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The Church as Polis

The Privatization of Faith and Public Worship of the Church

by Amy Wen

ABSTRACT:

This paper aims to name a growing rift between belief and ethic in contemporary American society. It suggests the concept of liturgy as 'primary theology' and a liturgical anthropology as the solution to this rift. The paper picks up on voices from Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions to highlight an ecumenical approach in retrieving a Christian worshiping anthropology.

SYNOD:

This paper is connected to the Synod because it dives into the question of how individuals and communities relate to one another and to God. The work of connecting ontology, ethic, and the Mystical Body of Christ has already been begun by leading liturgical scholars such as Fr. Alexander Schmemmann and Virgil Michel OSB. By listening to and amplifying wisdom that reaches across denominational and geopolitical differences, this paper seeks to put into practice what has been modeled by the Synod.



In his book *In Good Company: The Church as Polis*, theologian Stanley Hauerwas diagnoses a particular problem facing Christianity in the United States today—the separation between belief and action as a result of the American legal system. Hauerwas argues the church ought to see itself as an independent entity, and that the worship of the church is absolutely pivotal to the lived conduct that allows the church to be the church (and the world to be the world). This paper will first explore the “issue” at hand: the privatization of faith as a result of the North American political sphere and the effects of this privatization on worship and ethics. It will then survey the terrain of contemporary Christian approaches to belief and conduct. Through a reflection on Orthodox initiation rites and Roman Catholic liturgical history, this paper will give examples for the intertwined natures of rite and ethic. Lastly, this paper will summarize its main arguments and reiterate how worship can address the issue of privatization of faith. In sum, although North Americans have long argued for a separation between church and state, nevertheless the effects of this experiment have produced a concerning privatization of belief and action. Therefore this paper will survey the privatization of belief and seek a solution in Christian worship. This paper will argue that Christianity ought to explore the relationship between worship and ethics as a way for the church to heal the fragmentation in American identity and fuel subsequent action in the public sphere.

1. THE “ISSUE” IN CURRENT DISCOURSE

In his chapter titled “Why Freedom of ‘Belief’ is Not Enough” from the book *In Good Company: The Church as Polis*, theologian Stanley Hauerwas paints a scene for his readers. The year is 1990, and the United States Supreme Court ruled in the case *Employment Division, Dept. of Human Resources of the State of Oregon v. Smith and Black*, that two Native Americans who were fired from their jobs for ingesting peyote—despite religious claims—were rightly denied unemployment benefits by the state.¹ The men argued that due to peyote’s religious nature and the first amendment freedom of religion that they were entitled to, they ought not be penalized for their peyote use. The Court responded that “the Oregon Department of Human Resources [had] no obligation to pay benefits to the men if they had actually violated state

1 Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church As Polis*. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 199.

law; the fact that they had used the peyote in religious worship was not relevant.”² This ruling in favor of legal jurisdiction over *actions* and not *beliefs* set a debate in motion about the limitation of freedom of religion, most notably in the private and public expressions of it. A journalist named George Will argued that after the ruling—when not applying this same logic to other open religious freedom cases—the court missed the opportunity to reassert “the distinction that lies at the heart of the constitutional understanding of ‘religion’: the distinction between ‘conduct’ and ‘mere belief.’”³ Will elaborates on the difference between “conduct” and “mere belief” by retelling the story of the United States’ founding. He states that the

founders of the American republic wished to tame and domesticate religious passions of the sort that convulsed Europe. They aimed to do so not by establishing religion, but by establishing a commercial republic—capitalism. They aimed to submerge people’s turbulent energies in self-interest [and] pursuit of material comforts...It was Jefferson who held that ‘operations of the mind’ are not subject to legal coercion, but that ‘acts of the body’ are.⁴

Will argues that rather than guaranteeing the ability to freely exercise religion, Americans chose instead to “make religions private and subordinate.”⁵ From Will’s commentary on the case, the implications that Hauerwas finds to be the most sobering are—1) the fragmentation of conduct from belief, and 2) the intentional *subordination* of religion to the private sphere in American political philosophy. Returning to the case of the two Native American men, this distinction made it such that they were allowed to *believe* whatever they wanted to about the religiosity of peyote, but in this case their *conduct* (having trace amounts of peyote in their system while working) was deemed to be a violation of state law regardless of the religious motivations.

