Other Voices, Other Rooms

The Future of Liturgical Language in Postmodern Cultures

Nathan D. Mitchell

Based on the Sophia Award Lecture, presented at Washington Theological Union in 2005, this noted liturgist addresses the need for post-modern Christians, who live in “recited societies,” to learn or relearn a liturgical language whose primary story and native narrative is the body itself.

Much of the history of Christian liturgy could be written, I suspect, as a chronicle of choices believers have made about the proper words to use in public worship. History confronts us with voluble liturgies that are a virtual raid on the inarticulate. Perhaps because it transgresses the silence that ought to surround a God whose name surpasses speech, liturgical language has always been caught in the cross-hairs of crisis. Its words are cataphatic; its instincts apophatic. Its doctrine is doxological, its doxologies doctrinal. It submits spontaneity to structure—knowing all the while that the church can never really regulate what it cannot control. In its heart of hearts, the worshipping community knows that dispossession is the only means by which we may “own” the objects of our thanksgiving and praise. Christians care deeply about ritual acts but they know these acts can be verified only by what Emmanuel Levinas called the “liturgy of the neighbor.”

This essay on the future of liturgical language in postmodern cultures will not directly address the current liturgical documents or debates within Catholicism.

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I have chosen instead to concentrate on the theology of the liturgical act itself—understanding it as “linguistic” in the broadest sense (i.e., as an action that simultaneously embraces the audible words of speech and the visible words of sacrament and ritual gesture). I will ask: How can we Christians defend our preposterous claim that human speech may (and/or must) be heard as God’s Word? And, how can we have the audacity to assert that all this happens preeminently within the worshipping assembly?

My focus, then, will be the fate of liturgical action within the context of postmodernity. The essay falls somewhat naturally into two parts. Part One, “Calling God Names,” deals with the postmodern problematic of liturgical prayer by concentrating on that problem’s two primary sources: Scripture itself and the Cartesian dualism that privileges mind/thought over body/action. In short, how and why did liturgy become not “something we do” but something we think about, discuss, plan, and then produce. Part Two asks how human speech itself has been altered within the “recited societies” of postmodern cultures and what impact this may have on the language of liturgy. I will suggest that liturgy’s native tongue is not textual but embodied and iconic.

**Calling God Names:**

*The Problematic of Liturgical Language*

In a recent essay Laurence Paul Hemming makes a perceptive comment about postmodern experiences of public prayer: “We are no longer constituted liturgically in prayer,” he writes, “we constitute for ourselves the liturgy that best expresses our interior psychic life. Liturgy becomes style. It does not produce me, I produce it. In consequence, when I say that it ‘feels right’ I am saying that it fits an interior disposition I already have—if I think about it at all” (Hemming, 2001,446, emphasis added). One may reshape Hemming’s point as an aphorism: The liturgy no longer makes us; we make the liturgy. Public worship is perceived as selbst gemacht; a self-consciously planned, home-made fabrication rather than a selfless act of surrendering to the Holy One whom the ancient Greek liturgies (and the Roman liturgy of Good Friday) call “Holy God, Holy Strong One, Holy Undying One!”

Calling God names—“holy, strong, undying”—is not, of course, exactly the same thing as naming God. Postmodern theologians like Jean-Luc Marion remind us that, “The Name [‘God’] does not name God as an essence; it designates what passes beyond every name. The Name designates what one does not name and says that one does not name it” (Marion, 2002a, 157, emphasis added). Our willingness to call God names while refusing to name God results in a pragmatic theology of absence which is not, however, a theology of God’s non-presence. It is, instead, a theology whose very name-calling reveals that we cannot name, and
hence serves to shield God from presence (i.e., from confinement to or containment within the causal categories of traditional metaphysics and “onto-theology”). For as Marion and other postmodern theologians would argue, God is utterly beyond signification, and hence, surpasses any categories of “presence” or “absence.”

The unnameability of God is, as everyone knows, a major preoccupation of postmodern theology. This preoccupation is not purely speculative; it derives, in part, from the biblical record of revelation itself. In fact, I contend that the postmodern crisis of liturgical language has two distinct sources: one biblical, the other philosophical. Each of these deserves comment.

