

**Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Acting Liturgically: Philosophical Reflections on Religious Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. ix + 306 pp. \$65.00 (hbk).**

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This ambitious work aims to reshape the way philosophers think about religion. As Wolterstorff notes near the outset, analytic philosophy of religion has tended to focus on four topics: the nature of God, the epistemology of religious belief, the nature of religious experience, and the problem of evil. Important though they are, these topics effectively leave out a great deal of ordinary religious practice. Like his friend Terence Cuneo, who has also written in this area, Wolterstorff hopes to direct attention to liturgy as an area that should be central to philosophy of religion.

Wolterstorff distinguishes three dimensions of liturgy: expressive, formative, and performative. These are, roughly, how liturgy expresses the beliefs, commitments, emotions, and so forth of the participants; how it helps shape the same; and what it presents itself as performing or accomplishing. Whereas most previous writers on liturgy have focused on the first two dimensions, Wolterstorff gives the lion's share of attention to the third. He draws extensively on the notion developed in speech-act theory that one act can "count as" another, as, for example, raising one's hand in an auction counts as making a bid. In the same way, uttering the words "thanks be to God" at the appropriate moment counts as thanking God, standing to sing a hymn counts as honoring him, and so on. Interestingly, Wolterstorff considers the acts thus performed at the secondary (count-as) level to be imperceptible and "outside the causal order," since they can also be performed silently with the mind (85). This is a relatively minor point, but it does suggest a certain lacuna in his view, as I will explain below.

Besides counting-as, another foundational concept is that of liturgy as scripted action. Many forms of action follow pre-set instructions or a "script," as do plays, musical performances, public ceremonies, and so on. Within this broad category, one can distinguish ritual (a term that Wolterstorff does not attempt to define) as a genus, and within this genus, liturgy as the type of ritual whose purpose is to orient the participants toward God. Such orienting includes worship, of course, but also other acts such as teaching, proclamation, and confession. Hence Wolterstorff offers as a general definition of Christian liturgy that it is ritual performed "for the purpose of learning and acknowledging the excellence of who God is and what God has done" (29). Of course a fuller definition would need to distinguish Christian liturgy from that of other religions that may have the same purpose, but in other respects this seems sound enough.

The book begins with a chapter laying out the basic concepts just mentioned. Chapter 2 delves in more detail into liturgical scripting, particularly the relationship between the original meaning of a script (which may include ancient elements, such as a

psalm) and its current meaning when used in worship. Chapter 3 considers the communal element of liturgy, arguing that a collective action is informed by individual intentions that mesh in a certain way, not a collective “we-intention” as proposed by John Searle. Chapter 4 turns to the role of the body in liturgy, offering various reasons why worship must involve the body and defending Wolterstorff’s own Reformed tradition against the charge that it has a negative attitude toward the body. Chapter 5 addresses the question of what those who lack faith are doing when they participate in liturgy, arguing that by following the script they perform acts of worship despite themselves, as it were, unless they positively intend not to do so.

Part II of the book turns to “Liturgy and Scripture.” Chapter 6 deals with acts of communal reading and singing, particularly the reading of scripture. In a careful analysis that I found to be one of the book’s highlights, Wolterstorff argues that when scriptural passages involving first or second-person pronouns are read in liturgy, the reader is “playing the role” of the author, inviting the audience to imagine the author saying these words and to respond accordingly. However, there is an exception in the case of the Psalms (and, presumably, other written prayers), for in this case the congregants do not merely imagine the psalmist speaking, but themselves pray by appropriating the psalmist’s words; and even this must be qualified in the case of some psalms, for sometimes the psalm’s original meaning can no longer be appropriated directly and must be subjected to “revisionist appropriation.” Wolterstorff applies this analysis skillfully to cases like Psalm 137, in which the psalmist blesses those who dash the children of the Babylonians against the rocks.

The next three chapters take aim at views that are widespread among theologians. Chapter 7 argues that liturgy is not a form of reenactment (as is widely held), but the reinstantiation of an act-type. Some cases, but not all, include the further feature that the repetition is “token-guided,” in that it is guided specifically by a previous instantiation of the same type; the Lord’s Supper and Palm Sunday processions, for example, are token-guided in this way. Chapter 8 argues that the purpose of liturgical commemoration is not to remind the participants of the event or person commemorated, or somehow to make it more actual or real, but simply to show it due honor. Chapter 9, on the “liturgical present tense,” similarly argues that the use of the present tense to describe a historical event (such as the Crucifixion) is not a way of somehow reactualizing or participating in the event, but simply a way of speaking “as if” the event were present so as to make it more vivid.

