷ This historical contextualization was a necessary step for the “growth of liturgics into a genuinely theological discipline.”¹¹⁸

After these two propaedeutic periods of development, the liturgical revival after the First World War began to lead theologians “directly to the question of liturgical theology.”¹¹⁹ This movement did not itself *do* liturgical theology, since it was “directed toward the practical revival of Church life, by giving worship its real place and meaning.”¹²⁰ But without this focus on liturgy and worship in the life of the Church, Schmemmann believes that any deeper theological

¹¹⁴ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 9.

¹¹⁵ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 9-10.

¹¹⁶ Schmemmann, *Introduction* 12.

¹¹⁷ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 12.

¹¹⁸ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 12. It is in this phase of development where we encounter works like E.G. Cuthbert F. Atchley’s *A History of the Use of Incense in Divine Worship* (London: Longmans & Green, 1909).

¹¹⁹ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 13.

¹²⁰ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 13.

analysis would not have been possible. For Schmemmann, “Historical liturgics establishes the structures and their development, liturgical theology discovers their meaning: such is the general methodological principle of the task.”¹²¹

After these three stages of development, liturgical theology properly so-called could begin in earnest. This liturgical theology must have as its aim, “the elucidation of [worship’s] theological meaning.”¹²² He explains what this aim entails:

Therefore, the task of liturgical theology consists in giving a theological basis to the explanation of worship and the whole liturgical tradition of the Church. This means, first, to find and define the concepts and categories which are capable of expressing as fully as possible the essential nature of the liturgical experience of the Church; second to connect these ideas with that system of concepts which theology uses to expound the faith and doctrine of the Church; and third, to present the separate data of liturgical experience as a connected whole...¹²³

It is worth noting that at no point in this opening chapter does Schmemmann shun any of the prior phases in the development of liturgical theology. He does not maintain, for example, that rubrics ought to be ignored in favor of some kind of grander theological analysis. He highly respects the historical phase, and even draws on its fruits as he moves through his discussion of the problem, origin, development, and synthesis of the Church’s ‘Ordo.’ He notes that “in Liturgical Theology this historical basis is still but a basis, not an end in itself (as it was for the ‘historical liturgiology’ which we mentioned above.) The final goal here is precisely the *theory of church worship*. This theory, by its very nature, rests upon the foundation established by historical research and analysis.”¹²⁴ Nor does he believe that theology ought to take the place of the Church’s worship. He wants “to make the liturgical experience of the Church again one of the life-giving sources of the knowledge of God. What is needed more than anything else is an

¹²¹ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 22.

¹²² Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 16.

¹²³ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 17.

¹²⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, “Liturgical Theology: Its Method and Task,” *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (October 1957), 22. Emphasis original.

entrance into the life of worship, into life in the rhythm of worship. What is needed is not so much the intellectual apprehension of worship as its apprehension through experience and prayer.”¹²⁵

Schememann’s historical survey is not simply a rehearsing of historical data, but gives insight into the method that those who study liturgy employ. We have seen that by looking at the method, we can uncover a sense of what the investigator thinks meaning means. For the rubricists, whose locus of study are the details of performing the liturgy, liturgy’s meaning is found in the meticulous adherence of the liturgical ceremony to the prescriptions set down in the liturgical books. For the historians, liturgy’s meaning is located in the historical roots of the various liturgical ceremonies. A symbol’s meaning is discovered by looking at its original meaning and how that meaning develops through history. In both cases, it is important to note that meaning is located somewhere outside the actual celebration of the liturgy—either in the prescriptive instructions laid down in rubrics; or in the past—the historical development of liturgy and its component rites and symbols.

Schememann’s historical survey lays the foundation for him to begin thinking about liturgical meaning in a new way: within the actual celebration of liturgy. Methodologically, he believes that “liturgical theology must always draw its conclusions from the concrete data of the living tradition of worship, from the liturgical facts.”¹²⁶ This approach is an attempt at getting behind the symbols, rites, texts, and all of the various actions and gestures that make up any individual rite to discover the deeper structures at work in the Church’s worship on a broader basis. For Schememann, liturgical theology deals “primarily with *liturgical structures*. This notion

¹²⁵ Schememann, *Introduction*, 23

¹²⁶ Schememann, *Introduction*, 40.

of structure is essential. We described it above as the form of the frame that keeps all the elements of worship together, that relates them to each other in the ‘Ordo.’”¹²⁷

For Schmemmann, Ordo, structure, and shape (citing Gregory Dix) all refer to “worship as a whole, i.e. the interrelatedness of all the individual services and of each liturgical unit in particular.”¹²⁸ Structure or shape can be seen as a kind of thread that is woven among every aspect of the church’s worship and gives it “a consistent theological interpretation and free[s] it from arbitrary symbolic interpretations.”¹²⁹ The details of individual acts of worship, which have been codified in rubrics, can “decode” the tradition and reveal inherent theological meaning. These details “can reveal something which was at one time expressed by the Church in the language of worship but which we have forgotten how to apprehend directly.”¹³⁰

In pointing to this structural thread running through all of the Church’s worship, Schmemmann is able to succinctly and clearly outline his vision of the task and goal of liturgical theology:

From the establishment and interpretation of the basic structures of worship to an explanation of every possible element, and then to an orderly theological synthesis of all this data—such is the method which liturgical theology uses to carry out its task, to translate what is expressed by the language of worship—its structures, its ceremonies, its texts and its whole ‘spirit’—into the language of theology, to make the liturgical experience of the Church again one of the life-giving sources of the knowledge of God.¹³¹

Liturgical theologians must seek out what he calls “the living norm or ‘logos’ of worship as a whole within what is accidental and temporary...”¹³² Logos is a particularly helpful word here because it highlights the valences of “logic” or “shape” that the original Greek word carries, as opposed to merely “study of” as it is commonly deployed. For Schmemmann, this logos is kind

¹²⁷ Schmemmann, “Liturgical Theology: Its Task and Method,” 22. Emphasis original.

¹²⁸ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 22.

¹²⁹ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 22.

¹³⁰ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 22.

¹³¹ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 23.

¹³² Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 39.

of the “philosophy” of worship—“It is the elucidation of those principles and premises upon which all the regulations contained within it are founded.”¹³³ Only after the Ordo is teased out from the liturgical facts and its origin and development (history) have been analyzed can the liturgical theologian attempt to comment on “the meaning of the Ordo, its theological content as the *lex orandi* of the Church, as something inseparable from this *lex orandi*.”¹³⁴

One final note regarding Schmemmann’s project is essential. He has stated that the goal of “Liturgical theology, as the name itself implies, is *the study of the theological meaning of Divine Worship*,”¹³⁵ he notes that “liturgical theology discovers [structures’] *meaning*: such is the general methodological principle of the task;”¹³⁶ and that liturgical theology has “the elucidation of [worship’s] theological *meaning*”¹³⁷ as its main task. Schmemmann is consistent in his belief that the ultimate goal of liturgical theology indeed concerns meaning, and that meaning is best grasped through the examination of structures.

Robert Taft, S.J.: Deep Structures

In his important article, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” Robert Taft is careful to observe that he is merely reflecting on the methods he has “found fruitful” in his work.¹³⁸ He is not attempting to “propose *the* method for studying liturgy, nor even *an* organic, complete methodology.”¹³⁹ Thus, while he does explore methodological concerns, it is unfair to consider what he is doing here a systematic approach to

¹³³ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 39.

¹³⁴ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 40. Schmemmann of course does not leave his readers in the lurch about what the content of the Ordo actually is. Since my goal here is to look at methodological concerns regarding liturgical theology vis-à-vis meaning, the content of his conclusions is not necessary to explain here.

¹³⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, “Liturgical Theology: Its Method and Task,” 20. Emphasis original.

¹³⁶ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 22. Emphasis added.

¹³⁷ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, 14. Emphasis added.

¹³⁸ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” *Worship* 52, no. 4 (July 1978), 314.

¹³⁹ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 314.

method in liturgical theology. Yet, his observations are extremely important, and help shape the work of later theologians like Kavanagh.

Taft does not want his method to be too tightly equated with the philosophical school of structuralism, and notes that “[i]t owes nothing genetically to the structuralist school,” even though it does borrow significant elements from it.¹⁴⁰ Taft’s method, like structuralism is fundamentally comparative. The comparative method, whether liturgical or philosophical, is a way of “rendering intelligible through systematizing.”¹⁴¹ For structuralists and Taft, systems are the bedrock which ground intelligent communication in any discipline. He observes: “There is no communication without clarity, no clarity without understanding, no understanding without organization—and organization means system.”¹⁴² The comparative method is helpful because it looks at a wide variety of seemingly varied examples—Taft cites as an example Lévi-Strauss’s observations about the “surface structures” in language being varied—and attempts to find the “deep structure” in common among them. In structuralism, “commonality is the basis of all generalization, and the prerequisite of all system.”¹⁴³ Structure in liturgy, like Lévi-Straussian structuralism, looks for deep structures which can aid the practitioner in “reconstruct[ing] the whole from its remaining fragments; [and] the ability to reconstruct later from earlier stages of development.”¹⁴⁴

The major difference for Taft between his project and that of the structuralist school is that where “the structuralist is seeking meaning; I am seeking primarily the structure itself.”¹⁴⁵ It is not that Taft is uninterested by meaning, though we will see that he is hesitant to embrace a

¹⁴⁰ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 314.

¹⁴¹ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 315.

¹⁴² Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 315.

¹⁴³ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 315.

¹⁴⁴ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 315.

¹⁴⁵ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 315.

certain understanding of liturgical meaning. However, Taft believes that uncovering the structure must happen “before relating it to other disciplines such as history, sociology—or even theology. These disciplines are essential for explaining the hows and the whys, but prior structural analysis is necessary to recover the what.”¹⁴⁶ The goal of uncovering the deep structure is ultimately to provide a “model that reveals how the object ‘works.’”¹⁴⁷ The method that Taft employs to explore liturgical theology is structural, and “it is within the structure of liturgy that one can find the commonalities of every evolving liturgy, and it is the structure to which the liturgical theologian must pay heed”¹⁴⁸ because “structure outlives meaning. Elements are preserved even when their meaning is lost...or when they have become detached from their original limited place...acquiring new and broader meanings.”¹⁴⁹ Taft also notes “the importance of *seeking structure rather than meaning*, as meaning changes over time.”¹⁵⁰ Gilgannon also notes that Taft, following Schmemmann as we have seen, offers a critique of Scholastic theology’s approach to liturgy which “sought meaning over structure.”¹⁵¹

Taft gives some insight into why history is a necessary step for liturgics’ development into theology. He draws on the then-recent work of “philosophers” who have shown that even sciences have histories and that “so-called ‘scientific laws’ are hypothetical constructs, products of the human mind.”¹⁵² Thus, these laws and history itself are “*perceived structures* that change...because perception does.”¹⁵³ For Taft, history is not “events, but events that have

¹⁴⁶ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 316.

¹⁴⁷ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 316.

¹⁴⁸ Michelle Gilgannon, “Liturgical Theology of Aidan Kavanagh, OSB” (PhD diss., Duquesne University, 2011), 73.

¹⁴⁹ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 315.

¹⁵⁰ Gilgannon, “Liturgical Theology of Aidan Kavanagh, OSB,” 73. Emphasis added.

¹⁵¹ Gilgannon, “Liturgical Theology of Aidan Kavanagh, OSB,” 74.

¹⁵² Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 317.

¹⁵³ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 317. Emphasis original.

become ideas—and *ideas are of the present.*”¹⁵⁴ Thus history is not the study of the past, but rather the study of present ideas about the past. Liturgical history then is likewise not simply the story of the past, but the present perception of that story. Liturgical history deals with “tradition, which is a *genetic vision of the present*... And the purpose of this history is not to recover the past (which is impossible), much less to imitate it (which would be fatuous), but to *understand liturgy* which, because it has a history, can only be understood in motion, just as the only way to understand a top is to spin it.”¹⁵⁵ For Taft, exploration of liturgical history is not “to reach the most temporally remote recoverable forms and then hold them up for imitation but, once again, understanding.”¹⁵⁶ This understanding is always in the present and can teach us in the present about liturgy’s dynamism, growth, and change—an invaluable lesson for one seeking to know how liturgy works.¹⁵⁷

Aidan Kavanagh: Theologia Prima

Even though our focus here is on the structuralism that undergirds the liturgical theology of Aidan Kavanagh, it is important to situate his particular approach to structuralism in context so as to understand it more clearly. One cannot undertake a discussion of Kavanagh’s approach to structuralism without recourse to his distinction between primary and secondary theology.