Irenaeus of Lyons (+ ca. 200 C.E.) once said that Christ’s coming “brought us all possible newness by bringing us himself. For Christ was announced in advance, and what was announced was precisely this: that Newness in person would come to renew and quicken humankind” (see Rousseau, 846–49 and Marion 2002b, 124). Commenting on this text, Jean-Luc Marion concludes that:

Easter innovates, and does so radically. . . . The innovation has a name—Christ—and a function—to render [hu]man[kind] new . . . Since the Resurrection of Christ, . . . nothing will be as it was before. Since the Resurrection of Christ, we thus must relearn everything, like children (or rather, . . . like an old person, overcome by newness). . . . We are thrown forward into a world too new for us. (Marion, 2002b:124).

We might well expect that Christ’s radical newness would translate into a more immediate and palpable presence of God within the world—a presence that would not only let us call God names but also open us to know and experience God’s incomprehensible nearness in the risen body of Jesus. We are profoundly perplexed, therefore, to discover that in the Christian scriptures, Easter produces just the opposite: not a new and more certain presence, but a heightened (and daunting) awareness of absence. Thus, the Risen One’s first command to Mary Magdalene is “Back off! Don’t touch!” (John 20:17). And even if the tardy twin Thomas is invited to put his finger in the nail prints and his hand in the wounded side, Jesus chides his weak faith and implies that belief without the testimony of bodily evidence is better (John 20:27-29). Everywhere one turns in the gospel literature, the language surrounding Easter is ominously empty and distant.

John and the synoptics speak of young men or announcing angels whose terrible message confirms that “He is not here!” (Jn 2Mt 28:6; Mk 16,6; Lk 24:6). The empty tomb has become a void, a vacancy, a stony icon of loss and absence.

Luke similarly surprises us. The disciples on the road to Emmaus meet a garulous Stranger who, when finally recognized in the breaking of bread, instantly “vanishes from their sight” (Lk 24:31). The Greek text of Lk 24:30 says; “He became invisible.” Nor does the Ascension scene in Acts console us. Far from confirming that heaven is a beatifying “place of presence,” Acts 1:9 tells us that “a
cloud took [Jesus] from their sight,” seized, concealed, swallowed him whole. This cloud snatches the Risen One away, abducts him, erases the evidence, exchanges Christ’s body for a void, and produces not a presence but a disappearance. 

Paradoxically, then, Easter not only intensifies the problematic of presence; it further complicates the possibility of naming God. Wolfhart Pannenberg once wrote that in the Easter mystery, “the Revealer of the eschatological will of God became the very incarnation of [that] eschatological reality itself” (Pannenberg, 1977:367; text slightly modified; emphasis added). That is what Christians believe. But at the very moment when God's eschatological promise to humanity is embodied and fulfilled in Jesus’ rising from the dead, our access to that presence is cancelled, cut off. As counterintuitive as it may seem, the very incarnation of the eschatological reality that embodies God's decision to abide forever with us in the risen flesh of Christ is translated, in the Christian scriptures as a discourse of absence, disappearance, distance, and invisibility. As Acts 1 suggests, Easter and its aftermath end with Jesus going away, and with the speechless, clueless disciples looking up into an empty sky.

So the first source of the postmodern crisis in liturgical language is biblical; it flows from the Easter narrative itself. If God's eschatological will and presence are revealed in the person and work of Jesus, why does Jesus have to “go away” in order to be present? Already in the gospels, the Easter mystery has become a message and Christ's risen body an inscribed text, a topic of ongoing debate and discussion. The Emmaus story may reach its climax in a “request for presence” (Luke 24:29) but it begins and ends in gossip. Which is, of course, a short definition of Christian worship itself: the liturgy is the church's public gossip about God, its rumors about One whose presence can be discerned, named, and known only as an absence.

The second source of our postmodern neuralgia about liturgical language is philosophical, and it arises, ancestrally, from the thought of René Descartes, especially his Third Meditation on First Philosophy. Space here allows only two brief comments about Descartes' discussion of selfhood and God in that text.

The first concerns Descartes’ view of the human subject, the “self.” Descartes’ “Ego” is constituted by thought and autonomy, interiority and isolation. The human self emerges not from dialogue with other persons or the Other, who is
God, but from a wholly internal dialogue. It is no accident that Descartes’ celebrated formula—*Cogito, ergo sum;* I think, therefore I am—is formulated in the first person singular.

The second, concerns Descartes’ view of God as a clear and distinct idea whose reality is “eminent” (i.e., more “real” than us or the physical world at large). Descartes tells us:

> By ‘God,’ I mean a substance that’s infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, and supremely powerful—the thing from which I and everything else that may exist derive our existence. The more I consider these attributes, the less it seems that they could have come from me alone. So I must conclude that God necessarily exists” (Descartes, 1992:48).