The final two parts are shorter, consisting of only two chapters each. Part III is on “God in the Liturgy.” Chapter 10 deals with how God acts and speaks within liturgy, developing a notion of “continuant discourse” to argue that God can speak in the reading of Scripture and even in sermons that faithfully expound Scripture. Chapter 11 turns to the other side of the dialogue, divine hearing. Unlike most of the rest of the book it does not attempt a positive account of its subject matter, but is content to critique the view found in Aquinas that God’s knowledge of creatures is like that which an artisan has of his works. (Wolterstorff seems to think that this critique implies that strong divine aseity in general is incompatible with God hearing prayer, but he does not spell out these further steps of the argument.) Part IV is on “Liturgy, Love, and Justice.” Chapter 12 discusses *agape*, analyzing it into two types—neighbor love, which Christians are to show to all, and “Christ-like friendship love,” which is directed specifically toward fellow Christians—and describing how they are exemplified and encouraged within liturgy. Finally, Chapter 13 is on justice

and injustice in Christian liturgy. It investigates what it means to “identify” with someone (as Christians sometimes identify with Christ) and makes a case that liturgy should give greater emphasis to the suffering and injustice of the Crucifixion.

As I hope this summary will make clear, the book fairly sparkles with new questions and new ideas. Even when I disagreed with its conclusions, I was often moved to think about questions that I had previously considered either casually or not at all. Judged in light of its central purpose, that of showing the value of rigorous philosophical inquiry into liturgy, the book is unquestionably a success.

Nonetheless, I have reservations. Often as I was reading I found myself pondering the parallel between liturgy and sport. What would it be like to do philosophy of sport simply by focusing on “sport” as a category, without attention to particular sports? One could say much that would be worthwhile about the purpose of sport, its conventions, benefits, and so on. Nonetheless, one would be to a certain extent missing the point. “Sport” is an abstraction that we form by generalizing from particular sports. No attempt to understand it can be successful without taking account of the fundamentally different aims, methods, and presuppositions of individual sports.

Something like this is my concern about Wolterstorff’s approach to liturgy. By focusing on liturgy in the abstract rather than particular liturgical traditions, the book achieves a certain deceptive simplicity at the cost of overlooking the real complexity of its subject matter. For the rest of this review I will illustrate this point by focusing on the Eastern Orthodox tradition. I do so partly because it is the one that I know best, but also because Wolterstorff frequently singles it out for attention. As he comments near the beginning of the book, “Orthodox liturgy is prolix, poetic, excessive, wild, hyperbolic, highly metaphorical, complex, often obscure, much of it clearly the product of poets rather than theologians. For philosophers reflecting on liturgy it offers more challenges to analysis than any Western liturgy that I know of” (9). He is surely right about this, and one has to respect him for deliberately seeking out the most challenging examples for analysis.

One (admittedly simplistic) way to look at Orthodox worship is as the outgrowth of two biblical themes. The first is heavenly worship. Passages like Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1, and Revelation 4-5 and 19 present a powerful—although perplexing and mystifying—vision of the worship of the angels and the blessed around the throne of God. All who are saved are destined to share in such worship. It is natural to wonder, then, what it has to do with us now. Is it merely “there” while we are here, with no connection in between?

The consensus of early Christian thought on this matter affirmed a connection. From at least the fourth century (and arguably earlier), earthly worship came to be seen as a form of participation in heavenly worship—or, to put it another way, as an initiation into eternal life and the heavenly realm. This was particularly true of the two most central Christian rites, baptism and the Eucharist. To express this understanding the Church Fathers adopted a term in wide use at the time, *mystikos*, referring to that which is “mystical” in the sense that it initiates into a higher level of reality. So baptism came to be called the “mystical regeneration,” the Eucharist the “mystical banquet” and the “mystical sacrifice,” and so on.

Just as importantly, the prayers and hymns of the liturgy came to express quite explicitly the sense that those engaged in it are participating in a heavenly reality. For example, there is the Cherubic Hymn (written in the sixth century, and still in use in the Orthodox liturgy today) which accompanies the Great Entrance of the priest with the

Eucharistic elements. In it the people sing: “We who mystically represent the Cherubim, and who sing the Thrice-holy Hymn to the Life-giving Trinity, let us lay aside all worldly care, that we may receive the King of All, who is coming invisibly escorted by the angelic hosts.” The word here translated “represent” is *eikonizontes*, which might be rendered literally, “who are icons of.” The implication is that the worship offered by the congregation embodies, within space and time, the eternal worship of the angels around the throne of God.

The other biblical theme is the eternity of the sacrificial work of Christ. In the book of Revelation Christ is “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (13:8), and in I Peter he is the “pure and spotless Lamb foreordained before the foundation of the world, but manifest in these last times for you” (1:19-20). Similarly in the book of Hebrews, Christ’s sacrifice is said to be offered in “the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man” (8:2) and to have purified “the heavenly things themselves” (9:23). It would seem to be a fair inference from these passages that the sacrificial work of Christ is an eternal reality that is, as it were, brought fully into space and time at Golgotha.