In *On Liturgical Theology*, Kavanagh begins the second half of the book with a clarification of the two terms that make up its title, since both terms have become overused and imprecise. This strategy of defining terms helps move Kavanagh away from the fraught definition of liturgical theology that we saw Schmemmann use in the Introduction of the present thesis and toward a much more precise one. Kavanagh notes that liturgy usually comes to be

¹⁵⁴ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 317. Emphasis added.

¹⁵⁵ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 318. Emphasis original.

¹⁵⁶ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 324.

¹⁵⁷ Taft, “The Structural Analysis of Liturgical Units: An Essay in Methodology,” 324.

understood as “almost any ceremonialized human gathering, sacred or secular,” yet the understanding of liturgy on which his argument and book turns is much different. He notes that Urban Holmes said “that [good] liturgy leads regularly to the edge of chaos, and that from this regular flirt with doom comes a theology different from any other.”¹⁵⁸ For Kavanagh, the kind of “theology” he is trying to describe is not simply “any sort of religious discourse,” but rather something that arises from that edge of chaos and the regular flirting with doom which make up good liturgy.¹⁵⁹ This theology, however, is not the “very first result of an assembly’s being brought by liturgical experience to the edge of chaos.” Instead, what first happens is a “deep change in the very lives of those who participate in the liturgical act.”¹⁶⁰ This internal and communal change will shape the character of the next liturgical act, and how it unfolds in the congregation. Liturgy is a continual process of moving from one liturgical act to another due to the prompting of the Spirit which changes the lives of those who undertake them. This process echoes Hegel’s thesis—antithesis—synthesis model of dialectics: “the thesis is the assembly gathered in liturgy; the antithesis is the changed condition caused by the liturgy; the synthesis is the adjustment to the change.”¹⁶¹ The *sine qua non* of this model is that the liturgy is indeed “good”: that it brings the assembly to the edge of chaos in some significant way. Taken in this dialectical way, each liturgical act properly so-called is both a result of and then a response to an encounter with the living God at this edge of chaos.

None of Kavanagh’s work makes any sense (or any difference for that matter) without fully grasping this particular, nuanced, and perhaps (at the time) unique understanding of liturgical theology. His project is not to understand the liturgy in theological terms, but to try

¹⁵⁸ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1984), 73.

¹⁵⁹ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 73.

¹⁶⁰ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 73.

¹⁶¹ Gilgannon, “Liturgical Theology of Aidan Kavanagh, OSB,” 51.

reach out and grasp the Spirit as it moves throughout liturgical action, as impossible as that may be.¹⁶² Because this different understanding of liturgy is so key to understanding Kavanagh's project, David Fagerberg prefers not to translate the Greek word *leitourgia* when referring to the technical definition of liturgy that Kavanagh has offered. He notes "while nearly all worship services have some sort of liturgy (i.e., function according to a more or less loosely defined protocol), not all worship services could be characterized as *leitourgia*."¹⁶³ *Leitourgia* is a privileged kind of liturgy—one which knows and experiences that "an encounter with God is the source for the Church's existence and thinking, and thus the ontological condition for any such development."¹⁶⁴ In *leitourgia*, "One does more than worship...one does the world as it was meant to be done (Kavanagh) in behavior that is eschatological and cosmological (Schmemmann)."¹⁶⁵

Thus, for Kavanagh and Fagerberg, "liturgical theology" is not how the liturgy talks about God, but rather tracing God's pattern of movement (i.e. God's 'logic') throughout *leitourgia*: "Liturgical theology materializes upon the encounter with the Holy One...God shapes the community in liturgical encounter, and the community makes theological adjustment to this encounter, which settles into ritual form. Only then can the analyst begin dusting the ritual for God's fingerprints."¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Given the fact that Kavanagh is not interested in a second-level reflection on the theological meaning of the liturgy, it might have been helpful to try to coin a new term to grasp the sense he is trying to convey. Perhaps something like "Theo-phenomena" gets closer to what he is trying to argue. To this point, Kavanagh himself even notes: "For many this puts us on strange ground indeed, for since the high Middle Ages with the advent of the university and of scientific method, we have become accustomed to the notion that theology is something done in academies out of books by elites with degrees producing theologies of this and that...to argue with minds accustomed to thinking of theology in such a manner...is to argue against the grain." *On Liturgical Theology*, 74-75.

¹⁶³ David Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004), 111.

¹⁶⁴ Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 113.

¹⁶⁵ Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 114.

¹⁶⁶ Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 9.

Fagerberg builds on Kavanagh as well as Paul Evdokimov when he observes that “Liturgy is living in that eternal circulation of love within the Trinity...In the liturgy God presents Himself to be loved, and by loving we know Him and knowing the Trinity is what Athanasius simply called ‘theology.’”¹⁶⁷ This kind of theology that emerges is not “a new species of theology among others,” but rather “it is theology being born...what tradition has called *theologia prima*.”¹⁶⁸ All of the theology that immediately comes to mind is, for Kavanagh, “secondary and derivative.”¹⁶⁹ *Theologia prima* is very difficult to observe in action, and by nature cannot be reflected upon, lest it become secondary. Following on this insight, Fagerberg “would like to primarily call by the name ‘liturgist’ the one who commits liturgy, and only secondarily the one who studies or directs it.”¹⁷⁰

Since here Kavanagh is not interested in the historical development of liturgical acts, he takes for granted the present reality of the plurality and diversity of liturgical acts present in Christian worship. He picks up the same vein of critique of the so-called liturgical theology of the Middle Ages seen in Taft and adds that these “commentators attended more to the ‘symbolic’ meaning of the various liturgical units, and their interpretations often did violence to structure.”¹⁷¹ Here is his entry point into taking up the mantle of Schmemmann and Taft with regard to structure. He notes that on the surface level (following Lévi-Strauss) these liturgical acts can look quite different or even quite similar, but it “takes greater discipline, however, to go deeper into the surface structure...it takes an even greater degree of discipline, which comes only

¹⁶⁷ Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 31-32.

¹⁶⁸ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 75, 74.

¹⁶⁹ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 75.

¹⁷⁰ Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 8.

¹⁷¹ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 81.

with years of constant effort, before one can move beneath the surface into the deep structure of a language, of a mythic corpus, or of a given liturgical system.”¹⁷²

Thus Kavanagh posits a very interesting and evocative analogy from the field of particle physics. He observes that physicists detect atomic particles not through direct observation of the particles themselves, but by being able to observe the effects of their passage through some kind of medium. For Kavanagh, theology in its purest form is like the atomic particle: untraceable through direct, immediate observation and traceable only by seeing its effects, since once one stops to consider it, the moment has passed.¹⁷³ Like Taft, Kavanagh is particularly careful not to speak of liturgy in any kind of generality, “for liturgy in general is a convenient abstraction, a category we use to signal vastly differentiated sets of motives, acts, and patterns... The fact is that liturgy in general does not exist in the real order. It is a mental construct...”¹⁷⁴ Later on he explicitly invokes Taft when he observes that “[o]ne cannot spin a top in general, but only in specific.”¹⁷⁵

Discovery of the deep structures of liturgy uncovers the seams between structural acts, for example, Introductory Rites cease and becomes Penitential Rite; Liturgy of the Word becomes Liturgy of the Eucharist; and so on. Kavanagh’s thesis is that these seams between the structures represent the moments where the Church has recognized the movement of the Spirit in her midst and has prompted her to respond in a new way. Thus, a structural analysis of a liturgical act is like the physicist’s medium where he cannot see the particles as they move, but only their “footprints.” For Kavanagh, structural units are the liturgical footprints of the Spirit.

¹⁷² Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 80.

¹⁷³ It might be interesting to attempt to draw out this analogy even more. Namely, particle physicists note that particles cannot be directly observed without in some way altering them. Perhaps by attempting to *directly* observe *theologia* in action, the observer would change its nature.

¹⁷⁴ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 79.

¹⁷⁵ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 132.

As one rite becomes another, we witness a veering off of the Spirit into a new direction in the Church gathered to worship, and these structural units provide a hindsight roadmap of where the Spirit has traveled throughout the liturgy.¹⁷⁶ In recognizing where hearts are moved to pray (the deep ‘theological’ structures), we see effects of the Spirit, not unlike the leaves of a tree fluttering in the summer breeze.

For Kavanagh, the violence done to the structure of liturgy through the excessive focus on interpretations is not simply unfortunate, but leads “to a misinterpretation in the definition of *orthodoxia*” away from ‘right worship’ (which its etymology denotes) and toward ‘correct doctrine.’¹⁷⁷ Thus, symbolic meanings—teachings *about* liturgical structures—replace the structures themselves. As such, “[r]ight worship was ceasing to be the ontological condition of theology, of the proper understanding of the proclaimed Word of God, becoming instead a *locus theologicus* in service to correct belief and detaching by church officials and secondary theologians, who were using the liturgy as a quarry for stone to set into arguments shaped by increasingly rigorous methodologies worked out in the academe.”¹⁷⁸

Through the investigation of liturgical structures, on the other hand, the liturgical theologian is “more than just seeking what the given liturgical act ‘means.’...[but] to seek how liturgy ‘works’ in and from its ecclesial context, and how all liturgical acts and all ecclesial contexts work on each other.”¹⁷⁹ In any given liturgical act, what results “is not only ‘meaning,’ but an ecclesial transaction with reality, a transaction whose ramifications escape over the

¹⁷⁶ This kind of analysis can work not only within these larger liturgical acts, but also within the smaller acts that make up each act. Perhaps the same kind of movement of the Spirit can be traced even from word to word within the prayer of a particular act within the context of a larger rite.

¹⁷⁷ Gilgannon, 74. C.f. Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 81-82.

¹⁷⁸ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 82.

¹⁷⁹ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 87.

horizon of the present, beyond the act itself, to overflow even the confines of the local assembly into universality.”¹⁸⁰

Here we see a dissimilarity between the projects of Taft and Kavanagh. Namely, Taft seeks “primarily the structure itself,” where Kavanagh acknowledges that meaning is a component of the investigation of liturgical structures, but that meaning cannot be “attended to...apart from structural analysis” since “[m]eaning is notoriously malleable according to *a priori* which are often hidden.”¹⁸¹ He is careful to observe that “our modern quest for meaning is a riskier and more inconclusive business than we usually think it is, especially when we equate what something means with the analytical or interpretative process by which a meaning we can recognize is distilled.”¹⁸² In describing meaning in this way, Kavanagh shows a great sensitivity to the problem of the question of meaning, and a more nuanced approach to meaning than either Schmemmann or Taft put forth. Where Schmemmann uses the word “meaning” without any real sense of how he uses it, and Taft seems to avoid it altogether, Kavanagh approaches meaning with an appreciation for the richness and complexity that it entails.

II. Structuralism and Meaning

With this analysis of structuralism in mind, we can turn our attention to two questions regarding structuralism that have surfaced. The first question is how structuralism as a method of secondary theological reflection considers the question of meaning. In other words: how structuralism thinks about the nature of meaning. To do so, we must look at structuralism on its own terms to see if we can extract an understanding of meaning from the methodology of looking into liturgical structures. Second, it is helpful to see whether Welby’s framework of

¹⁸⁰ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 88.

¹⁸¹ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 133.

¹⁸² Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 127.

meaning has anything to say about the liturgical theology as *theologia prima*, or whether it is more properly used at the level of secondary theological reflection.

Structuralism and Meaning

When the understanding of “meaning” is explicitly articulated, as we have attempted to do in the first chapter, its role in shaping methodology can be deduced rather simply. However, where the nature of “meaning” remains implicit, as in the case of the three theologians explored above, there is a missing piece of the puzzle. Yet, regardless of whether the nature of the unknown is explicitly articulated or implicitly assumed, it will shape the way researchers approach their studies. In Schmemmann, Taft, and Kavanagh, even though the nature of meaning is not explicitly described, each of them is working out of some understanding of meaning.