Right; but there lies the fly in the ointment. Descartes protests that “the idea of God is completely clear and distinct and contains more subjective reality than any other idea.” But this creates a problem, not a solution. God becomes an idea—and those idea remains, at the end of the day, a conclusion reached by an autonomous, thinking subject. God is met, Descartes implies, not in body, history, and world, but in the self’s isolating interiority.

Such are the remote sources of the problematic of liturgical language. For us heirs of Descartes’ *Third Meditation,* prayer belongs to the interior world of thought and ideas; it is a psychological act, something we intend and produce. God is met not as the Hebrew Bible suggests, in the disruptive mode of revelation, in the tumult of bodies creating history together. Descartes’ God is an inference, a predication—not the sudden, unexpected eruption that leaps from the pages of the Hebrew Bible, flashing flames of fire, shaking the wilderness of Kadesh, and cleansing the prophet’s lips with a burning coal—while ever replenishing the widow’s cruse of oil and breathing gently on the back of Elijah’s neck. Of course, if God is an “inference from the self,” the very nature of public prayer changes. Liturgy becomes a function of the meanings, choices, and intentions that “I” and “you” (another solitary “I”) bring to the act. It becomes an intentional project, a production, a style through which we solitaries express our interiority. It is no longer the prayer of the body, and its language is inferred not from our bodily inscription into God’s Word, but from the interiority and autonomy of the thinking self.

**Postmodern Cultures and the Challenge to “Speak Liturgy”**

So where does that leave us? Can postmodern people still learn how to “speak liturgy”? And what is postmodernism, anyway? In response, I offer a snap-
shot of campus life at the University of Notre Dame campus during the last week of October, 2002. That week offered the following events: a reading by Irish poet Ciaran Carson; a celebration of the “Day of the Dead” in the Mestrovic Gallery; an Abendmusik concert of medieval plainsong by the ensemble Schola Musicorum in the nineteenth century faux-French-Gothic style Basilica of the Sacred Heart; a lecture on “Pluralism and Tolerance in Classical Islamic Law,” by Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah at the Law School; and the “Indian/American/French/Italian” picture Monsoon Wedding at the Annenberg Auditorium. That is postmodernism come to life—diverse but coexisting cultures, competing beliefs, colliding ethical traditions, and conflicting legal systems.

Many would agree with Michel de Certeau, that industrialized Western cultures have become “recited societies,” i.e., societies defined by their stories, especially by the fables proposed to us by marketers, spin doctors, and peddlers of information technology—stories interminably cited and recited as “gospel truth,” especially in the media. The real, Certeau argues, “no longer has its own proper place.” It enjoys neither a reserved “seat nor ex cathedra authority.” Instead, “an anonymous code”—information—stimulates and “saturates the body politic. Certeau continues:

From morning to night narrations . . . haunt [our] streets and buildings. They articulate our existences by teaching us what they must be. They . . . make our legends . . . Even more than the God told about by . . . theologians of earlier days, these stories [are believed to have] a providential and predestining function: they organize in advance our work, our celebrations, and even our dreams.

“These [stories] . . . have the twofold and strange power of transforming seeing into believing, and of fabricating realities out of appearances . . . (De Certeau, 1984: 186–87; slightly altered).

In a nutshell, as Graham Ward writes, people in recited societies “believe what they see, and what they see is produced for them,” largely through televised images (Ward, 2001:xxii). And, because ours is a world of technologized images, because our images are produced on screens, and because there is not necessarily any “original” behind or beyond those screens, it is very difficult for us to distinguish fiction from fact. We install “authorities” (news anchors, politicians, radio talk-show hosts) to tell us the difference. Thus, in the United States, we seem content with a regime that tells us black is white, down is up, squares are spheres, and weapons of mass destruction pose a clear and present danger in Iraq.

To meet the challenge “recited societies” pose for liturgical language two things are necessary. First, we must return to liturgy’s native tongue and primary speech, the language of the body itself: Christian liturgy seeks to subvert the Cartesian cognitive apartheid by retrieving the body as the premier site of ritual, of public worship, of communal celebration. The ancient Christian ritual

NATHAN D. MITCHELL
instinct was, I think, the right one: our bodies make our prayers. We pray as a body above all through gestures, postures, and the shared exertions of singing, responding, processing, lifting, moving, touching, tasting, saying, seeing, and hearing. After all, the mind will say anything you want to hear, but the body never lies.

