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Sarah Coakley

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BOOK REVIEWS

Acting Liturgically: Philosophical Reflections on Religious Practice, by Nicholas Wolterstorff. Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. ix + 306. \$67.00 (hardcover).

SARAH COAKLEY, University of Cambridge, Australian Catholic University

The indefatigable Nicholas Wolterstorff—whose recent autobiography (*In this World of Wonders: Memoir of a Life in Learning*, 2019) has reminded us afresh that no crushing life events can ever kill the impetus to philosophy—is still hard at work in his late '80s with ever-original insights, this time on the topic of Christian liturgy. In the introduction to this book, he explains that his interest in this theme might never have been piqued but for a chance invitation to serve on the central committee for his denomination's Liturgical Revision in the mid-1960s. But it has really been in the last 15 years or so (ably assisted and inspired by his former pupil, Terence Cuneo, and sustained by a group funded by the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship) that Wolterstorff's publications on this topic have blossomed. This particular volume enshrines thirteen essays of varying focus, but all designed to "target" Wolterstorff's "fellow philosophers," and to goad them into thinking more about what is going on in Christian liturgy and why it matters philosophically. However, as Wolterstorff sagely admits at the outset, "This has been the most difficult to write of all the books that I have written, partly because liturgical activity is among the most complex forms of human activity, partly because I have almost no predecessors in the project . . ." (viii).

Does he succeed? The answer to this question doubtless depends on one's presumptions about the proper "reach" of analytic philosophical methods. On the one hand, Wolterstorff's attempts to engage with key moments in the history of Christian liturgy, to probe a variety of contemporary liturgical sets from different denominations (including the Orthodox), to interrogate the work of a handful of contemporary (anthropological) ritual theorists, and to interact with some leading theologians who focus especially on liturgical expression, is nothing short of heroic, and it garners many remarkable insights. On the other hand, there is no mistaking



his own training and *attrait* as an analytical philosopher of a particular generation—albeit one who is nonetheless still chafing so creatively at the edges of his discipline. What we get is a slightly mixed bag of results: some essays in this collection leave one slightly *affectively* disappointed (given the richly complex topic of ritual and its impacts) by their extreme analytic dryness and testing focus on small philosophical distinctions. Others, as we shall see, take off into larger arenas which creatively join the dots between liturgical enactment, social ethics, politics, and personal transformation. It is in the relation of these latter themes that Wolterstorff leaves his mark with particular suggestiveness and originality.

The book is divided into four unequal parts. The first, and largest, part (“Liturgy, Enactments, and Scripts”) is devoted to certain “ground-clearing” questions which those coming newly to the engagement of liturgy and philosophy might need to negotiate before proceeding further. “What is liturgy?” (Chapter 1) is fundamental and is concerned with how to locate liturgy “on the ontological map” (29). Wolterstorff’s conclusion, after jousting with several alternative views, is that “An enactment of a liturgy consists of the participants together performing scripted verbal, gestural and auditory actions, the prescribed purpose of their doing so being to engage God directly. . .and to be engaged by God” (29–30). This might seem a somewhat anodyne conclusion to a quite searching investigation; but actually it inscribes most of the distinctiveness of Wolterstorff’s approach to liturgy which are spelled out in the essays that follow: liturgy’s necessarily “scripted” nature, its particular forms of speech (divine and human), its interactive and interpersonal capacities, and its irreducibly bodily expressions. In this way, Wolterstorff attempts to tread a path between positions that have been espoused of late by competing liturgical and ritualist exponents—whether those who seek too urgently to identify a core “meaning” in ritual, as opposed to its richer gestural enactments (see 83), or those at the other end of the spectrum (Wolterstorff here chooses the late Catherine Bell as his target) who overlook the “scripted” nature of ritual and thus fail to comprehend the “norm-infused” nature of it (see 20). Whether this very brief critical assessment of Bell’s classic work on ritual is a fair one strikes me as worthy of further debate: the great strength and subtlety of her *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992) lies in its analysis of the negotiation of the conscious and the unconscious in ritual, which—far from lacking normative impact—surely expands the range of what might in other forms of discourse be more simply identifiable as “norm-infused.” Moreover, whilst in *Christian* liturgy “script” is usually (but not always) given, it surely does not necessarily follow that *all* ritual is, or should be, “scripted” in the same way.