Here, instead of deducing methodology from the nature of meaning, one must rather start with the methodologies and conclusions and reason toward their understanding of meaning by means of induction. As with all attempts of inductive reasoning, in attempting to make explicit something which someone has left implicit, we must remain cautious about the firmness of our conclusions. This attempt must have a further caution in that I am only analyzing the method and not the entire body of work of these three theologians. Therefore here we will be unable to come to any kind of final word on the nature of meaning employed by Schmemmann, Taft, and Kavanagh. Instead, since we will only be able to see general movements, our present study can only be a beginning of understanding how they approach meaning.

The first place to look for evidence of this approach is their stated area of focus: the deep structures that undergird liturgical acts. Structuralists desire to move away from merely describing liturgical acts at the surface level and move deeper into the fabric of liturgical structures themselves. The surface-level structures can change, adapt, be translated into new languages, rites, and even different Christian denominations. Yet below the surface, at the

deepest level of liturgy, God is at work. Again, this point is not as obvious as it seems, particularly in light of Welby's consideration of signifying processes. Schmemmann, Taft, and Kavanagh all keep their focus singularly on liturgical acts themselves and the deep structures behind them. By focusing their attention on liturgical acts, they seem to suggest that whatever meaning is, it is located *within* the signs themselves. This approach to meaning is one that embraces a dyadic view of the signifying process, namely, that every sign "consist[s] in *two parts*: the signifier and that which it signifies—the familiar paradigm of materiality and intelligibility."¹⁸³ Graham Hughes includes all dyadic ways of considering meaning under the umbrella of a Saussurean approach.¹⁸⁴ He notes that in this system of signifying, "codification" is the "decisive semiotic mechanism: the sign-producer encodes meanings . . . which the sign-recipient subsequently decodes."¹⁸⁵

The three theologians treated above are too nuanced and too careful in their thinking to believe that this simplistic view of sign-production is indeed what is happening in the liturgy. All three resist any kind of "decodification" of meaning that a Saussurean approach to signs would entail, pushing back against the claim that they are seeking meaning at all. Schmemmann, Taft,

¹⁸³ Graham Hughes, *Worship as Meaning: A Liturgical Theology for Late Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 120. Hughes's study is a very interesting approach to the question of meaning in which he engages the work of C.S. Peirce to investigate the question of meaning. My own introduction to Welby stems from reading Hughes's book and further researching the semiotics of Peirce. The middle section of the book is a thorough exposition and analysis of Peircian semiotics with its devotion to triadic signifying processes, or "threeness."

¹⁸⁴ Since the dyadic view is perhaps the most common way Roman Catholic theologians have addressed the question of meaning, it would certainly have its roots much earlier than Saussure himself. Its more fundamental roots are found in a correspondence view of truth where the world as experienced by a human being corresponds directly to something that exists in the natural world. This is the theory of truth that results from the Aristotelian-Thomistic view that we "come to know and express the being of things by way of processes of abstraction." John Carlson, *Understanding Our Being: Introduction to Speculative Philosophy in the Perennial Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 55. In this view, the mind abstracts what is intelligible from the matter and thus can know it, and we can see clearly the dichotomy of matter (or sign) and mind.

¹⁸⁵ Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, 120. Note that Hughes contrasts the dyadic system with the triadic system of C.S. Peirce. We have seen that Welby's system, like Peirce's is also triadic. Peirce wrote frequently with Welby, and on one occasion addressed the way that his interpretant trichotomy and Welby's trichotomy of 'sense,' 'meaning,' and 'significance' are attempting to accomplish a similar goal. See Peirce's letter to Welby, reproduced in Petrilli, *Signifying and Understanding*, 293.

and Kavanagh are right to resist the decodification model of meaning, and rightly sense something much more important going on than liturgy simply being what Peirce calls a “tube for communication.”¹⁸⁶ They recognize that the first two stages (rubrics and historical analysis) of Schmemmann’s history of liturgical theology both remain focused on decoding meaning that is either found through strict adherence to rubrics or meaning that is hidden in the historical development of the rites.

Theologia Prima and Welby’s Significs

As Kavanagh understands it, *theologia prima* is the experience of liturgy as it is happening by those who are engaged in the liturgical acts. It is theological in the sense that it is an experience of the living God moving throughout the liturgical assembly and the liturgical acts. It is primary in the sense that it is the first and most significant point of contact between the assembly and God. All of the structuralists we have examined above are interested in this kind of primary experience, though it is Kavanagh who gives it the name of *theologia prima*. Secondary theological reflection is what all theologians do when they do theology. This kind of theology is theological not because it is a point of contact with the living God, but rather a systematic reflection on the experience of God. Thus, it is also secondary not only chronologically and ontologically, but also in terms of importance. The Church cannot be Church without *theologia prima*—without contact with the living God. This kind of “theology” is an experience available to and desired by all the baptized.

This distinction is important for us here because the structuralist project is simultaneously interested in both kinds of theology. Structuralism is very much interested in the experience of liturgy as *leitourgia* and thus has *theologia prima* as its first point of interest. Yet since all of

¹⁸⁶ Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, 120.

these theologians are reflecting on how *leitourgia* happens, they are actually doing secondary theological reflection. For the structuralists, the investigation into the deep structures shows *how* the experience of God (*prima*) in *leitourgia* is facilitated.

On the subject of secondary theological reflection, it is important to nuance this concept to include not only the work of professional, academic theologians who attempt to systematize, synthesize, explain, etc. the experiences had in *theologia prima*, but also the secondary reflection on *theologia prima* that worshippers do when they recognize that their participation in the Church's liturgy must have an effect on them after the liturgy has ended. Academic theologians are certainly doing secondary analysis, but so are the faithful when they recognize that they too should take, bless, break, and give their lives to others as Christ has done in the Eucharist, or that they are to "leave their gift" at the altar and reconcile with their brother, or that the water they use to shower themselves reminds them of their baptism. All are secondary to the experience had in *leitourgia*, but with two different ways they manifest themselves: one personal, the other academic.¹⁸⁷

In a certain sense, *theologia prima* is always and necessarily outside the realm of analysis of any kind since analysis is always and necessarily a secondary process after the primary experience of liturgy. Therefore any methodological considerations—structuralist, Welbian, or otherwise—must be secondary. Whether researchers probe liturgical acts for structures or ask participants in the liturgy what 'significance' the liturgical acts have for them, as I have suggested, the resulting answers are secondary theological reflection and not actually *theologia prima*. We must therefore proceed cautiously when trying to consider what *theologia prima* is, since it is a kind of elusive *Ding an Sich* of liturgical experience. To consider *theologia prima* is

¹⁸⁷ I make this point simply to show that neither primary experience nor secondary reflection are confined to the academic enterprise with no intention of downplaying the importance of the academic enterprise.

to consider what happens at the nexus of liturgical act and liturgical participant in the moment that this nexus occurs. Kavanagh's metaphor of the particles traveling through a medium is apt since to call attention to this nexus moves it from the level of experience itself into the realm of secondary reflection.

All of that being said, Kavanagh proposes the following paragraph as his understanding of what liturgy is:

...when they come to their liturgy, Christians approach not just a text, a proposition, a doctrine, an option, or a chance to grab the brass ring of grace of passing moral uplift. In their liturgy, Christians disport themselves warily with the One for whom their universe is but the snap of a finger...Christians have traditionally understood their liturgical efforts to be somehow enacting the mystery itself, locking together its divine and human agents in a graced commerce, the effective symbol of which is that communion between God and our race rooted in the union of divine and human natures in Christ Jesus...in the liturgy, God welds himself into our media of discourse...¹⁸⁸

Several points here are worth reflection. First, Kavanagh notes that since liturgy is not fundamentally a text, proposition, doctrine, or option; liturgy is not primarily an intellectual enterprise. Instead, liturgy is a disporting of oneself to God, and as such, it is not a sign-system, but an *enacting* of the mystery itself. For Kavanagh, liturgy is the place where human beings and God are wed together, in what he calls an “effective symbol.”

This word “effective” fundamentally shapes the way that any approach to liturgy must be considered, since Catholic Christians do not believe that they are engaged merely in signifying processes, but *effective* symbols—i.e. symbols that effect what they symbolize. In other words, during liturgical celebration, signs are not merely employed by sign-users to communicate with sign-engagers, but are a living participation in the mysteries that they symbolize. Kavanagh's observation resonates with the difference noted by Louis-Marie Chauvet between sign and symbol. Chauvet draws on the work of Edmond Ortigues in understanding how symbols work:

¹⁸⁸ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 119-120.

“The sign... ‘leads to something other than itself’ because it implies ‘a difference between two orders of relations... On the contrary, the symbol ‘does not lead to something of another order than itself, as does the sign, but it has the function of introducing us into an order of which itself is a part.’”¹⁸⁹ In her feminist approach to the Fourth Gospel, Sandra Schneiders provides a clear, succinct, and insightful definition of symbol: “...a symbol does not stand for something. It *is* the ‘something,’ available in sensible expression. Therefore, it is the locus, the place, of revelation and encounter, whether human or divine.”¹⁹⁰ Chauvet uses this “thick” understanding of symbol when he describes the sacraments, which “*symbolize* this indissoluble marriage” between Christ and the Church: “one can never speak of one without the other.”¹⁹¹ In each sacrament the sensible expression is a part of the reality of God’s presence to his people. Thus the classic formulation of a sacrament as “outward signs of inward grace” from Trent (following Augustine) still rings true today.¹⁹² The structuralist approach to liturgy is one that is in direct line with this kind of language and this orientation toward symbol rather than sign.

A sign in Chauvet’s technical definition is a representation in which the sign-user *intends* to convey a reality that is beyond and not an essential part of what that sign entails. For example, the sign-user who decided that the Greek letter “rho” would be the sign used for “momentum” in physics did not *intend* to use anything naturally a part of that letter which is tied in any kind of essential way to the momentum of a moving object. In Chauvet’s technical definition of symbol, the representation points to a reality in which it is already wrapped up. For example, in a kiss exchanged between lover and beloved, the kiss, while still remaining a sign of love, is a real expression of the love shared between them. Kisses are wrapped up in love by their very nature.

¹⁸⁹ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, Madeleine Beaumont, trans. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997), 75.

¹⁹⁰ Sandra Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2003), 70.

¹⁹¹ Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 86. Emphasis mine.

¹⁹² C.f. Augustine, *De Catechizandis rudibus*, Ch. 26 §50.

Since this understanding of symbol is tied to the nature of things it holds that symbols belong to the sphere of ontology. Those who advocate for this understanding of symbols recognize that there is something ontologically similar between love and a kiss, not simply a conventional similarity or a similarity agreed upon at some point in time. The same is true for the water sign used in baptism. The sign-user here has definitely chosen water *because* it has certain properties that are indeed essentially tied to the very nature of baptism itself. In this sense, baptism does not merely suggest washing with water (as rho suggests momentum), it *actually is* a washing with water.

At a certain level, we must concede that at the level of *theologia prima*, no methodology is capable of giving an adequate account of what is going on in liturgy *as it is experienced*. Even questions posed to members of the assembly will actually only supply their own secondary reflections on it. Thus at a very fundamental level in liturgy, Welby's system is as useless as any other. Since Welby is primarily interested in intellectual processes, signification is necessarily secondary. Signification is as unable to define mystical experience as any other philosophical or theological system. This kind of "consolation without prior cause" is a mystical intermingling of the soul with the divine life and if it can be spoken of at all, it will be in the language of poetry and not theological or semiotic analysis.¹⁹³ By their nature, mystical experiences are direct, but even they are not unmediated, since the one engaged in mystical experience does so through the media of space and time, which includes personal history and ecclesial context.¹⁹⁴

Liturgy is always a mediated experience. Mediated experiences like the liturgy can indeed be effective and participate in the reality they symbolize. My claim is not that the

¹⁹³ On consolation without prior cause, see *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by George Ganss, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1992), #330. The nature of this kind of commingling is perhaps one reason why Welby herself was uneasy about the subject of mysticism. See Christo Lombaard, "Mysticism and Mind in Welby's Signification," *Semiotica* 196 (2013): 365-379 for more on how Welby considers this topic.

