

Editorial

Phenomenology and Liturgical Practice: Introduction to the Special Issue

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What do people do when they worship together? What do their actions mean? How might one make sense of the liturgical phenomenon? This issue of *Religions* proposes phenomenology as a fruitful methodological approach for understanding liturgical practices more deeply: the ways in which they organize time and space, the role body and affect play in them, how they shape personal and communal identity. The present introduction to the Special Issue will first lay out this methodology and justify its usefulness, before demonstrating briefly how the various contributions employ it in order to illuminate aspects of liturgical phenomenality in a variety of ways.

Phenomenology is a term used in a variety of disciplines, often with quite different meaning. Philosophical phenomenology refers to the study of human experience in its most fundamental structures. It is concerned not with the concrete empirical experience of a specific person or the event of a particular moment, but with the very structures of experience: what makes experience for humans possible, what grounds and enables all the particular events and experiences. Martin Heidegger famously draws a distinction between ontic or “existentiell” investigations that analyze particular experiences in a specific domain, as undertaken by psychology, sociology, anthropology, biology, or even theology, and the more fundamental investigation into human existence as such, which he calls an “existential” or—when concerned with Being as such and not just human existence—an ontological dimension, investigated by phenomenology. A description of human existence insofar as it is engaged in religious practices or subscribes to religious beliefs would thus be only a regional or existentiell investigation, not a fundamental existential one. Yet, in *Being and Time* Heidegger does employ phenomenology also to analyze the existentiell, everyday, ontic dimensions of Dasein, before proceeding to the deeper primordial structures of existence. And in his phenomenological analysis of the “religious life” proposed by Paul in his letters to early Christian communities, Heidegger not only thinks this 1st-century existence worth investigating phenomenologically, but describes it in terms quite similar to the more existential structures he lays out only shortly thereafter in *Being and Time*.

Thus, phenomenology can apparently operate on both levels: on the one hand, it gives insight into concrete and particular dimensions of our current existence, on the other hand, it can uncover the deeper existential structures on which our more particular ways of being rely and by which they are enabled. Throughout *Being and Time*, but especially in Part II, Heidegger is at pains to establish relationships or at least maintain a connection between these two levels or layers. Our ordinary and everyday use of clocks and calendars is not wholly disconnected from the primordial structure of Dasein’s temporality, even if this deeper structure does not proceed in the linear fashion our calendars do. Our everyday fear of death or experience of another’s death is not an authentic existential experience of finitude, yet it cannot be denied by our more fundamental being-toward-death. At times, Heidegger’s affirmation of this connection becomes almost violent, as he is wrestling with the gap between existential possibilities and everyday existence, while also trying to demonstrate that the everyday experience often covers over the more fundamental structures and thus distorts them. At the very least, this grappling with the connections



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between the everyday and the primordial shows that phenomenology can operate at both levels, that it is useful both for investigating particular ways of being, but also reveals the deeper and more fundamental structures of our existence.

What does this mean for an investigation of religion in general or an analysis of liturgical practices in particular? First of all, one might challenge Heidegger's contention that faith or religious experience is only a regional affair, a particular and limited way of being. While this is obviously true of any particular faith or ritual tradition, one might still argue that such ways of being and existing rely on and are enabled by more fundamental human structures, that a "religious" or "spiritual" dimension is at the heart of human existence and always already part of its primordial existential condition. Such structures could then be expressed in more particular, "regional" or "applied" ways in specific religious or spiritual traditions or more personal ways of life. Heidegger argues later in *Being and Time* that Dasein is always already caught up in history and tradition, that historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) is the way in which Dasein experiences temporality. Surely religion need not be a priori excluded from this "tradition-laden" condition of our existence. In either case, phenomenology can certainly investigate how religious forms of expression function on the regional levels and thus reveal their connection to deeper structures, be these "religious" or not.