Citizens of the United States are all too familiar with the effects of separation of church and state in the political sphere, but of more concern for this paper is a parallel, often overlooked question. What did the privatization of belief

2 Hauerwas, 200.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

do to the identity of the church and the contents of Christian conduct? Hauerwas charitably notes that while it is still up for debate whether this “subordinating tendency” was the intention of the founders, there is still a lived reality to contend with.⁶ The lived reality is that “Christianity in America is private and subordinate; it has succumbed to a central purpose of America’s political arrangements, i.e., the subordination of religion to the political order, meaning the primacy of democracy.”⁷ Within American Christianity, Hauerwas argues that this same impulse flourishes—that “the conspiracy operates whenever theologians acquiesce in the assumption that Christianity consists of a set of beliefs that can be abstracted from practices and actions.”⁸

In the chapter “Teaching Christian Ethics as Worship” of *In Good Company*, Hauerwas addresses this schism between belief and conduct as a key issue in contemporary Christian ethics—so much so that it is at the *core* of how he structures his course for seminarians at Duke Divinity School.⁹ In this chapter Hauerwas writes that for the American church, “nothing could be more salutary than being reminded that what makes Christians Christian is our worship of God. Of course, the praise of God cannot be limited to ‘liturgy,’ but it is nonetheless the case that Christians learn how to be praiseworthy people through worship.”¹⁰ To this end, he writes

I was sure that it did little good to teach seminarians Christian ethics as a series of alternative positions...while no doubt such teaching gives students some quite valuable information, it seldom initiates students into the activity of moral reflection by which they acquire skills necessary for their ministry. It occurred to me that whatever else the ministry may be said to be about the one thing ministers clearly do in an embattled church is lead their congregations in worship.¹¹

Hauerwas comments about this pedagogical priority, and that he “also hoped that by patterning the course on the liturgy [he] could defeat the dreaded

6 Hauerwas, 201.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Hauerwas, 154.

10 Hauerwas, 154.

11 Ibid.

‘and,’ as in ‘theology *and* worship.’”¹² Hauerwas argues that the “and” mentality between theology ‘and’ worship serves to mirror the schism between religious belief and conduct addressed earlier, and that it is *particularly* a problem for those who “‘do ethics’ since ‘ethics’ too often is understood by theologians and ethicists alike as what you do *after* you have the theoretical issues straight in theology.”¹³ This divorce between belief and conduct seeps into even the institutional memory and techniques of the seminary, and is a truly insidious false dichotomy. Hauerwas writes that “through the liturgical shape of the course, [he] hoped that students might learn that part of the problem is found in those practices that make the distinction between theology and ethics appear to be intelligible.”¹⁴ If this is a problem even in the way we pass the substance of Christian ethics on to the leaders of the church, how too might the effects of this belief-conduct schism trickle into the broader church?

2. MAPPING THE TERRAIN

Beyond Hauerwas, other contemporary Christian voices have picked up on the same vein of argument—that the connection between how worship informs and shapes belief (and conduct) is vitally important to letting the church be the church. Hauerwas applied this affirmation of worship as the scaffold for his seminary students’ Christian ethics curriculum, yet the impulse to return to worship as the source for ethics can be found in many and varied places outside the walls of the academy. In his book *You Are What You Love*, theologian James K.A. Smith sets out to close the gap between belief and conduct by re-defining liturgy and showing how liturgies shape the way we live. This affirmation cuts to the core of the privatization of faith, but with a slightly different vocabulary and plan of attack. At the core of Smith’s argument is his view of anthropology—he believes humans *are* the things that they love, because “love is like autopilot, orienting us without our thinking about it.”¹⁵ Smith argues that, when left to our own devices, this autopilot will gravitate toward all the wrong things; so how are we to intervene? As opposed to a historic *ordo*, Smith introduces liturgy as the generalized practices of habituation, repetition, and imitation that are

12 Hauerwas, 155.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 James K. A. Smith. *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, a Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 15.

main factors for the shaping of human persons. He argues that stepping into a right set of practices will inform the formation of our character, value system, and loves.¹⁶ In Smith's system, stepping into the practices of the church is what reshapes the cultural liturgies we regularly absorb. He sets the parameters of Christian liturgy by defining that "liturgy is action; and the actions are not just human actions and not just divine actions but an interaction between God and his people, in which the congregation self-consciously participates."¹⁷ It is by acknowledging that we are worshiping beings and rightly ordering our worship that our beliefs and conduct are reshaped.