¹⁹⁴ In Chapter 3 we will explore further this question of ecclesial context for the mediation of liturgical experience.

symbols of the liturgy must be divorced from mystical experience because they are mediated, but that the kind of mystical experience that true *leitourgia* is, is always a mediated mystical experience. Even though the liturgy is an “enacting the mystery itself,” it is a symbolic enacting—albeit “symbolic” in the thick sense described above. In other words, the kiss that two lovers share is a mediated expression of love and not love-in-itself since the latter is not possible. Recognizing the mediated nature of a kiss does not take away from the fact that it actually does communicate something of love-in-itself.

It is essential to remember that the deep structures that Schmemmann, Taft, and Kavanagh identify were all placed there deliberately by the Church as she constructed her liturgy. While the structures they identify do indeed seem to have roots in movements of grace—reconciliation, receptivity to the Word, response to it, etc.—they are also at a certain level artificial: that is, created by human beings. Reception of the Eucharist at Mass mediated by the Church is fundamentally different from the Apostles’ experience at the Last Supper itself. Likewise, recognizing the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is a categorically different experience of the presence of God than Moses had with the burning bush. Yet even in these two kinds of experiences, they are also mediated—through a person or through a miraculous bush. Mediation is not to be considered a liability, but rather a necessary condition of all human experience outside of direct communication of God with a person’s soul, since no human experiences are unmediated.

Therefore, since liturgy is always mediated through symbols, even at the level of *theologia prima*, Welby’s philosophical system may offer something to say after all. As mediated, symbolic experiences, liturgical acts fall in the second level of Welby’s framework of ‘meaning.’ We recall that ‘sense’ is unmediated, while ‘meaning’ is mediated. In the movement from ‘sense’ to ‘meaning,’ we move from the planetary to the solar levels of signifying; from the

unintentional effects of signs to the intended, teleological aspects of their use. The symbols used in liturgical acts are all used for some purpose, which for Kavanagh is to enact a mystery. On the level of *theologia prima*, Kavanagh's insights vis-à-vis Welby's analysis are interesting. The one engaging the liturgical act experiences the act at the level of 'sense,' and the Church deploys the symbol for a purpose, thus acting at the level of 'meaning.' Kavanagh notes that the congregation at worship actually does move from one liturgical act to another in a kind of Hegelian dialectical movement. This movement betrays the 'significance' that the liturgical act has in *theologia prima* since the symbols have an experienced value and have an effect on the experience of subsequent symbols and acts.

Two observations must be made regarding this kind of 'significance.' First, the congregation might not be aware of the kind of 'significance' present in liturgical acts. The liturgy moves from one act to another whether those participating in it are aware or not. It is possible that Kavanagh and others could refute this point noting that for them, *leitourgia* properly understood requires the full, active, and conscious participation of the congregation. Such a refutation is a very fair response to this first potential critique.

However, the second observation is that the congregation has no role in shaping the response they make to the 'sense' and 'meaning' they experience. This second observation makes it more likely that the kind of 'significance' experienced in *theologia prima* is only analogous to the kind of 'significance' Welby imagines and not identical with it. We saw that for Welby, for something to have 'significance,' it must "modify more or less profoundly our mental attitude" and thus seems to require some kind of freedom and creativity in the response.¹⁹⁵ Welby believes in the power of symbols "not only in Word, as in legend, narrative, parable,

¹⁹⁵ Welby, "Sense, Meaning and Interpretation," 27.

name, and all social speech and all intellectual discussions; but also in act, as in ritual, ceremony, performance, posture, dance.”¹⁹⁶ Yet it seems that to Welby, the power lies in how these activities affect the performer after they are finished performing. Since Welby is focused on linguistic signs, she does not delve deeply into any of the other kinds of performance signs that she mentions here. An open question is whether any of these art forms in which decisions about responses have already been made—a play’s script, a composer’s score, a dance’s choreography—can employ signification to analyze these performances as they are happening. Signification can certainly play a role in attending to the response of those-performing (actors, musicians, dancers, e.g.) and to the audience once the moment of the performance has ended. Yet this kind of analysis is always secondary. Given the fact that liturgy as it is happening is not primarily intellectual, that the ‘significance’ can occur with or without the participants’ awareness, and the fact that the responses to the ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’ of liturgy are already programmed, it is my belief that signification is very limited in its ability to help understand, assess, and analyze what is happening in liturgy from the perspective of *theologia prima*.

In this chapter, we have explored how Schmemmann, Taft, and Kavanagh have all appealed to structuralism a methodological tool for doing liturgical theology. Though all three of them provide a different contribution to the field, in all three, we can see a desire to move more deeply into the fabric of liturgy so as to know how it works. We have also attempted to extract the definition of meaning out of which each of them is working and have seen that for the structuralists, whatever meaning means, it is located within the acts themselves. We have seen that at the level of *theologia prima*, the question remains somewhat open-ended as to whether

¹⁹⁶ Welby, *Signification and Language*, 42.

Welby's framework is useful and acceptable given the difficulty of engaging *theologia prima* as it happens.¹⁹⁷ From here, we are now able to move to a discussion of how Welby's framework can provide a new methodology in the study of liturgy which can help liturgical theologians grasp a richer and more robust sense of liturgical meaning.

¹⁹⁷ On this idea, see Robert Taft, "Mrs. Murphy goes to Moscow: Kavanagh, Schmemmann, and 'The Byzantine Synthesis,'" *Worship* 80 no. 5 (September 2011): 386-407.

Chapter 3: Toward a Welbian Liturgical Theology

Now that Welby's framework is clear and the structuralist approach has been contextualized within that framework, we are now at the point where we can consider what a truly Welbian approach to liturgical theology could look like. According to Schmemmann's historical survey of the field, liturgical theology is not a very old discipline, but it has certainly given much insight into Christian liturgy in its comparably brief history. In addition to Schmemmann, Taft, and Kavanagh, towering figures like Josef Jungmann, Louis-Marie Chauvet, Edward Schillebeeckx, and seemingly countless others have devoted careers and thousands of pages of written work to the study of the liturgy. One might be tempted to wonder why a new methodology is needed at all given how much work remains to be done with the methodologies already at our disposal. So first, it is helpful to consider briefly the question of why a new approach is needed at all.

I. The Need for a New Methodology

The State of the Problem

A new methodology is needed in part because of the shifting way that contemporary people think about reality in the present era. Graham Hughes calls this era the "late-modern," and in it human beings think about meaning differently from the way that traditional liturgical theologians consider it.¹⁹⁸ For Hughes in "late modernity," which is a period in which most 21st century church-goers find themselves,

¹⁹⁸ Graham Hughes, *Worship as Meaning: A Liturgical Theology for Late Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). It is not possible here to provide a comprehensive description of what it means to live in the late-modern world, to say nothing about making an argument for its existence or identifying other ways of considering the present age (post-modernism, e.g.). I will leave such a discussion to the experts in philosophy and sociology. Here I circumscribe my focus to Graham Hughes and I do so for two reasons: 1. His approach to the question is quite comprehensive and historically sensitive. He looks at major trends in how the question of meaning has been approached and provides many useful texts for considering the question of late modernity; 2. He draws his own liturgical method and approach from the semiotics of C. S. Peirce, with whom Victoria Welby maintained extensive correspondence and who commented extensively on Welby's own approach to semiotics.

western technological society is a way of being in the world which has detached that world from any enveloping skein of religious reference. ‘Disenchantment’ means two things: first that the world is no longer seen religiously; and, second, that the fundamental mechanisms of society—legislature, judiciary, economy, medicine and education—once held within that encompassing web of meaning have, in their detachment from it, become discreet ‘disciplines,’ each functioning in its own right and without perceived obligation to a larger social enterprise.¹⁹⁹

For Hughes, in this “disenchanted” world, religion and the interconnectedness of society both become detached from what it means to be a person in society. A less religious world has a harder time accepting a traditional religious perspective and the late-modern person does not see the world through religious eyes as previous generations had done. In addition, Hughes observes that where previous generations saw an interconnected web of meaning among the various human disciplines, in late modernity, the various disciplines of society become discreet entities, but so do the people who exist within it. Detachment from a clear center becomes part of what it means to be human in the late-modern age. Thus, a methodology is needed that addresses the reality of the situation which honestly engages the problem of detachment as well as religious disaffection. Again Hughes notes: “...the question presses: can an account of liturgical theology, which somehow manages to ignore late-modern religious disaffection, be sufficient for our times? Can such be a sufficient account of liturgical theology—of the meanings of worship, that is—in the times in which we live?”²⁰⁰ Hughes is right to identify as a problem of liturgical theology more specifically or theology more generally any method that does not directly address the problem of detachment, disenchantment, and disaffection so ubiquitous in late-modern thinking.

We saw in Schmemmann, Taft, and Kavanagh that “meaning” is something that lies within the liturgy as something to be discovered, uncovered, or recovered. Thus the “meaning” of the

¹⁹⁹ Graham Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, 2.

²⁰⁰ Graham Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, 230.

liturgy is located within the liturgy itself and does not depend in any significant way on the people who are present for its celebration. This approach to meaning asks participants to discover the meaning within something, but does not allow for the participant's role in the creation of meaning, nor does it allow for the participant's own personal experience of the liturgy's meaning to bear. Hughes believes that in this kind of liturgical theology, "...the liturgical signs are seen as effecting their own meaning; recipients are somehow written out of the account as contributors or agents."²⁰¹ It is certainly possible to simply aver that the individual's creativity or personal engagement with the liturgy's meaning are irrelevant, but to do so is to make the situation in which "institutional Christianity finds it increasingly difficult to portray itself as a viable source of meaning for people in [late modern] societies" much, much worse.²⁰²

It may be more fair to levy this claim against Schmemmann than Taft or Kavanagh, since both of these latter two theologians do indeed want to address the experiences of the congregation in their analysis of liturgy. Taft's *Through Their Own Eyes*, Kavanagh's famous "Mrs. Murphy" and David Fagerberg's excellent description of her provides another possible place where a structuralist is interested in the congregation's response.²⁰³ However, Taft and Kavanagh are very much interested in how the congregation responds to liturgical meaning or is moved by it, but do not include the congregation's attitudes as a necessary component of the meaning of a liturgical act. The late-modern person that Hughes describes seems to need their own experiences to be included in the analysis of meaning itself as Welby proposes, since for

²⁰¹ Graham Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, 228.

²⁰² Graham Hughes, *Worship as Meaning*, 2.

²⁰³ See David Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2007), especially Chapter 5, "Introducing Mrs. Murphy."

Welby the sign-engager has a role in *constructing* meaning itself and not simply being moved subjectively by objective meaning located elsewhere.

Inviting people's experiences and creativity to bear on liturgical meaning is a very complicated endeavor and is met with problems of its own. The question of liturgical meaning can become completely unmoored from liturgical symbols and thus the tradition of the Church and can become merely a feeling of an individual regardless of the sign's 'meaning' or the 'sense' of the sign being used. Nathan Mitchell's book, *Meeting Mystery*, is a good illustration of this problem where a theologian focuses exclusively on the inter- and intra-personal aspects of liturgical experience, and does so at the expense of the objective analysis of liturgical acts.²⁰⁴ It is not the case that many mainstream Roman Catholic liturgical theologians advocate for such an unmooring to the degree that Mitchell seems to suggest in his book. However, this position could emerge as an attractive one, particularly for late-modern people given its prioritizing (both temporally and in terms of value) of individual experience.²⁰⁵

In these two approaches, a kind of divide emerges in which theologians find themselves on one side or the other. On the one side, as we see in Schmemmann, Taft, and Kavanagh, meaning is located entirely in the liturgical acts themselves, and more precisely in the deep structures that undergird liturgical acts. On the other side, as we see in a theologian like Mitchell, meaning is almost completely detached from the liturgical acts, which are now not vehicles for

²⁰⁴ See Nathan Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, Sacraments* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999). One could possibly see suggestions of a liturgical methodology that does what Mitchell is doing in Melanie Ross's "Joseph's Britches Revisited: Reflections on Method in Liturgical Theology," *Worship* 80, no. 6 (November 2006): 528-550. She takes issue with liturgical theologies—particularly structuralist ones like in Taft and Gordon Lathrop—which believe that "Ordo" is a superior way of organizing liturgy than her own Free Church tradition. While she is not advocating unmooring meaning from existing liturgical acts and structures, her argument depends on a liturgical tradition which itself is allergic to structure. Perhaps the attractiveness of such a tradition is another data point of evidence for the existence of the kind of late-modern worldview that Hughes identifies. It is extremely interesting though that at the end of her essay, she invokes C. S. Peirce and sends her readers to Hughes's book.