Something similar can be said of ritual or liturgical structures, which are both broader and narrower than religion, but often among its most visible manifestations. Religion does not consist solely of ritual or worship—it has many other dimensions of spiritual expression—but personal and communal ritual practices are a crucial, central, and very visible aspect of religion with significant social, economic, and political dimensions and ramifications in many traditions. Communal worship and its liturgical expression is hence not the only but a very important part of religion. At the same time, ritual is found in many other dimensions of human experience, such as sports, politics, the law, even shopping. Ritual is often a way of structuring human experience in a meaningful way, of heightening individual or, more commonly, communal experiences with more significance by giving them a ceremonial character. Such ceremony can be analyzed in phenomenological terms by showing how it structures human ritual experience in terms of repetition, grand signifying gestures, anointing of certain ritual experts, specialized use of language, setting aside and special treatment of certain items employed in ceremonial fashion, the affective dimensions of awe, special attachment, or consolation in an interplay of familiarity and strangeness—to give just a few examples of possible paths of phenomenological exploration. Looking at the liturgical practices of specific traditions is perhaps the first crucial step for addressing some of these broader aspects of human cultural experience.

In this regard, it is important to remember that phenomenology investigates the *how* of our experience, not the *what* or the *why*. When it depicts and analyzes human structures of existing it does not primarily seek to explain them in terms of the composite parts or to give a causal explanation. Phenomenology focuses on the meaning and significance of human existence, but not in order to reduce it to a particular explanation, whether in terms of genetics, cultural conditioning, psychological desires, or evolutionary fears. Instead it describes how such experience manifests, how it reveals the very structures of our existence, how it orders our lives and thereby endows them with meaning. Interestingly, ritual or liturgy often does the very same—ordering and structuring our existence and endowing it with meaning and significance—and phenomenology is consequently an especially useful methodology for its investigation.

The scope of the present issue is somewhat narrower than these sweeping possibilities for phenomenological investigation of ritual, in that most contributions consider primarily instances of Christian liturgy, albeit from a wide variety of Christian traditions. A number of papers focus on the more regional or existentiell dimension of the liturgical experience or on the concrete liturgical practices of Anglicans, Catholics, Evangelical Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, and members of the Church of Latter-Day Saints. A couple of papers confront pressing issues of the present moment—such as the COVID-19 crisis—and their impact on

liturgy. Indirectly or directly, many contributions deal with the role of corporeality, affectivity, temporality, spatiality, and similar phenomenological elements of ritual experience. Other contributions engage the methodological questions more explicitly and thus venture into the existential or transcendental dimension. The articles thus cover a wide range of possible approaches to liturgy and of concrete liturgical phenomena, opening the possibility for further investigation and conversation. The rest of this introduction will provide a brief overview of this range of possibilities, beginning with the more methodologically oriented contributions before turning to the investigations of concrete practices in specific traditions.

Neal deRoo directly confronts the question of how the particular might relate to the transcendental in phenomenology by showing that liturgy can be said to operate on both transcendental and everyday levels. Thus, any analysis of liturgy must pay attention also to the transcendental dimension. DeRoo distinguishes between four explanatory levels—empirical, transcendental, empirical–transcendental, and ultratranscendental—that all seek to make sense of experience. Although the transcendental dimensions are not directly experienced, they respectively describe how we make sense of experience (e.g., as part of particular traditions and practices), the structures within which experience is enabled, and what constitutes or generates those structures. He contends that an examination of liturgy as a phenomenon requires a transcendental approach in order to understand its religious significance and the ways in which it deliberately shapes our religiosity (and not just our participation in particular religious traditions) in organized and regularly repeated fashion, thereby affecting and forming how we situate ourselves in the world. Ritual practices orient particular moments or events such that they are endowed with and experienced as having “sacred” or “religious” significance. Relying on Smith’s notion of “cultural liturgies,” deRoo suggests that phenomenology of liturgy should not focus just on particular identifiable practices, but also explore this deeper dimension of a transcendental structured shaping of experience. Ultimately, a “robust” and “rigorous” phenomenology of liturgy must explore all four levels and as many aspects of the multifaceted phenomenon in as careful and accurate a fashion as possible. He suggests that this means that we must draw on a variety of disciplines and many different traditions for a full phenomenological analysis, which will require collaboration across disciplinary boundary lines.