Secondly, we have to learn (or relearn) that our bodies are icons. We do not look at icons; icons look at us. And it is not for nothing that Colossians celebrates the Jesus the Lord as eikon tou Theou aoratou, “the image of the invisible God, first-born of all creation . . . . (see Col 1:15-18).

To learn the body’s iconic language, I suggest we begin with what Ivan Illich proposes in his commentary on Hugh of St. Victor’s Didascalicon (Illich, 1993). Illich notes that throughout the first millennium, Christian readers experienced written pages as tablature, notation, a performance piece, a musical score for mumblers. The words painted on a page were meant to be mouthed, read aloud, their meanings tasted and absorbed by the body (Illich, 1993:2). That is why Augustine was amazed to see Ambrose reading with his eyes only. In the ancient world, reading was done “out loud,” by devoutly munching the words that made the body itself the principal text, interpreter, and language of the liturgy. Liturgical reading was emphatically not the self’s withdrawal into Cartesian “interiority.” Books and bodies were well-nigh interchangeable: thus, both bodies and the written pages of gospel books were encircled by light and enswirled by fragrant smoke. Reading and chanting aloud kept alive the critical social connection that bound the reader’s body to God’s Word, that linked person to person, creating a community of devout “munchers” who understood human speech as a desire to touch and connect (Merwin, 2004:151). To read aloud is already to feel in one’s flesh the wonder and wound-edness of words.

Liturgical assemblies are thus called to be “recited societies” in reverse, where reading is a kenotic enterprise in which God’s Word, painted on pages, is re-inscribed onto human bodies. Liturgy embraces emptiness, powerlessness, the “absence” in human life where God’s Word and ours are surrendered into mutual presence that creates communion without suffering confinement. Worship’s structure is embodied and iconic; it makes us—we don’t make it. Why? Because liturgy is that moment when God’s own Word places itself at the mercy of history, human flesh, and the world.

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Perhaps the best icon of Christian worship is found in the story of an anonymous woman in Luke 7:36-50. Like God, the woman is “nameless,” and so she enters the house of Simon the Pharisee to anoint the feet of Jesus. Namelessly, wordlessly, her own body enacts a eucharist: for she takes her costly jar of perfume, breaks it open, and gives it as balm and blessing. As she takes, breaks, gives, blesses, this nameless woman names Jesus as God’s Christos, Anointed One. Her body, broken open in love and tears, meets his body, broken open to receive her hospitality. Together, Jesus and this woman, form an embodied, eucharistic icon of Savior and Saved. Christ is anointed for his mission (culminating in the cross) and the woman is released into freedom and forgiveness. Luke’s story begins with name-calling, but it ends with God’s Word surrendered, as love and forgiveness, to the mercy of the body.

The point of Luke’s story is, I think, deliberately shocking and subversive. It tells us that God’s own Word is wounded. Just as Jesus’ body opened to that woman’s tears, love, oil, and perfume, so his own body, hung like a criminal’s on a tree, opened to the spit, the shame, the hammered nail, the thrust of the spear. Note well: God’s Word was “kenotic,” self-surrendering from the very beginning—and before. God’s Word is speech “given to,” “handed over,” in that communion of Persons who are givenness so utter and so complete that it makes them who they are. God’s tri-personal life is kenotic life; and personhood in God is constituted by self-emptying, mutual, self-surrender. God’s persons possess themselves precisely by dispossessing themselves.

Every liturgical act is an attempt to inscribe that trinitarian dispossession onto human bodies. That is why I’ve said that worship is God’s Word at the mercy of the body. It is also why any theology of liturgical language must appeal to the voice of an Other, to the Word’s own cry of dereliction on the cross, to the loud voice of Jesus’ blood. On the cross, crucified speech at last learns the obedience of worship. On the cross, the human tongue was at last loosed and began to sing the great, unending hymn of the liturgy, a hymn sung “by all, and for the sake of all.” On the cross, our crucified speech, silenced by sin and death, at last finds its voice. That is why we can accept the invitation to join the company of saints and angels and peoples of all times and places in that “unending hymn of praise.” We can do this because those persons whose communion constitutes the blissful life of God open up a space, in the crucified Word, to receive our wounded speech into their own life, making it their own. We may, at last, hear human speech as God’s Word.
References