²⁰⁵ See Bryan Spinks, *The Worship Mall: Contemporary Responses to Contemporary Culture* (London: Ashford Colour Press, 2010) for a discussion of the way that late-modern worship has evolved and the issues that it raises.

transmission of meaning, but rather moments for participants to encounter one another in graced ways. Given the reality of how late-modern humanity considers religion, as well as the way that Roman Catholicism considers its liturgy and its sacramental theology, this divide is deeply problematic. When the Church focuses all of its attention on meaning-within-liturgy, late-modern people see their agency and so-called participation as inconsequential or even irrelevant. When theologians focus all of their attention on the participants, then the acts themselves and their rich and long history suffer the same fate. Thus liturgical theology finds itself in a place where a new methodology is required that attempts to harmonize, or at least address the problems posed at both sides of this divide.

Victoria Welby: A Bridge Spanning the Divide

Before looking at how Victoria Welby's signification provides an antidote to the divided liturgical theological landscape seen above, it is helpful to point out that there are indeed other attempting such a project. We saw above that Taft and Kavanagh really are interested in the congregation's experience of liturgy, whether that experience is a necessary component of its meaning or not. In addition, David Newman gives many insights into how to shift the discussion of meaning to include congregational shaping of meaning.²⁰⁶ Margaret Mary Kelleher is another fine example of using a different method (Ricoeurian hermeneutics) for examining meaning from the standpoint of the congregation, as is her article referenced in the Introduction to the present thesis.²⁰⁷ In addition to these authors, Gordon Lathrop, Don Saliers, and Graham Hughes are all attempting something similar in the non-Catholic Christian traditions, as was Mark Searle in the

²⁰⁶ David Newman, "Observations on Method in Liturgical Theology" *Worship* 57, no. 4 (July 1983): 377-384, noted in the Introduction of the present thesis. Don Saliers is another theologian attempting to bridge the gap.

²⁰⁷ Margaret Mary Kelleher, "Hermeneutics in the Study of Liturgical Performance." *Worship* 67, no. 4 (July 1993): 292-318; Kelleher, "Liturgical Theology: A Task and Method" *Worship* 62, no. 1 (January 1988): 2-25.

Catholic tradition.²⁰⁸ Regardless of denomination, they all make an effort at including the congregational experience in their analysis of liturgy.

In Welby, we have seen a thinker who is deeply immersed in a thoroughgoing, even technical analysis of signs. We saw that Welby wants to preserve all of the “grunts, squalls, yells, [and] squeals” that make up the various languages and sign systems that human beings use.²⁰⁹ When it comes to analysis of the ‘sense’ of a sign, Welby wants the interpreter to be “full ‘in touch’ with the world” and using both deductive and inductive reasoning processes.²¹⁰ We also noted that for Welby, it is essential to observe signs as they are used and not in any abstract kind of way. We have seen that she is averse to any kind of pernicious ambiguity which causes “involuntary discord” and leads to “defective ‘tuning’ of language.”²¹¹ She is committed to the intellectual pursuit and immerses herself in it. She elegantly summarizes the project of clarity and analysis as follows:

For by a now possible international consensus and the united wisdom which this means, we are to train up a whole generation in the vivid and steadfast sense of the paramount duty of contributing to a vast advance in the resources of Expression. This indeed will pave the way to restatement of problems in the highest and best sense. Such an achievement will lead, in the case of the thinker, to results in conception of which at present we can no more ‘dream’ than the seventeenth century dreamt of gravitation, or the eighteenth of the work of Darwin or Pasteur.²¹²

Here, she notes that the vividness and steadfastness of expression will allow for problems to be restated in new ways and thus the dreams that one never knew one had might be realized because of it. We saw this idea earlier when we observed that her commitment to the ‘sense’ of signs

²⁰⁸ See Gordon Lathrop’s *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1993), Don Saliers’s *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Divine Glory* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), Mark Searle’s “New Tasks, New Methods: The Emergence of Pastoral Liturgical Studies” in *Worship* 57, no. 4 (July 1983): 291-308 or his *Called to Participate: Theological, Ritual, and Social Perspectives* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006).

²⁰⁹ Victoria Welby, *Significs and Language: The Articulate Form of our Expressive and Interpretative Resources*, edited by H. Walter Schmitz (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, (1911) 1985), 72.

²¹⁰ Victoria Welby, *What is Meaning? Studies in the Development of Significance* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, (1903) 1983), 27; 94.

²¹¹ Welby, *What is Meaning?* 74, 75.

²¹² Welby, *What is Meaning?* 76-77.

enables her to free herself to consider them on a higher and more ‘significant’ level. She notes that such a commitment will enable future thinkers to make the kinds of leaps that were possible in science such as the theory of gravitation and Darwin’s theory of evolution and Pasteur’s work in germ theory. It is only when “Expression’s” resources are vivid and precise that such dreams are able to come to fruition.

Further down in the same chapter, Welby transitions from describing the necessity of precision of expression for its own sake and frames it in the context of why such precision is important at a much higher level:

But these results, as tending everywhere to transcend by intensifying the significance of what we call ‘limit’ or ‘end’ or the ‘finite’ or the ‘concrete,’ will make possible a positivism in a new and higher sense, recognizing the abstract, the absolute, the infinite, as owing their value to their negative character; to their antiseptic power, their neutralizing and sterilizing force. For all such negative ideas are not creative but protective, forming a natural criticism which rules out a lower, a parasitic or fungoid life, until we can reach the higher life through truth.²¹³

In these sentences, we see that Welby values limits, ends, the finite, and the concrete *because* they set out the boundaries for the analysis of something deeper and more ‘significant.’ For Welby, the infinite horizon is glimpsed from the standpoint of the finite; and the abstract from the concrete. She uses the analogy of moving from a concept of a flat, straight line to a round, curved one, like in the move from a cube to a sphere to illustrate this point.²¹⁴ Mathematically, a curved line requires many more data points to be defined than does a straight line, and only through rigorous and thorough analysis of the sense of a sign can such data points be ascertained.²¹⁵ For Welby it is not only unhelpful to unmoor meaning from the concrete data, but would annihilate the possibility of meaning altogether. All that would be left are solipsistic feelings with no necessary connection to the person using the sign or to the sign itself.

²¹³ Welby, *What is Meaning?* 77.

²¹⁴ Welby, *What is Meaning?* 77.

²¹⁵ Indeed, many different lines and curves can pass through two different points. The more data points that exist, the more complete the picture of the line.

In this discussion, we see just how Welby's method can address the concern of liturgical theologians who might feel uneasy orienting the discussion of liturgical meaning toward the experience of those engaging it. The Welbian liturgical theologian cannot simply ask members of the congregation how they feel about a particular liturgical act, but rather to move through the significant analysis with them and to address their direct experience of the act to discover how the act's 'sense' and 'meaning' move them to act in their lives of faith. For the Welbian, liturgical 'significance' comes *through* the 'sense' and 'meaning,' explored in the vivid and steadfast way seen in Welby above. Thus the Welbian approach to liturgical theology must *begin* in the analysis of the signs, although if it remains there, Welby would see the theology that results as being locked at the level of the finite, limited and concrete. For some sign systems, remaining at this lower level has less at stake. Yet for liturgical theologians and Christian believers more generally, to remain at this level is to imprison the infinite and unlimited God to a sterile, antiseptic concrete cell.

As their significant analysis moves from the rigorous analysis of the 'sense' and 'meaning' of the liturgical act to its 'significance,' significantians recognize that the ultimate object of their study is not the acts themselves, but rather how these acts affect and move people.²¹⁶ Thus, it is in freeing God from the aforementioned concrete cell that the Welbian liturgical theologian addresses the question posed at the other end of the spectrum: how liturgical theology can speak to late-modern society? Significant analysis more generally, as well as significant liturgical analysis more specifically are ultimately focused on investigating how liturgical acts move beating hearts, inspire living spirits, and shape real lives as they are being lived. In this move from the study of the acts in the concrete to the 'significance' they have on the participants, the Welbian liturgical

²¹⁶ In Chapter 1 on this notion I remarked, "'Significance' is where *chronos* becomes *kairos*—where the simple passage of time takes hold on the person and makes it charged with importance." See p. 30 above.

theologian is able to address the concern raised by Hughes that the late-modern person is very much concerned about their own agency in the process of shaping or even making meaning. It is important to remember that Welby is very much concerned about the “man-on-the-street” and his experience of signs and how they move him to act. We recall that for Welby, unless this man-on-the-street recognizes that a sign points to a reality beyond itself, and that reality-beyond has some effect on his life, it really isn’t a sign at all.²¹⁷

One other aspect of Welby’s philosophy that is useful in bridging the divide between act-based/objective and person-based/subjective liturgical analysis is her focus on the importance of community. Since liturgy is always done in community, theologians at both ends of the spectrum speak extensively about the importance of community in shaping liturgical theology. For Welby, signification is a process that must always be done within a community and with an eye toward how signs affect communities. Welby begins by noting the commonality of sense among all living creatures, and from there moves up, in a kind of hierarchy of being, to the human approach to sense, which, for her, necessarily moves from sense, to meaning, and ultimately to significance. Welby’s argument then is seen not primarily (in the sense of being “first”) from the standpoint of the ethical, but from the standpoint of the sensual. We have seen that the sensual is not restricted to the so-called five senses or sense organs, and includes the way in which the symbol is used, its “circumstances, state of mind, reference, ‘universe of discourse’ belonging to it.”²¹⁸ In practicing signification, before any kind of analysis can be made, it must be recognized that a symbol is used within an already established and larger context. To analyze the significance of a symbol for Welby seems to presuppose the presence of an interpreting community. Since Welby’s concern is not directed toward the abstract denotational study of symbols but toward human flourishing

²¹⁷ C.f. Welby, *What is Meaning?* 8.

²¹⁸ Welby, *What is Meaning*, 5.

within a society, the presence of context and community in the process of interpretation is necessary. The fact that there is a “universe of discourse” that surrounds any symbol points to the fact that there are people engaged in the discourse. Welby is clear that symbols do not have sense in any kind of absolute way, but only a way that a symbol is used. This understanding of sense then also presupposes symbol-users.

We can now see clearly both why a new methodology in liturgical theology is needed, as well as why Welby’s philosophical and semiotic framework is an adequate response to that need. The significian is never satisfied with mere ‘sense’ and ‘meaning,’ nor is the significian satisfied only to inquire after a sign’s ‘significance.’ Significians are concerned about the process which begins in ‘sense,’ travels up through ‘meaning,’ ultimately arriving at ‘significance.’ It is a rigorous, thorough, and challenging process to undertake. The significian is not focused solely on either the sign-user or the sign-engager. Instead, the significian must attempt to unite both perspectives in an effort to understand a sign’s meaning and signifying power.

II. Toward a Welbian Liturgical Theology

With all of these pieces now in place, we can turn to what exactly a Welbian liturgical theology would look like. Since for Welby theory can never be separated from concrete facts, it is important to illustrate this distinctive approach to liturgical theology with a concrete example from the liturgy. After describing how this new method comes to bear on liturgical theology, we will turn our attention to a few implications that this new method has on liturgical theology and liturgical theology’s interconnection with and interdependence upon other theological disciplines.

Significs and Liturgical Theology Illustrated

Since significs can be applied to any liturgical act, any of the acts present in the liturgy would theoretically suffice here. However, not all liturgical acts are created equal, nor do they all

have the same ‘meaning’ or desired ‘significance.’ As we saw in the Introduction, the Church maintains that the Eucharist is the “font and summit” of the Christian life. It is the sacrament toward which and from which all Christian life is oriented; no other rite holds the same privileged place in the Church’s repertoire of liturgical acts. Therefore, here, I have chosen one moment from the Communion Rite for significant analysis: the reception of communion by members of the congregation. In addition to this important theological reason, I have chosen this moment because as a liturgical act, it engages many different components that are available in liturgical acts: people, words, objects, and gestures.