Jorge Luis Roggero brings together Heidegger’s early discussions of the phenomenology of religious life with Lacoste’s proposal of liturgical being before God, suggesting that we might be able to speak of a “phenomenology of liturgy” in the early Heidegger. The “logic” that governs the encounter between God and humans, as highlighted by Lacoste, is already inchoately present in Heidegger’s thought and in a way that helps us reconsider the limitations of some of Lacoste’s own approach. Roggero highlights the parallels between Lacoste’s “liturgical” transgressions of the world, of time, and of activity in terms of abnegation and Heidegger’s readings of Paul and Luther as providing an experience before God, a temporality of not-yet, and the passivity of “factual life.” Lacoste claims that in prayer we show our ultimate humanity before God in a way that suspends our connections with the world, especially our relations to place, time, and consciousness, but thereby enables us to see our existence in the world differently. Roggero shows, however, how Lacoste does not take sufficiently seriously the ethical and political implications of this liminal existence and criticizes his dismissal of the role of affect in “liturgical” being. Heidegger, surprisingly, describes the being before God of the Pauline communities in very similar fashion. The experience of Christian “factual life,” as Heidegger elucidates it in these early texts, involves a struggle of faith that requires the enactment of temporality as becoming toward a communal way of being, a conversion away from the world and our condition of sin through the challenge of the cross and the expectation of the parousia. Roggero ultimately suggests that Heidegger is able to go deeper than Lacoste because his account of Christian facticity does not require the same radical rupture with the world as Lacoste’s, partly because Heidegger begins with Christian existence rather than a prior “atheist” assumption in regard to which the “liturgical” is only a surplus, as is the case for Lacoste. Heidegger’s being-toward-death becomes a secularized version of a Pauline Christian facticity.

Marie-Aimée Manchon also draws on Lacoste's work, bringing it into conversation with that of Franz Rosenzweig, in order to illuminate the communal and choral nature of liturgy. Both Lacoste and Rosenzweig explore a fundamentally liturgical structure of human existence, while also giving us insight for concrete Jewish and Christian ritual celebration. Thus, she suggests, a phenomenology of liturgy in the concrete sense has implications for thinking about the human in a broader sense. Lacoste unfolds the possibility of our being-before-God, while Rosenzweig highlights how such existence must always already be plural. The communal assembly is not just a physical gathering of people but shows a deeper possibility of communion. The "we" that the liturgical community instantiates is received from elsewhere, as a call and a gift, which can be received as the possibility of a shared life and confronts us with the truth of our existence in exposure before God at the liminal edge of the parousia. Second, such communal being before God challenges the horizon of the world and enables us to hear the cry of hope cutting across our cries of suffering in a transfiguring choral hymn of redemption. Liturgy is polyphonic in character by shaping a new choral voice where a shared body is created in the comingling of voices. By offering ourselves in response to the liturgical invitation, we become bound to each other in love in responsibility for all. Both the present world and the coming kingdom are revealed to some extent. Manchon suggests that this discussion of Jewish and Christian liturgy provides pointers for our shared being in the world.

Dan Bradley draws on resources from Ricœur's final works to suggest the need for a connection between the eschatological and the doxological. Ricœur's reflections on the Song of Songs can help us see the sacramental nature of all of creation by holding together text and ritual in a "theology of praise." He begins with a hermeneutics of suspicion that takes suffering seriously and responds to it both with courageous ethical action and the eschatological hope of liberation. Yet, Ricœur's focus on texts can miss out on our embodied existence and engagement with the material world. Bradley criticizes the exclusive emphases on ethics and eschatology in Ricœur's earlier work, but suggests that some of his final essays included in *Thinking Biblically* broaden this horizon to allow a fuller consideration of the sacred in a fairly radical turn to a more "sacramental mysticism." He interprets Ricœur as allowing for liturgical experiences of beauty, both in terms of human corporeality and in terms of experience of the natural world. He shows how Ricœur, while still allowing for the ethical and eschatological interpretations of Ezekiel and the Song of Songs, opens the door to a consideration of poetic desire, a liturgical and sacramental turn to creation, and full attention to fleshly and sensuous existence. Bradley concludes by suggesting that the appreciation of embodied creation must always be held in tension with the textual promise of hope and call for ethical action. Ritual celebration of the material must remain attentive to the ethical and eschatological dimensions and the need for discernment.