Indeed, this question of the relation of the conscious to the unconscious in Christian liturgy haunts Wolterstorff’s book in more than one way, and I am not certain it is satisfactorily resolved. In another critical assessment of a contemporary anthropological text on ritual (Humphrey and Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual* (1994)), Wolterstorff objects

to their proposal that “the intentions and thoughts of the [ritual] actor make no difference to the *identity* of the act performed” (see 48). His insistence that intentionality must have *some* impact on what one has done (or not done) in a liturgy seems *prime facie* entirely convincing; the trouble is that—for one who also takes bodily and gestural movement in liturgy as seriously as Wolterstorff wishes to—the import of *conscious*, individual intentionality for the liturgy as a whole (see Chapter 4: “On bended knee”) is curiously hard to assess. Harder, I propose, than Wolterstorff would like to admit. As the anthropologist Talal Asad has been wont to remind us over the years, intentional “unbelief” may be just as much the result of “untaught bodies” as it is of untaught (rational) intentionality. Thus, I do wonder whether Wolterstorff’s conclusion to his fascinating Chapter 5 (“What are those without faith doing in liturgical enactments?”), *viz.*, that such people are “neither sincere nor insincere” (120), is sufficiently nuanced. For instance, if their own *unconscious* propulsions—and their intermingling with others in the acts of faith such that they “lose” themselves (another matter which Wolterstorff, following Schmemmann, wants to highlight and approve: see 55)—cause them to use the bodily gestures of faith without yet *consciously* and *intentionally* embracing it, from what perspective can it be said with such certainty that they are “neither sincere nor insincere?”

Many of the essays in the two central sections of the book (“Liturgy and Scripture” and “God in the Liturgy”) revolve around questions of the liturgy in relation to *time*. Particularly important here is Chapter 11 (“Does God know what we say to God?”), which draws into the realm of the liturgical Wolterstorff’s now well-known views on divine aseity, which he argues again here to be incompatible with “God know[ing] things other than God in general” (247). And if this is so (although strict defenders of Thomas would of course dispute this), then those who believe that addressing God in liturgy involves God “knowing what we are saying” must also reject the traditional doctrine of divine aseity; for “God [must be] conditioned in a certain way by things other than God.” This is arguably the most contentious moment in the book philosophically, and will surely garner further critique and discussion, since Wolterstorff does not here clarify the extent of God’s “conditioning” by human worship specifically, nor whether it involves a wholesale rejection of divine aseity or only a “strong” version of it. Other essays in Parts II and III illuminatingly tackle the concepts of “repetition and reenactment,” “commemoration,” “liturgical present tense,” and “God’s liturgical activity.” In each of these, questions of time (and the way we might say liturgy “plays with time”) are implicitly to the fore, as Wolterstorff discerningly rehearses various philosophical options for understanding what is at stake. Because he comes at these topics afresh with analytic tools, it takes him a seemingly long time to arrive once more at the theological position honed through the great Reformation debates on the Mass, *viz.*, that the eucharist cannot be a “re-enactment,” and only a “repetition” of a very particular sort

(162–163). Nonetheless, the contemporary philosophic argumentation is a worthy complement to the classic theological exploration.

In a particularly fine earlier essay in Part II (Chapter 6, “On the liturgical reading and singing of Scripture”) on how lectors and congregations enter into what Wolterstorff calls a “bound revisionist appropriation” of the Scriptural text (142), he comments passingly that recitation of the psalms by the people “requires training and theological sensitivity *if it is to be done properly*” (147, my emphasis). Wolterstorff does not pause at this point to clarify how we know when a liturgy has indeed been “done properly,” or found to be sacramentally “efficacious” (as opposed to “valid” in the classic Augustinian distinction); but the two essays in the last part of the book (to my mind the most exciting and generative) finally confront the crucial moral question of when “love” and “justice” is, or is not, furthered by liturgical activity. Chapter 12 (“Liturgical love”) urges that “neighbor love” may indeed be “formed” and even expanded in the context of liturgy—through Scriptural injunction, preaching, acts of reconciliation, and encounters with those one otherwise might not know or care to know (including refugees, ex-convicts, “people of color,” etc.: 272). Wolterstorff’s analysis here is, as ever, deeply clarifying; but the troubling problem remains—as theological scholars such as William Cavanaugh and Lauren Winner have highlighted unforgettably—that so many Christian liturgies that are ostensibly “done properly” continue to sustain, and even reinforce, conditions of prejudice and injustice, seemingly without the enactors even being aware of it. (The issue of the “unconscious” in liturgy here reappears again disturbingly.) In the last essay of the book (Chapter 13, “Justice and injustice in Christian liturgies”) Wolterstorff directly engages the issue of black suffering in the United States and its relation to Jesus’s crucifixion as portrayed in “mainline liturgies.” Using the work of James Cone as a sensitive point of comparison, he then avers—curiously, to my mind—that he, and “most” of what he takes to be his “readers” would be incapable of “identifying” with Jesus’s suffering on the cross in such a way as Cone and his black followers (290). This leaves us, at the end of this extraordinarily rich and original book, with a major epistemic and moral conundrum: if liturgy is the crucial realm where the ills of American racism are to be confronted through “performative,” “formative,” and “expressive” means, such that new “life-meaning” capacities are released for the participants, is it not an urgent matter to explore further how liturgy can *unite* those participants who otherwise would be societally and epistemically divided? If Wolterstorff has not answered this pressing question in this particular volume, he has in a masterful way laid the groundwork for its further discussion and debate.