In addition to these two contemporary Protestant voices (Hauerwas and Smith), we hear echoes of a similar sentiment for bridging belief and conduct across the theologies of both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Fr. Aidan Kavanagh, a Roman Catholic priest and liturgist argues in his book *On Liturgical Theology* for reclaiming worship as the primary place one 'does' theology. In his chapter "Liturgical Theology," Fr. Kavanagh describes a phenomenon he has seen in multiple healthy churches he has visited across different traditions: that "'something vastly mysterious' transpires in the church as it engages in worship worthy of Creation and congruent with the human City within which it abides as witness to God in Christ...the worshiping assembly never comes away from such an experience unchanged, and the assembly's continuing adjustment to that change is not merely a theological datum but theology itself."¹⁸ This 'something vastly mysterious'—the constant synthesizing work of a church pushing its assembly to change and respond to the lived experience of the reality of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit—happens in the worshiping life of the church and is what Fr. Kavanagh calls *theologia prima*.¹⁹ Worship, not systematic theology, is where Fr. Kavanagh sees the church primarily performing, believing, then living out the "stuff" of what it knows to be true about Scripture, Christ, and the world. To Fr. Kavanagh, systematic theology is a necessary and incredibly thoughtful way in which to speak about the church, but since it is more of an annotation or explanation to the *theologia prima* that the church already participate in, it ought to be deemed "secondary theology."

16 Smith, 18-21.

17 Smith, 73.

18 Kavanagh, 76.

19 Kavanagh, 77.

Orthodox professor Vigen Guroian too affirms in his essay “Seeing Worship as Ethics: An Orthodox Perspective” that there exists a “separation, if not an outright divorce, of worship, belief, and ethics in much of American religious discourse... suffice it to say that the near total disregard by Christian ethicists of the *lex orandi* as source or resource for ethics testifies to such a separation or divorce of ethics from dogma and religious practices.”²⁰ He goes on to write that “in view of this omission in religious ethics, my purpose is to explore the relation or correlation of worship with right conduct and good works as understood from within the Orthodox tradition.”²¹ In order to do so, he describes an Orthodox take on an ancient liturgical formula: “*lex orandi, lex credendi, lex bene operandi*.”²² Guroian argues that this formula for describing the flow of faith into worship and ethics—the law of what is prayed (*orandi*) is the law of what is believed (*credendi*) which then is the law of the ‘good operation’ (*bene operandi* in Orthodox theology as a ‘good life’; usually *vivendi* or ‘the law of what is lived’ in traditional Roman Catholic belief)—has been severely neglected in contemporary Christianity. To explore *how* liturgy shapes communities and individuals in belief and ethics, Guroian presents the Orthodox initiation rites of Baptism, Chrismation, and Eucharistic union as an example of the ethical imperative woven into the rites themselves.

3. EASTERN ORTHODOX RITES OF INITIATION: A CASE STUDY

Part of the rite of baptism—whether adult or infant—of an individual into the Armenian Apostolic tradition, involves the performance of an exorcism. Guroian writes that

these exorcisms provide the basis for a powerful social ethic. Not only is the spirit of evil exorcized from the catechumen but from the air, water, and the oil as well. From this vantage baptism is a proleptic re-creation of the entire cosmos. Exorcism is a *necessary* action of Christian ethics because there is a demonic reality which obstructs the way of return to God. Exorcism is *possible* because the Lord of all Creation has waged a

20 Vigen Guroian. “Seeing Worship As Ethics: An Orthodox Perspective.” (*The Journal of Religious Ethics* 13, no. 2 (1985): 332-59), 332.

21 Guroian, 332.

22 Guroian, 333.

successful struggle against Satan and has redeemed us by conquering death through his submission to it on the cross.²³

This reflection on the rite (Guroian then goes to quote the entirety of the exorcistic prayer which is prayed over the soon-to-be baptized in the liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Church) outlines for us how the liturgical rite of baptism holds in itself a recapitulation of deeply rooted Orthodox theology—beliefs about cosmic spiritual warfare, sin, and the triumph of Christ in the atonement. Guroian quotes Fr. Alexander Schmemmann on the meaning these declarations of belief have in one’s understanding of their own autonomy. He says that “such a *sacramental realism* does not allow for an *ethical idealism* which would interpret evil as a function or valence of ignorance or as the mere absence in nature of some perfection achievable in an indeterminate future. Neither does it permit a Pelagianism which would define the Christian life and the virtues and values belonging to it as products solely of human freedom. Human freedom is not a power or state of being autonomous of divine intervention. Human freedom is a divinely bestowed ability to cooperate with God to his glory and purpose.”²⁴

Guroian then moves on to the rite of Chrismation, the anointing with oil that seals and confirms the new order established in baptism. He quotes in his paper these words spoken over each of the parts of the body as they are being anointed:

Sweet ointment in the name of Jesus Christ is poured upon thee as a seal of incorruptible heavenly gifts.