Operating at the boundary between the methodological and the confessional by putting into play what he calls a "theo-phenomenology," Nicolae Turcan turns to Orthodox liturgy and argues that apophaticism, in the sense of a mystical experience of the divine that is in some way beyond the world, is an important element of Orthodox liturgy, while also revealing how the investigation of the phenomenon can bring theology to bear on phenomenology. Liturgy is not onto-theological in Heidegger's sense, because it is a lived experience of an essentially mysterious and incomprehensible God rather than that of a conceptual idol. Liturgy transforms our relation to the world by allowing its participants to enter into a different world that transfigures everyday relations and objects in spatial, temporal, and symbolic ways. Furthermore, liturgy is dialogic through the ministry of the priest and the various prayers of the liturgical ceremony, allowing for a dialogue between humans and God. Turcan criticizes an account of liturgy or prayer that removes God entirely from the analysis, contending that theological dogma must inform the mystical experience in a unity of faith that holds experience and theology together. Such theological words are not an instance of arbitrarily imposed onto-theological concepts but grow out of the experience of the church as liturgical communion. Eucharistic realism deepens such

communion of love without annihilating mystery. God is not reduced to metaphysical concepts, but opened for communion.

William C. Woody similarly brings phenomenology and theology together in order to analyze a particular Roman Catholic liturgical practice, that of the rite of initiation. He argues that phenomenology can provide a new perspective on the sacrament of baptism, while a phenomenology of baptism also holds promise for new understandings of ritual more broadly. Drawing primarily on Marion's concepts of saturation, givenness, and receptivity, Woody shows how they can become productive tools for a richer description of the sacrament. After laying out important dimensions of Marion's phenomenology of givenness and its resituating of the self, as well as considering some of the critiques of Marion's lack of attention to hermeneutics, Woody proceeds to what he calls a "theological phenomenological perspective" on the rite of baptism. He shows that baptism emerges as a saturated phenomenon in the multivalence of its presentations and the inexhaustible nature of its givenness. No description can exhaust its significance, and it calls for a multiplicity of images. Furthermore, it has a direct impact on the identity of the one who undergoes the sacrament, revealing an essentially receptive self and an introduction to a new community. Various elements of baptismal practice demonstrate how it confers a new identity received from another rather than constituted by the self. Finally, baptism requires hermeneutic grounding in catechesis and other preparatory practices that make the phenomenon possible and enrich the experience. Woody concludes that this particular example demonstrates the fruitfulness of contemporary phenomenology as a tool for theological inquiry.

Tamsin Jones gives an even more specific analysis of a particular liturgical moment in the Christian year, the Maundy Thursday Service of the Canadian Anglican tradition, showing how phenomenological categories illuminate various aspects of this ritual. Phenomenology, she suggests, shows us the many lived dimensions of the liturgical event rather than being limited to an analysis of texts or rubrics. This helps us to understand not only the theological meaning of a given liturgical occasion but to explore its affective significance. She situates the phenomenon within the broader hermeneutic and theological context that values liturgy as a source of theology and the work of the people who participate in it, binding people into community through commemoration and anticipation in the particular context informed by the broader tradition. The service comprises the commemoration of the Last Supper and its institution of the Eucharist (fellowship), the foot-washing (service), and the vigil in anticipation of the passion (sacrifice), ending with the ritual act of the stripping of the altar. As part of the broader Paschal cycle of Holy Week, it brings together elements of fasting and feasting, exposing participants to a range of emotions, such as joy and gratitude, but also shame and grief. Jones describes the words and actions that frame the experience, showing that it begins in fairly heavily textual fashion with the reading of biblical passages, but moves on to function primarily through actions in the ritual of foot-washing. Here "normal" orders, spheres, and activities of liturgy are displaced in the unusual act of celebrants washing the feet of congregants, with all its attendant vulnerabilities of touch. It is followed by a celebration of the Eucharist that consciously recalls the last supper of the Gospels and is accompanied by the dimming of lights and a procession. The liturgy concludes with the stripping of the altar, its messy washing with wine—as in a preparation for burial—and an extinguishing of all light. The participants not only experience a variety of emotions as they progress through this liturgy, but encounter "the absence of God" without closure or resolution. Jones contends that a sense of the complexity of this liturgical occasion is only gained through a phenomenological analysis that pays attention to the actions, movements, and broader structures of the event.