‘Sense’

A sensal analysis of the reception of the Eucharist at Mass must begin by a simple phenomenological description of what is happening. The *Roman Missal* describes this moment as follows: “After [reverently receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, the priest] takes the paten or ciborium and approaches the communicants. The Priest raises a host slightly and shows it to each of the communicants, saying: ‘The Body of Christ.’ The Communicant replies: Amen. And receives Holy Communion.”²¹⁹ In this description of the reception of communion, we see the *Missal* drawing attention to the various aspects of the liturgical act that I referenced above: people, gestures, words, and objects. It will be useful to explore each of these in more detail,

²¹⁹ *The Roman Missal* §134. Here, Schmemann, Taft, and Kavanagh would be careful to remind us that the text of the rite in the *Missal* is not the rite itself. The rite itself is the rite-as-it-is-happening. The *Missal* merely describes what *should* happen. This distinction is an important one, since it reminds theologians that rites “in the wild” are what actual believers experience. This distinction is an important one to keep in mind for the significant analysis of this act as well. Here it is important to note that the *Missal* is simply one aspect of the act under consideration and not identical with the act itself. It may also be useful to note that “in the wild,” reception of Holy Communion, at least in dioceses of the United States, unfolds more or less exactly according to what the *Missal* prescribes. There are certainly some aspects of the act that change (e.g. an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion), but these will be a part of the ‘sensal’ analysis of the act described below. This act is additionally an excellent one on which to perform significant analysis since it is so universally done according to the way that the *Missal* describes.

though it should be stated at the outset that it will not be possible to provide any kind of comprehensive or exhaustive analysis here.²²⁰

The people involved in the reception of Communion seem simple enough: minister and communicant. However, this seemingly simple dyad is actually an opportunity for an incredibly complex sensal analysis. The significian-theologian could begin by considering the nature of the state of life of the minister: is he a member of the clergy, and if so, what kind—pope, cardinal, bishop, priest, or deacon? Or is the minister an instituted Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion? Do the minister and communicant know each other, and if so, how well? In addition to these kinds of relational questions that examine the relationship between minister and communicant, one would also want to look at what has been going on in their lives as they approach this sacrament. Related to this question is the consideration the place of this particular reception of communion in context of the minister/recipients' lives: First Holy Communion, Viaticum, or a regular communicant on a Sunday, etc.; as well as the time of the liturgical year: Christmas, Lent, or a random Sunday in Ordinary Time, etc. Since physical spaces have an effect on human temperament, it would be important to consider the location of where the Eucharist is received: the nave of a medieval cathedral, a hospital room, or at a retreat with high school students around a campfire, etc. The sensal analysis of the act will also take into consideration the movement, if any, of the communicant toward the Eucharist. For many parishes (perhaps most), there is a procession of the congregation from their pews toward the altar to receive by which there is a change of “geography,” a change of posture, and approaching another person.

²²⁰ Comprehensive analysis is not only prohibited here because of the limitations of space and word count, but because the many variables that are at work are constantly moving, developing, and changing. For example, at the time of the writing of this chapter, the coronavirus global pandemic has led to the suspension of all public liturgies in the archdiocese of Boston, where I am writing. The experience of receiving communion after a period where its reception has been prohibited will likely lead to a vastly different ‘significance’ for daily communicants than their usual practice might have.

All of these variables will have an effect on the experience of either or both the minister and the recipient, and thus have some effect on the act's wider meaning.

The object—the consecrated host—is frequently the lone aspect or at least the most widely treated aspect in analysis of the Eucharist, and perhaps rightly so. Tomes have been written attempting to describe what exactly it is, how it became what it is, what it is supposed to effect in the life of the person who receives it, and so on. All of this, too, will be a part of the sensal analysis as well. But so too would be the other aspects of the host perhaps overlooked in traditional theology: Has the host been purchased from a liturgical goods store, or has it been baked by someone known to the congregation, or even a member of the congregation itself? What is its size and shape? Has it been broken off of a larger host and thus have rough edges? Is it a round wafer with smooth edges? Is it imprinted with an image? If so, which one? How does it taste? What does it feel like in the mouth? Does the communicant chew it or let it dissolve on the tongue?²²¹ Is the communicant gluten-intolerant and finds this moment of reception of communion awkward since he or she must ask for a low-gluten host, thus adding more words to the act?²²²

In §134 quoted above, there are several gestural prescriptions given: the priest's taking of the paten/ciborium, his raising of the host, and his showing it to the communicant; the communicant's receiving Communion. Yet, this moment has several other gestural components from the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)* and that bishops' conferences have adjudicated and indeed are seen week by week in the Communion procession. The *GIRM*

²²¹ Here I am reminded that a member of my own Jesuit community chews the host rather loudly upon receiving it. Perhaps this is unconscious, but perhaps too it is a moment of richer 'sense' and thus deeper 'significance' as well. This man knows Greek, and so perhaps he is drawing on a valence of the verb τρώγω from John 6:54ff which includes gnawing, munching, and crunching as a possible meaning. See James Strong, *Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), s.v. G5176, "τρώγω."

²²² For more on the "bread sign" in the Eucharist, see Mary Collins, "Critical Questions for Liturgical Theology," *Worship* 53, no. 4 (July 1979), 305-309.

references *Redemptionis Sacramentum* when noting that “Holy Communion is to be received standing unless and individual member of the faithful wishes to receive Communion while kneeling.”²²³ Later on in the same section the *GIRM* notes that “When receiving Holy Communion, the communicant bows his or her head before the Sacrament as a gesture of reverence and receives the Body of the Lord from the Minister.”²²⁴ The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) notes the following regarding the gestures of the communicant in receiving the Sacrament:

Those who receive Communion may receive either in the hand or on the tongue, and the decision should be that of the individual receiving, not of the person distributing Communion. If Communion is received in the hand, the hands should first of all be clean. If one is right handed the left hand should rest upon the right. The host will then be laid in the palm of the left hand and then taken by the right hand to the mouth. If one is left-handed this is reversed. It is not appropriate to reach out with the fingers and take the host from the person distributing.²²⁵

The USCCB thus gives two options for the communicant to decide how he or she would like to receive the Eucharist: on the hand, or on the tongue. In addition, the discussion of left- or right-handedness is interesting, and is worth noting for sensal analysis.²²⁶ It is also important that there is the proscription against reaching out with the fingers—not only does the sensal analysis take into consideration what *is done*, this investigation into the ‘sense’ of the signs also reveals what *is not to be done* as well.

Up to this point, all of the sensal analysis of the act is related to the act-as-it-happens, which both structuralist theologians and Welby herself would appreciate. As essential as this in-the-moment analysis is, it is not the only sensal aspect of the act that the significian-theologian

²²³ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (hereafter *GIRM*) §160, citing *Redemptionis Sacramentum* §91.

²²⁴ *GIRM* §160.

²²⁵ <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/order-of-mass/liturgy-of-the-eucharist/the-reception-of-holy-communion-at-mass.cfm>. Accessed March 18, 2020.

²²⁶ One does wonder whether this detail would have any effect whatsoever on the ‘significance’ of the reception of the Eucharist. However, Welby’s concern for the “vividness” of expression leads me to include it here.

must consider, since they are symbols as well as signs, they are not only present to the senses, but also qua symbols: that they stand for a reality beyond how they appear. Liturgical acts are the result of a very long process of historical, theological, spiritual, and sociological development. The words used in the act provide a moment to reflect on this reality. There are only five simple words used in this liturgical act: “The Body of Christ,” “Amen.” As with the dyad of minister and communicant, we should not let this simplicity lure us into a false security that the sensal analysis would likewise be simple. A sensal analysis of these words would first include an analysis of each word in the act. One word, “Amen,” is borrowed from a foreign language, so translation of this word is an important aspect of the analysis.²²⁷ All of the individual words here have a life of their own in the scriptures and throughout the tradition.²²⁸ Each word has a referent, and the sensal analysis will attempt to locate those referents. In addition to the analysis of each individual word, there is a phrase with a meaning of its own: “Body of Christ.” This phrase has wide usage theologically and historically for the Church, and an exploration of its historical and theological use would be an essential part of the ‘sense’ of this act.

The words have a complex history, but so does the act itself taken as a whole. Reception of Communion should not be taken for granted in the Church’s collective historical imagination since there were long periods in the Church’s history when few people, if any besides the priest-celebrant, who received. The Church, as a living body, must know its history because it is because of this history that the current act is done the way it is.²²⁹

²²⁷ In fact, performing a sensal analysis on the word in its original language would be of use as well. Since it is a borrowed word, the history of its use in the vernacular language will play a role in the analysis as well.

²²⁸ With the word “body,” there is wide use outside the tradition, where it has a ‘sense,’ ‘meaning,’ and ‘significance’ of its own.

²²⁹ Obviously, here is not the place for any kind of rigorous historical analysis of the Communion Rite. For such an analysis, see Robert Taft, *A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, Volume VI: The Communion, Thanksgiving, and Concluding Rites* (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 2008).

It should not go unsaid that sensal analysis is far-reaching, difficult, and painstaking or even tedious. Sensal analysis of a liturgical act cannot be done quickly, and must draw on the best techniques available for analysis of many different kinds of subjects: theology's many diverse disciplines including spirituality, Biblical studies, systematics, and historical theology; as well as disciplines from the secular world like psychology, architecture, art, music, history, philology, literary theory, proxemics, movement, and so on. It is unlikely that any one theologian would be able to do the kind of sensal analysis required alone. Such analysis will necessarily require the assembly of experts in many fields working together for the most vivid depiction of what is happening at this moment.

'Meaning'

For Welby, 'meaning' involves the volitional, intentional, and teleological aspects of the sign being used: what the sign-user hopes to do vis-à-vis the sign-engager by using a sign. Thus to move from 'sense' to 'meaning,' a Welbian liturgical theologian will need to address the intention behind the use of a particular liturgical act. It is also important to add here that both for Welby, 'meaning' is objective and determined by the sign-user, and not left up to the discretion or interpretation of the sign-engager. Regardless of whether the sign-engager does not grasp or understand the sign-user's 'meaning,' the sign-user has a very specific intention behind their using of a sign, liturgical or otherwise. Welby's method here fits well with a Roman Catholic understanding of the intention or volition of its liturgical acts. In Catholicism, 'meaning' (as well as 'sense' to some degree) has an objective character: the intention behind liturgical acts is always the same, even though the time period, minister, communicant, place, etc. may all be different from one celebration to another. In other words, liturgical acts always have a desired effect from their performance and celebration. St. Thomas, among others, refers to this as the *res tantum* of a sacrament—it's desired effect.

We saw in Chapter 2 that structuralists like Schmemmann, Taft, and Kavanagh were all interested in looking into the deeper structures to know *how* liturgical acts work. In so doing, they are investigating both the desired effect of liturgical acts as well as the mechanisms (deep structures) which permit them to come to fruition. We saw that Schmemmann is not primarily interested in meaning (despite his deceptively simple definition) but rather the “Ordo” of the liturgy—that is, its shape and form. Taft is perhaps the clearest on this matter since he believes that he seeks not meaning, but “the structure itself.” Kavanagh pushes back on the kind of meanings that liturgical theology in the Middle Ages attempted to uncover, instead seeking the movements of God seen by movement from one structure to another. Schmemmann, Taft, and Kavanagh are all savvy enough to know that what they are doing is decidedly not seeking the kind of meaning that a dyadic approach to meaning would necessarily entail. They know that there is something more significant going on at a deeper level. Where Schmemmann points out this reality and Kavanagh notes what is at stake, Taft is the only one who attempts to explain how he believes that this process works.