The eyes:

This seal in the name of Jesus Christ enlighten thine eyes, that thou mayest never sleep unto death.

The ears:

This holy anointing be unto thee for the hearing of divine commandments.

23 Guroian, 338.

24 Guroian, 340. Quoting Schmemmann from his book *Of Water and Spirit* (1974).

The nostrils:

This seal in the name of Jesus Christ be to thee a sweet smell from life unto life.

The mouth:

This seal in the name of Jesus Christ be to thee a guard for thy mouth and strong door for thy lips.

The hands:

This seal in the name of Jesus Christ be to thee a cause for good works and for all virtuous deeds and conduct.

The heart:

This seal establish in thee a pure heart and renew within thee an upright spirit.

The back:

This seal in the name of Jesus Christ be to thee a shield of strength thereby to quench all the fiery darts of the Evil One.

The feet:

This divine seal direct thy goings unto life everlasting that thou mayest not be shaken.²⁵

To expand on this rite, Guroian provides the following commentary:

There is a markedly ethical imperative in the Armenian baptismal rite. The actions and words of this rite bestow upon persons (ontologically) and call them (ethically) to a certain disposition and character which, if they conscientiously strive to cultivate within themselves, mark them off radically from the selfishness, pride, vengefulness, will to power, and violence of this fallen world that condemn it to death unless...they be transformed. A baptismal ethic develops persons of humility,

25 Guroian, 342-343. Guroian quotes directly from the baptismal rite in *The Sacraments: Symbols of Our Faith* (1983) book used by the Armenian Church of America.

purity of heart, contrition, gratitude, and peacefulness. These virtues constitute that Christic character which Christians must make their own through constant and conscientious spiritual struggle. Because their old selves have been drowned in the baptismal waters and they have been resurrected with Christ, Christ himself becomes the pattern of their lives to which they are called by him to conform.²⁶

These are radical elements of Christian initiation that, when replaced or missing altogether from non-liturgical worship, leaves a real gap in understanding (and acting upon) the ontological change in baptized persons. Guroian's work is a case study in the liturgical formula he referenced earlier. It is impossible to perform the Armenian Rite of Chrismation without honoring the connection between *lex orandi* (the application of the rite itself), *lex credendi* (the summary of faith and declaration of Christic character being imparted on the individual), and *lex bene operandi* (the actual living out of this Christic character in the eyes, ears, nostrils, etc that have just been sealed). Guroian demonstrates here how the Armenian Apostolic tradition bridges the gap between belief and practice by joining them together in the performative language and values inscribed into these Orthodox rites of initiation.

4. LITURGY AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Guroian's work on retrieving liturgy as the source of transformation finds itself in the good company of other American liturgists. In her paper "Liturgy and Social Transformation: Exploring the Relationship" Dr. Margaret Mary Kelleher synthesizes the works of notable liturgists to provide background for American Christianity's liturgical history.²⁷ She begins by honoring Fr. Keith

26 Guroian, 243. Guroian writes in his endnotes that this reflection is specifically rooted in the theological tradition of St. Gregory of Nyssa. He quotes the following of St. Gregory's writings to clarify his own summation:

"The manner of our salvation owes less to instruction by teaching than to what He who entered into fellowship with man actually did. In him life became a reality, so that by means of the flesh which he assumed and thereby deified salvation might come to all that was akin to it. Hence it was necessary to devise some way by which, the baptismal procedure, there might be an affinity and likeness between disciple and master. We must therefore note what characterized the Author of our life, in order that (as the apostle says [Heb. 2:10]) those who follow may pattern themselves after the Pioneer of our salvation."

27 Kelleher, Margaret M. "Liturgy and Social Transformation: Exploring the Relationship." *US Catholic Historian* 16, no. 4 (1998): 58-70.

