

RITUALIZED READINGS

Topic: How Do Liturgies Shape Biblical Interpretation?
 Convener: W. T. Dickens, Siena College
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 Respondent: Richard McCarron, Catholic Theological Union

Dickens's presentation explored some of the resources provided by ritual studies theorists for theological hermeneutics. While liturgical, sacramental, and moral theologians rightly contend that the effects of Christian liturgies should carry over into a participant's daily life, this session examined an addition effect: reviving and refining capacities for interpreting the Bible as a christologically focused, yet polyvalent story whose meanings are communally negotiated.

While recognizing that there are numerous avenues into this complex field of study, Dickens focused his analysis on the works of three prominent ritual scholars: Roy Rappaport, Clifford Geertz, and Catherine Bell. He did not ask these social scientists to provide a theologically neutral means of grounding the intelligibility and truth of Christian liturgies or theological hermeneutics. Instead, he read them as providing tools that better enable us to grapple with a complex affair that touches on our rational, imaginative, emotive, volitional, and bodily dimensions.

The lesson Dickens chose to draw from Rappaport's enormous *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999) concerns the inherently performative quality of liturgical participation. Rituals are distinguished from other performances, such as drama, in virtue of their being self-involving. To pick up the hermeneutical point, scriptural interpretation that nourishes the *sensus fidelium* must be similarly self-involving. Regular liturgical participation can school one in active, self-involved participation by means, to give two examples, of using first person singular and plural forms of pronouns and by sealing one's forehead, lips, and heart with the sign of the cross while saying: "Glory to you, Lord" when the Gospel is read.

Geertz, too, focused on rituals as performances, although Dickens only mentioned that in passing before describing Geertz's more nearly textual metaphor for ritual analysis. Dickens held that Geertz's reliance on a hermeneutical model for interpreting rituals (*Local Knowledge* [New York: Basic Books, 1983, 2000]) inclines him to treat rituals too statically and, second, betrays a naively sanguine attitude about the difficulties of interpreting texts. Nevertheless, Geertz's definition of rituals does help focus attention on the way they lend authority to a given way of living and believing—and, therewith, interpreting texts. This can make it very difficult—as feminist and liberation theologians have discovered—to advance alternative interpretations that would upset the power relations reaffirmed and naturalized by the rituals.

Dickens's analysis of Catherine Bell's work (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992]) began with a rebuttal of her criticism of Geertz's theory for trading on the dubious distinction between thought and

action. He then criticized her own theory of rituals for being too wedded to the binary, taxonomic approach found in the early Foucault—an approach Foucault himself later abandoned because it treats power as insufficiently diffuse. Still, maintaining, along with Bell, that the process of ritualization establishes privileged distinctions between two sets of actions by means of which one of the sets is marked as more significant, thereby creating a social instinct in its participants for interpreting events, ideas, and practices outside of the ritualized sphere, can help us explain, among other things, how a plain sense of scripture comes to be. And if we recognize the arbitrariness of Bell's own ranking of the contrasts ritualization creates, we can use her work to see some of the benefits and liabilities for biblical interpretation of, say, bringing the lights in the nave to full illumination during the reading of the Gospel.

While in basic agreement with Dickens, McCarron urged him to attend in more detail to three aspects of liturgical performance. First, conceiving of biblical interpretation as communally negotiated raises the question of what sorts of meaning are generated and by and for whom. It is helpful, along with Bell, to conceive of liturgies as creating dispositions, which suggests that interpretation should be conceived of more performatively, as enacted. Second, liturgies are already biblical interpretations, the selections involved in creating the lectionary being the most obvious example. And as such, liturgies are culturally and socially situated acts of proclamation, the variances of which need to be considered. Third, he echoed and extended Dickens's concerns about the ritualized bodies Bell believes rituals create, especially as that bears on questions of power. McCarron is wary of minimizing the extent to which liturgical participants, as responsible agents, share in the formation of liturgical effects.

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