As they dig into the liturgy and uncover the threads that make up the Ordo, deep structures, and *theologia prima*, and eschew the decodification that they know is unsatisfactory, they (subconsciously?) begin the exploration of what liturgy is *supposed to be* doing. The Ordo, the deep structures, and the experience of God in *theologia prima* all circle around the question of liturgical design, which thus necessarily raises the question of liturgical designers, whether human or divine. The thread of order/logic that Schmemmann seeks among liturgical acts must have been placed there by someone for some reason. The same can be said for Taft’s deep structures or Kavanagh’s *theologia prima*. As such, structural analysis of the liturgy is an

investigation into the desired teleology of liturgical acts and an exploration of the “volitional, intentional, purposive, rationally idealized sense” that liturgical acts entail.²³⁰

Since structuralists are primarily interested in the telos of liturgical acts and the intended effect they have, we can place them squarely in the realm of Welby’s second level of signifying: ‘meaning.’ Structuralism has devoted itself to a rigorous analysis of the deepest parts of liturgy so as to more fully and more robustly understand how liturgy works. This project is incredibly important, even essential, for a Welbian. We must not forget that for Welby, ‘meaning’ is an important step in the signifying process. Without a deep appreciation for something’s ‘sense’ and ‘meaning,’ no meaningful assessment of ‘significance’ is possible. Therefore, locating liturgical structuralism within ‘meaning’ is not in any way an insult to their contributions. Instead, it contextualizes what a structuralist methodology is capable of accomplishing. The most precise definition, description, and analysis of a sign, for a Welbian, is of great importance, but not of *ultimate* importance. A Welbian can never be satisfied by looking at “how” and “why” without those questions propelling the researcher forward into asking after a sign’s impact on the sign-engager. Put more concisely, the ultimate question is not *how* something is supposed to work, but *whether* it works at all.

Structuralism, however, is not the only way to look at the ‘meaning’ of liturgical acts. For example, there is of course the scriptural intention: Jesus says, “Take and eat.” The reason why the Church desires to give communion to the faithful is because Jesus himself has asked her to do so. Thus, in the scriptural intention, there is the question of why Jesus himself would want to give himself to others in this way—i.e. the ‘meaning’ of Jesus’ original words and actions. Since ‘meaning’ deals with questions of the intention behind the original act of receiving

²³⁰ Welby, *What is Meaning*, 27.

“Communion” (i.e. the disciples at the Last Supper), as well as the intention behind the Church’s continual performing of this act throughout its long tradition, it seems that it is at the level of ‘meaning’ where liturgical theologians find themselves most at home. This claim is not to dismiss the fact that liturgical theologians do indeed find themselves working comfortably in the area of ‘sense’ as well, in fact, it is hard to imagine someone like Schmemmann, Taft, or Kavanagh not thoroughly engaging many of the questions posed at the level of sensal analysis.²³¹ Perhaps their sensal inquiry is more focused on the objective elements of the liturgical act than on the subjective elements that are unique to each individual’s reception of the Eucharist, but their inquiry certainly begins with sensal investigation.

‘Significance’

Over the history of liturgical theology, whether at the rudimentary level of rubrics or the much deeper level of structures, ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’ have been strong elements present. In the words of Welby described above, this commitment to ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’ have helped define the limits and concrete nature of the subject which theologians have sought to investigate. Yet unless liturgical theology can move toward the ‘significance’ of liturgical acts both in the Church more broadly speaking, as well as in each individual, liturgical theology remains within the “concrete” limits described above. In other words, investigation of the ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’ of a liturgical act can at best yield what *is happening* and what *is supposed to happen*, but can never move into the question posed at the level of ‘significance’: *does anything happen?*

It is important to nuance this question a bit since the question of ‘significance,’ at least here, is not related to the question of whether anything happens to the host, for example, in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, ‘significance’ is not interested in the questions posed by the

²³¹ Gregory Dix’s *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Glasgow: University Press, 1954) and Joseph Jungmann’s *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1951) both come to mind as good examples of theologians working comfortably in both areas, though perhaps more explicitly at the level of ‘sense.’

efficacious nature of liturgical acts, or by the tradition of *ex opere operato*. At the level of ‘significance,’ the question is not whether the words of institution validly transform bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, or whether the words of absolution do indeed absolve sins. Instead, ‘significance’ deals with how a sign affects the behavior, attitudes, social and communal interactions, etc. in the sign-engager. For Welby’s man-on-the-street, if the reception of the Eucharist doesn’t actually move his heart to love of God and neighbor, is the Eucharist actually a sign at all and does it signify for him what the Church believes it to be? When liturgical or sacramental theologians do not include ‘significance’ in their calculus of the meaning of a liturgical act, there is a tacit acknowledgement that the Church’s intention and desire is more important than how that act moves believers to respond; thus they render the act not meaningless, but truly insignificant.

Inquiring into the ‘significance’ of a liturgical act is a very challenging endeavor. Unlike ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’ which have the advantage of focusing their attention on a sign, ‘significance’ requires to know the mind and heart of the sign-engager. With regard to the example of the reception of Communion, we can see this challenge at work. To know the ‘significance’ of this moment for the communicant, the theologian must talk to the communicant. Yet, theologians cannot ask communicants about their experiences in the moment, lest they intrude into the experience itself—not unlike Kavanagh’s example of particle physics seen in Chapter 2. In addition, interviewing communicants does not actually speak of the ‘significance’ of the act, but rather the communicant’s thoughts or opinions *about* the act.²³² Perhaps theologians could ask communicants how their reception of Communion changes their lives shortly after its reception—how their attitudes toward God and neighbor are moved and shifted

²³² See Martin D. Stringer, *On the Perception of Worship: The ethnography of worship in four Christian congregations in Manchester* (University of Birmingham: University Press, 1999), 49-54.

as a result of receiving Communion. Perhaps more concretely, theologians could inquire about how communicants' lives have changed with regard to treatment of God and neighbor as the result of receiving Communion: do they do more works of charity or give more money in the collection? Are they more loving and patient with their children? Theologians cannot only ask these questions, but must somehow also see that the lives-changed are changed *because of* the liturgical act in which they have participated.

The kind of research that needs to be done with regard to 'significance' is related to the field of ethnography and lived religion. Works like Robert Orsi's *Madonna of 115th Street* is a good example of how the liturgical life of the procession of the statue of Mary for the celebration of the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel has a deep effect on the lives of the Italians living in East Harlem in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²³³ Martin Stringer's ethnographic book *On the Perception of Worship* is an excellent, technically sophisticated book about how to do ethnographic research specifically with regard to worship. Significs can and should rely on ethnographical research to help understand the 'significance' of liturgical acts, but cannot be identical with it for a few important reasons. First, ethnography is a tool that sociologists use to understand societies. The goal of significs is not to understand a society, but rather to know the deepest possible meaning of signs—their ability to influence and actual influencing of human behaviors and attitudes. Second, ethnography is interested in extracting a theory of society from the data that the society provides. Significs, as we have seen, is not finally interested in theories, but people, interactions, lived attitudes, and actions.

Finally, ethnography is limited by the fact that the understanding of a society as a whole can never be done by surveying every member of that society: the whole is not the sum of its

²³³ See Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, Third Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

parts, and thus there is always a necessary level of ambiguity and uncertainty that must be taken as a liability in ethnographic research. For signification, uncertainty and ambiguity, as we have seen, are a fundamental and essential feature of the richness and texture of signification analysis, provided the ambiguity is not pernicious. Where ethnography's inability to come to a complete answer must be seen as a limit in that discipline, for signification, the same inability frees the signifier for more creativity, deeper engagement, and wider application of the method. Where an ethnographer must harmonize seemingly opposite experiences of the same event, the signifier can see them as different facets on the same diamond.

Implications of Welbian Liturgical Theology

The Welbian Congregation: Full, Active, and Conscious

The Second Vatican Council has famously exhorted that "all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy."²³⁴ A Welbian congregation takes its role as congregation, in the way *Sacrosanctum Concilium* describes very seriously. The Welbian congregation recognizes its role as sign-engager, and engages as deeply as possible in the sign system of the liturgy as it unfolds. In more commonplace sign systems such as language, 'sense' and 'meaning' are more immediately evident than in the sign system of liturgy, but with the liturgy, however, 'sense' and 'meaning' are very complex. According to Welbian signification analysis, the 'significance' of a sign is a level reached through the engagement with its 'sense' and 'meaning.' Therefore, in order for liturgical acts to have 'significance' which is related to the 'sense' and 'meaning' of the act, the congregation must be aware of those two other levels of Welbian signifying.

²³⁴ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* §14.

One oft-heard refrain from former or current Church-goers is that they “didn’t get anything out of Mass.” Such a comment can be made for a wide variety of reasons, but one oft-heard response to this refrain is something to the effect of “You get out what you put in.” While this response too can be made for a wide variety of reasons, it is unfair and frequently inaccurate to assume that the one not getting anything *out* is also not putting anything *in*. It is possible that bored or unengaged Church goers do not know what to focus on, what the signs mean, why they are used, and what the Church hopes they accomplish in their lives. Thus for a truly Welbian congregation to exist, the pastors and teachers of the Church must dedicate themselves to more consistent, rigorous, and thorough liturgical catechesis which includes rubrics and history, but also the mystagogical incorporation of liturgical acts into the lives of the people. This catechesis must address the levels of both ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’ in addition to training sensitivity toward how the liturgy has ‘significance’ in their lives. If the liturgy is a sign system, then it is fair for the Church to assume a fully conscious and active sign-engager. Yet it is also fair to acknowledge that the sign-engagers might be as active and conscious as their catechetical formation has allowed them to be. Here we face an all-too-real problem when it comes to liturgical experience: are congregations actually experiencing Christ speaking to them in the sign system of the liturgy?

On the point of the sign system of the liturgy, it is possible to notice another congregational implication of signification on liturgical theology. There are areas of the world where the Latin Rite is used but seems deeply foreign to the people present for worship. Yet here is the place where the need for Church-led offices of inculturation are necessary, and perhaps even a call for more exploration of Church-developed cultural rites. Here, the recent publication of *Querida Amazonia* is helpful since it acknowledges the fact that a rite which has developed out of a European context might not be the best or only sign system that can tradition the Church’s

faith to people from an indigenous one.²³⁵ If the Church's rites have no 'significance' for the congregation, they will, as Welby tells us, mean nothing.

The Welbian Presider

In liturgy, past, present, future, local and universal are all intertwined in an elegant dance. As such, the presider must be extremely cautious with the way he presides. The presider is the mouthpiece for Christ the head speaking through the Church, and thus he must be careful to use the signs and the sign-system the way that the Church expects them to be used. When the presider changes the words of a liturgical act in an attempt to be creative, he finds himself no longer speaking the Church's words, but his own. Not only has the sign system shifted from an ecclesial one to a personal one, but both the 'meaning' and 'significance' shift as well. Now the congregation can only know the intention of the one presider and not the Church speaking on behalf of Christ, and any 'significance' that the congregation experiences is not rooted in the Church's intention but the presider's. This is why the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* states, even though there is room for adaptation foreseen by GIRM and the Order of Mass, "the priest must remember that he is the servant of the sacred Liturgy and that he himself is not permitted, on his own initiative, to add, to remove, or to change anything in the celebration of Mass."²³⁶ Even in the most well-intentioned instances of the presider changing the liturgical acts where he hopes to make the Church's sign system more accessible, interesting, or engaging for the congregation, he risks fundamentally altering the fabric of liturgy itself and thereby engages in perhaps the highest and most egregious kind of clericalism where he substitutes himself not only for the Church, but for Christ. An analogy of music is helpful here.

²³⁵ See Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia: Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis to the People of God and All Persons of Good Will* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), particularly §§81-84 on "Inculturated Liturgy."

²³⁶ *GIRM* §24.

No violinist is free to change the notes in the score he or she is given. The musician's role is to learn the notes on the page and to perform them musically. Even though different violinists will play the same score, their musical interpretation will vary, sometimes vastly. It is the *music* not the notes that the performer provides to the score. The same holds true for the presider. The musical analogy works on another level because concert-goers often expect to hear the notes of the score of the concert they are attending. They know and anticipate the familiar four note motif that begins Beethoven's fifth symphony and would be outraged if a musician in the orchestra decided to change those notes to something else.²³⁷ Presiders should think of their congregations as the well-catechized, well-educated, and fully conscious and active participants we saw as typical of the Welbian congregation. Perhaps presiders change the sign systems because they know the congregation in front of them is not a genuine Welbian one. If this is the case, then the onus is on the presider to first form and catechize the congregation. The fact that on-the-fly accommodations and adaptations are easier, simpler, and less time consuming than careful catechesis does not guarantee that they "correspond more fully to the prescriptions and spirit of the sacred Liturgy" nor that they "increase its pastoral effectiveness."²³⁸ The *GIRM* is clear that "certain accommodations and adaptations are specified in this General Instruction and in the Order of Mass."²³⁹ It should be presumed that such changes are considered after careful study of both sources mentioned in this quote, and long before the organist begins the entrance chant.