F. Pecklers' book on the liturgical movement in the United States from 1926-1955 as a resource for how liturgy has been involved in social transformation.²⁸ Kelleher notes that "it was in the 1930s and 1940s that the connection between liturgical and social reform became strong, and Pecklers shows how liturgy became a prominent concern for people in such movements as Catholic Action, the Catholic Worker, the Champion Propaganda Movement, Friendship House, the Grail Movement, and the Christian Family Movement."²⁹ Kelleher further writes that the evidence of this explicit connection can be found in the work of Fr. Virgil Michel—and specifically in his publication *Orate Frates*.³⁰ This journal was founded by Fr. Michel in 1926 to promote the liturgical movement, and later gained the following explicit motto: "The goal of restoring all things in Christ was extended to include the notion of working for a restoration or regeneration of the social order."³¹ To this end, Kelleher writes that

"Fr. Michel received permission from Abbot Acluin Deutsch to send a complimentary copy of all the publications of the Liturgical Press to the editors of the *Catholic Worker* 'so that they might integrate the liturgy more fully into their program of social action.' Fr. Michel also visited Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in their New York House of Hospitality and this strengthened the relationship. Just as Virgil Michel made a point of covering issues of social justice in *Orate Fratres*, so too did Dorothy Day begin to include material on liturgy in issues of the *Catholic Worker*. While they did not always agree on language or strategies they were united in their conviction that the Mystical Body of Christ was at the heart of both liturgical and social reform."³²

Fr. Michel and organizations like Catholic Action and the Catholic Worker each had their own language for articulating the connection between the liturgy, the Mystical Body of Christ, and the necessary active participation in society that an encounter with Christ produced. In them, we see a time in the United States where belief *and* action came together for the good of the nation.

28 Pecklers, Keith F. *The Unread Vision: The liturgical movement in the United States of America, 1926-1955*. Liturgical Press, 1998.

29 Kelleher, 58.

30 Ibid.

31 Kelleher, 59.

32 Kelleher, 61.

5. REASONING & IMPLICATIONS

The purposes of this paper have not been to chastise evangelicals (or any other group of Christians) for their worship deficiencies, but to point out a real issue created in contemporary America due to the privatization of faith and divorce of belief from action. Like every good revival movement that seeks to return to richer theological waters, the Christian move to address this rift should never be a mere nostalgia or sentimentality. The enduring effects of the *Ad fontes!* injunction of the Reformation or the *ressourcement* movement within Roman Catholicism were possible because the strengths of these sources—of Scripture, Thomism, patristic theology, etc—were returned to and appropriately synthesized within the particularities of their time. How too could a new wave of liturgical reform—grounded in the work of Fr. Michel and others like him—help us mend the division between belief and action? This paper is not advocating for any one historic *ordo* (as hopefully attested to by the ecumenical breadth of sources), but merely that an ancient Christian liturgical formula may have answers to the growing division between belief and action in the United States.

In one final illustration, Fr. Kavanagh writes the following analogy between neurological research and maturation of the church:

Neurologists point out that a human being, so far from being born with innate coordination of its senses, must grow itself into a sort of envelope of sensation which then forms for the individual his or her own peculiar physical and emotional self-image. An infant first regards its limbs as strangers. Only by constant and long-term stimulation does the child come to recognize its own members as part of itself. It learns to associate pain and other sensations with various bodily parts...it seems that an individual's nervous system creates and holds in being that individual's real self-image and awareness of a personal identity which is the individual's fundamental principle of operation.

Analogously, a corporate entity such as a church might perhaps be said to grow itself into a sort of envelope of sensation which then forms its own peculiar self-image, its own real awareness of corporate identity which is its own fundamental principle of operation. The stimulation process which is most responsible for a church's growth into its own identity-envelope, and

which is therefore responsible as well for how that church functions in the real order, is its life of constant and increasingly complex worship. For in worship alone is the church gathered in the closest obvious proximity to its fundamental values, values which are always assuming stimulative form in time, space, image, word, and repeated act. The richer this stimulation is, under the criteria of the Gospel, it follows that the more conscious, aware, self-possessed, and vigorously operational the given church will be.³³

May the church be the church so the world can be the world. May humans become what they love through Christian worship. May we see our participation in Sunday liturgy itself as *theologia prima*, the primary point of contact in which we know and love God. May the performative action of our rites compel us to act on the ontological change that takes place in our baptismal and chrismation vows. Lastly, may Christians retrieve the connection between liturgy and social transformation. By returning to the ancient formula of faith, may Christians become a source of healing for the rift between belief and action that plagues American social identity. May Christians show a new way to exist that does not rely upon broken concepts of personhood and capitalism, but allows for a harmony of ontology and ethic. *Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex bene operandi.*



33 Kavanagh, 62. Kavanagh is a bit lengthy here, but his analogy remains one of the best descriptors I have read for how the worshiping activity of the church actually helps her name the boundaries of her own corpus/corporate identity. It is well worth the entire quote and I'd like to speculate that Stanley Hauerwas adapted his concept of 'letting the church be the church' from his friendship with Fr. Kavanagh during their time together at Notre Dame.

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