This understanding of the work of Christ, taken in conjunction with that of earthly worship as a participation in heavenly worship, is what underwrites the traditional (i.e., Orthodox and Catholic) use of the liturgical present. The heavenly worship is directed to the Lamb who was slain, whose eternal identity was manifested and realized in the central events of the life of Christ. Hence the liturgy, by placing its participants in communion with this worship, also places them in immediate proximity to those events. Within Orthodoxy, the events singled out in this way include the Annunciation, the birth of Christ, his baptism (or Theophany), the Transfiguration, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Ascension. Notably, there are other events in the life of Christ (such as the profession of faith by Thomas, and the healings of the paralytic, the Samaritan woman, and the blind man) that are also commemorated, but of which the liturgical present is *not* used. It is reserved for the most decisive events in the life of Christ—those that, as it were, constitute him as the Lamb.

This is just a thumbnail sketch of a subject that deserves much fuller treatment.<sup>1</sup> For present purposes, the point is that one cannot lump together the use of the liturgical present in Orthodoxy with that in Protestant hymns (such as “Hark, the herald angels sing”) as if they were simply different examples of the same phenomenon. The Orthodox practice has distinctive presuppositions that cannot be ignored without fundamentally distorting it. Indeed, even apart from the liturgical present, the same is true of liturgical commemoration in general. Orthodox, like Catholics, commemorate saints not just to honor them, but to invoke their aid. This is another aspect of communion with the heavenly realm that Orthodox and Catholic worship presupposes. It is remarkable that Wolterstorff does not so much as mention prayer to the saints, even though it is integral to a great deal of traditional Christian worship.

So the distinctiveness of liturgical traditions is one axis along which the philosophy of liturgy needs to be expanded. Another is the situatedness of liturgy within other practices that provide its context and meaning. Here again, Orthodoxy provides a helpful

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<sup>1</sup> See further my “The Divine Liturgy as Mystical Experience,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7 (2015), 137-51.

test case. Wolterstorff devotes an interesting discussion in Chapter 6 to the Orthodox vespers prior to the Sunday before Lent. This Sunday commemorates the expulsion of Adam from Paradise, and the vesperal hymns consist largely of Adam's imagined lament upon his expulsion. After examining several possible interpretations, Wolterstorff concludes that "each participant is lamenting her sins and pleading for forgiveness in her own voice, not Adam's, doing so, however, not by employing her own words but by employing the words of Adam's imagined lament" (136). This is close, I think, but not quite right. Adam (as his very name, *'Adam*, man, indicates) was not only a human individual, but in some sense the representative and embodiment of the entire human race. That is why, as St. Paul says, "in Adam all die" (I Cor. 15:22). Adam's lament is therefore our own, and to insist that the hymns must be lamenting one's own sins *or* those of Adam is to pose a false dilemma.

Even more importantly, Adam's lament is tied intimately to bodily practices of repentance. After all, Lent is about to begin, and Lent is a time of fasting, confession, almsgiving, and increased use of prostrations. Personal amusements are to be curtailed, and the color of the priest's vestments and the tone of the music at church also change to a more somber cast. Seen in this light, Adam's lament is the verbal articulation of the attitude of sorrow and contrition that the participants are preparing to enact in their own bodies. Placing the hymns in Adam's voice in effect situates the practices that the worshippers are about to undertake as the bodily correlative of their own state of exile from Paradise.

Wolterstorff does devote an earlier chapter to the role of the body in liturgy, but it is one of the thinnest and least satisfactory in the book. Much of it is addressed to the question of why the body is needed in worship at all, to which various rather obvious answers are given (such as that without it there could be no communal worship). What is missing is any sense of how bodily practices shape and inform spiritual experience. Fasting, for example, does not merely express an already existing attitude; by weakening the body and bodily drives, it helps shape such attitudes. A similar point could be made for other bodily practices such as prostrations, the lighting of candles, the making of the Cross, standing in vigil, kissing icons, processions, pilgrimages, and so on. As I mentioned earlier, I believe Wolterstorff is hampered here by the assumption that acts performed at the secondary (count-as) level can also be performed silently with the mind. Although this may be true in some cases, surely the more religiously significant acts are those that can be performed only in and through bodily practices.

Ultimately what is needed, then, is not so much a philosophy of liturgy as a philosophy of religious practice, one that takes full account of the embeddedness of liturgy within practices that embrace the whole of life. Wolterstorff has given us a first step in that direction. Admirable though it is, its greatest value lies in its questions rather than its answers.