²³⁷ A classic example of this phenomenon from music history is Gustav Mahler's use of the tune "Bruder Martin" (known more familiarly as "Frère Jacques") as the theme for the third movement in his first symphony, so-called "Titan." Yet, instead of the tune as it is expected to be heard, Mahler reimagines it in a minor key. Audiences were outraged not only by Mahler's transposition, but by his changing the structure of the esteemed symphony by placing a folk tune in the movement designed for a slow, reflective, beautiful movement. See Jens Malte Fischer, *Gustav Mahler*, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 148-156.

²³⁸ *GIRM* §23.

²³⁹ *GIRM* §23.

A Welbian Ecclesiology

In the sign system of language, Welby observes that there is always a speaker and a listener. On this observation, I noted that the same relationship exists in all signs which I identified as the sign-user (Welby's speaker) and the sign-engager (Welby's listener). For Welby, the ultimate meaning of a sign is reached through a progressive movement from that sign's 'sense,' up through its 'meaning' to its 'significance.' Given how these three levels work, it is clear that the signifying process is characterized by a relationship between the sign-user and the sign-interpreter. Thus to consider liturgy from a Welbian perspective requires us to look at who the sign-user and the sign-engager might be in the context of liturgy, which leads to the question of ecclesiology.

In Chapter 2, I made the the claim that "deep structures...are also at a certain level artificial: that is, created by human beings."²⁴⁰ It might be tempting to consider this comment as a neo-Pelagian argument for liturgy being the work that people do, or perhaps even a cynically minded comment that liturgy is *merely* human activity exercised in the name of God. Put more simply, one might raise the following objection: "Isn't liturgy really about what God is doing and not about what we are doing?"²⁴¹ This question is important and the critique a valid one, but I believe presents a false dichotomy, at least for a Christian deeply committed to the entirety of the Paschal mystery.

Christian faith is complicated by the fact that it is always practiced within the context of the Church. In fact, there is no Christian faith possible outside the context of the Church. In chapter two I noted that there are no unmediated human experiences. Indeed the same can be

²⁴⁰ See p. 61, above.

²⁴¹ This question is not simple conjecture, as it was a question raised to me by two different students independently on February 20, 2020 as a result of my presentation of my thesis at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry S.T.L. Colloquium.

said for the Christian experience of God: all experiences of God are always and necessarily mediated by the Church. This observation is not a claim that all experiences of God must be dispensed by the Magisterium and that the lay faithful must go to a priest to have an experience of the divine. Far from it. Instead, this observation is a claim that all experiences of God for a Christian take place within the context of being a part of the Church—past, present, and future; living, dead, and in glory; local, global, and universal. The scriptures and tradition which house the revelation of God are mediated—handed down—from generation to generation. The subsequent generation’s experience of God is always mediated through the previous generation’s experience. Since the Ascension of the Lord, no other experience of Christ exists than the one given by the Holy Spirit in the light of faith through the Church. When the Church deliberately and intentionally creates, develops, or reforms liturgical acts as seen in the work of the Second Vatican Council, she does so out of an inexorable connection to tradition. The process of creating liturgical acts whether in surface or deep structures is the Church traditioning the faith. Thus, the stance that posing a dichotomy between human or divine action in the liturgy is a profoundly non-Christian one to take since it presumes a God who acts in a way other than in the way that has been revealed in scripture and tradition.

In the fifth chapter of *The Holy Longing*, entitled “Consequences of the Incarnation on Spirituality,” Ronald Rolheiser explores how the theological event of the Incarnation has consequences for Christian life. His concerns are admittedly spiritual, and his book is popular rather than academic, but his insights are enlightening and useful for our consideration of liturgy in this academic context. He notes that Christians “pray to God ‘through Christ,’ and in trying to answer that prayer, God respects the incarnation, namely, that God’s power is now partially dependent upon human action.”²⁴² He explains that when Christians pray “through Christ...”

²⁴² Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 83.

they are praying on various senses of what “Christ” means: “the Body of Christ, which then includes Jesus, the Eucharist, and the body of believers (ourselves) here on earth. We are praying *through* all of these. Thus not only God in heaven is being petitioned and asked to act.”²⁴³

In the liturgy, the speaker and the listener are, in some ways, the same: the Church speaks and the Church listens. From the side of the Church-speaking, she speaks in the name of Christ the head; the Church-listening does so as Christ the body. In liturgy, the Church experiences the wholeness of Christ—head united with body. Yet while the Church-speaking does so *in the name of Christ the head*, she is at the same time a part of Christ the body.

In this chapter we have seen not only the need for a new methodology in liturgical theology that speaks both to the importance of the concrete and objective side of liturgical acts as well as the subjective concerns of late-modern human beings, but also that Victoria Welby’s signification provides a bridge between them. Her method allows for rigorous objective analysis as well as looking toward the infinite horizons possible in human experience. Through the analysis of the reception of communion, we saw how signification can be used as a method for doing liturgical theology. We saw how it honestly addresses and assesses liturgical acts on the phenomenological, anthropological, relational, theological, and historical levels, and then moves into a consideration of how the liturgical act has observable effects in the action and attitudes of the sign-engager. In the final section, we saw three implications of signification on the field of liturgical theology which included catechesis, seminary formation, and a significant approach to ecclesiology. This thesis is only the first step in introducing Welby’s signification into liturgical theology. It is not possible to foresee the many ways that signification will influence theology, but as

²⁴³ Rolheiser, *Holy Longing*, 83.

it becomes more widely used and appropriated into liturgical theology, it will have more implications on how liturgical theology is done, what aspects of it are necessary to explore more deeply, and how to engage the Church in a more comprehensive way.

Conclusion

My father tells the following story about me when I was a little boy: once I was in the car with him and my mother and he said to her, “This intersection is a bear.” I immediately shot up in my car seat and frantically searched sidewalk and streets shouting to them “Where’s the bear?!” This quaint little story helps point out how the sign system of language, particularly the more nuanced use of language found in metaphor, requires some analysis not only to understand the sign, but for that sign to adequately and appropriately move the sign-engager to respond in the way the sign-user had hoped. One could imagine me moments later being plunked in the side of the head by an incoming projectile after someone shouted “Duck!” and I searched for a mallard instead of getting out of the way. Victoria Welby’s *significs* provides a compelling and useful methodology for the analysis of all the components of signs and the ways in which we use them to communicate. At some point in both scenarios, the signifying process broke down: in both cases, both the ‘sense’ and the ‘meaning’ were confused, and thus the ‘significance’ was as well. While some analysts of signs feel that identifying the referents of signs is a robust enough analysis of sign systems, I imagine the little boy rubbing a bruise on his head and disappointed that there was in fact no furry creature in the intersection might disagree.

Significs is a method that not only informs the more mundane of sign systems such as language, but also the richer and more textured systems as well. Welby believed that *significs* could be applied to every level of human activity that uses signs to communicate. *Significs* then finds itself at home in the area of liturgical theology, and we have seen that Roman Catholic liturgical theology can find Welby’s method at home in the liturgy, particularly given how the Church sees what goes on in liturgy and how liturgy is supposed to affect its participants.

As the field of liturgical theology has grown and developed, important strides have been taken so that theologians and believers alike have been able to immerse themselves more fully,

consciously, and actively into the celebration of liturgical acts. The work of structuralists like Alexander Schmemmann, Robert Taft, and Aidan Kavanagh has made significant progress in identifying the deep structures that undergird liturgical acts. This work has helped not only to identify the structures, but has worked at discovering the mechanics of how they work and operate. In identifying the structures, one is able to identify where the Spirit has moved when genuine *leitourgia* has been celebrated. The difference Kavanagh notes between *theologia prima* and secondary theological reflection plays an important role in the way that any theologian—structuralist, Welbian, or otherwise—approaches the question of liturgical meaning. At some level, for all theologians, the experience of liturgy moving one's own heart is outside the scope of their analysis.

Given the state of where the human race is on the question of meaning more broadly, we have seen that a new methodology for its study is needed. Such a methodology cannot locate meaning exclusively either in the liturgical acts themselves or exclusively in the experience of the participants. To remain on one side of that divide or the other impoverishes the interpretation and may even lead to a pernicious kind of ambiguity. Thus, a method that tries to bridge this divide is necessary. Welby's *significs* provides such a method. *Signific* analysis of liturgical acts will progress through all three of Welby's levels of signifying. It will begin with a thorough analysis of all the different 'senses' that the act entails: subjective and objective, rubrical and historical. From this place, it will proceed into a nuanced analysis of the 'meaning,' or the intention, of the liturgical act. 'Meaning' will be objective and will come not only from a thorough analysis of structures, but also of the Church's tradition and the words of Sacred Scripture. Only after these first two levels are done with intentionality, rigor, and commitment can the signification move up to the level of 'significance.' At that level, theologians will be able to see the strong connection that 'sense' and 'meaning' have to the way that the believer's life is

changed, the believer's attitudes are altered, and the believer's actions take on flesh in the community. For the Welbian liturgical theologian, the synthesis of these three levels is where meaning in its broadest and most important definition is located.

Such an approach to liturgy will have implications on all involved—from the presider to the congregation to the way the Church thinks about itself. It is not hard to see how liturgical significs could have other implications in additions to the ones we saw here. For example, how does significs help inform the question of liturgy and ethics? Or how does significs help shape religious education or seminary formation? Significs can help musicians, visual artists, sculptors, architects, and the like in designing, implementing, and evaluating the various aspects of liturgy. The present thesis is only meant to introduce the liturgical theological community to Victoria Welby, and her signific method, and to show just how powerful and profound it can be. As I conclude, it seems only fair to let Welby herself have the final word about what her method is, and how it can shape, inform, and inspire every aspect of what it means to be human, and certainly contribute to a more fully realized experience of liturgical significance.

Live in Me; learn and know Me, saith all that is Real. For the glamour or the horror of the Dream which haunts or fascinates, entrances or repels you—the adoration of false hopes, the cult of false despairs—shall vanish with the rising of my Sun, with the bearing and the birth of my being as your true and waiting heritage.

*I open all: I keep back nothing: see that at least you learn to express me nobly, without flaw that need not be, or falsity that shames you, or blankness that defeats your highest powers...*²⁴⁴

²⁴⁴ Victoria Welby, *Significs and Language*, 93-94. These words are the final words of this monograph, and are among the last words that Welby published in her lifetime.

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Appendix: Selected Images of Victoria Lady Welby

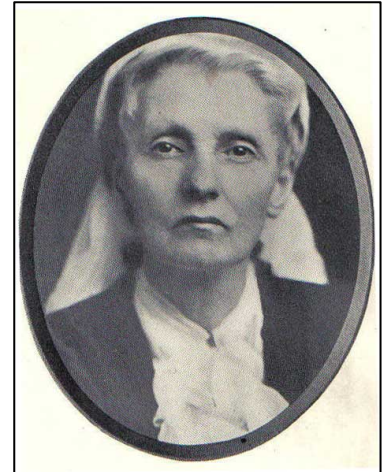
Photographs



Albumen print,
Camille Silvy, 1861.²⁴⁵



Carbon print, Jabez Hughes,
1883 copy of 1866 original.²⁴⁶



Photograph,
G.C. Beresford, date unknown.²⁴⁷

Paintings



Miniature, water-color,
Edward Taylor, 1862.²⁴⁸



The House Builders
Frank Dicksee, 1880.²⁴⁹



Frontispiece.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁵ Original located in the National Portrait Gallery, London. Available at <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp123000/victoria-alexandrina-maria-louisa-nee-stuart-wortley-lady-welby-gregory>. Accessed March 26, 2020.

²⁴⁶ Original located in the Royal Collection Trust, United Kingdom. Available at <https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/4/collection/2800858/victoria-lady-welby-gregory-1837-1912>. Accessed March 26, 2020.

²⁴⁷ This image is available in the front matter of *What is Meaning?*

²⁴⁸ This image is available in the front matter of *Significs and Language*.

²⁴⁹ Available at https://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=5631467. Accessed March 26, 2020.

²⁵⁰ This image was provided to me by Susan Petrilli in personal correspondence dated November 10, 2019. It is located in Ms. Henry Crust, *Echoes of a Larger Life* (London, 1929).