Kimberly Hope Belcher and Christopher Hadley draw on phenomenological and theological resources in order to explore the nature of priesthood in the Roman Catholic tradition. They show that the dimensions of the priest's role of ministry to the people and the worshipping community's orientation toward the sacrament must be held together and that a phenomenological approach can show a path beyond some of the more problematic ontologizing dimensions of previous theological explorations of priesthood. They combine

a reading of the anointing in Bethany, as reported in Mark 14: 1–9, with a theological analysis of the eucharistic paradigm of liturgy. The story from Mark shows that Christ's priesthood is manifested by the woman's anointing, which takes on a priestly function in anticipating eucharistic dimensions of Christ's passion and thus shows that Christian ministry and service must be mutual and collaborative. They go on to discuss how the relationship between priest and assembly have both a dialogical and a symbolic character in the eucharistic liturgy, including as it is demonstrated by the act of prostration during Good Friday liturgies. Priest and people participate together in the eucharistic ministry by sharing in Christ's priesthood through their baptism. In the eucharistic prayer the assembly together offers thanks to God. Both dimensions reveal a relational ontology for the priesthood, which, they suggest, should be patterned on the trinitarian relations of persons. The church as a whole, as well as priest and assembly, receive the Spirit and sacramental grace, which is most fully exercised in the church's participatory worship together. Priestly ministry is thus a collaborative exercise in which both the ordained and the community mutually interact with and for each other.

James E. Faulconer draws on phenomenological tools to investigate the sacrament of the communal memorialization of the body and blood of Jesus in the liturgy of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), arguing that it shows the ways in which immanent and transcendent are not starkly distinguished in this tradition and yet sacred rites play a more important role than is often recognized. Regular Sunday worship together is a prerequisite for the more specialized worship in the temple. In the temple, adult LDS members can choose to participate in rites of endowment with cosmological significance, where God is experienced as part of the space–time continuum and thus not as transcendent in a metaphysical sense. Instead, Faulconer argues, phenomenological notions of transcendence as being in relation with what is other than the self are more appropriate for the embodied notions of personhood for both human and divine in LDS experience. This demonstrates that experience of the sacred are not separate from the mundane, but occur along a range in which all of existence is meant to be sanctified. The temple rites serve to re-present the past and project the future, enabling a participation in what LDS members are supposed to become. This vision also informs the regular weekly meetings that include the sacrament as available to everyone, communicating especially the relational significance of everyday life. Relatively informal, the meeting includes other elements (such as singing and preaching) but culminates in the sacrament as commemoration of Christ's death and celebration of community. Faulconer describes the progression of the rite and how those present participate in it, as well as analyzing the accompanying blessings. He highlights the communal and relational dimensions: speaking in the plural, passing the elements of water and bread to each other, full participation of all members, even infants. The elements—functioning not simply as signs or mere symbols—enable participants to instantiate the sacrifice they memorialize in their own lives as a community. Remembering does not signify mere recall but a witnessing that is concretely embodied by the participants. Bearing witness means to take on responsibility for the event and to affirm the covenant relationship entered through baptism with the Father and the reception of the Holy Spirit.

Barnabas Aspray considers theological objections to liturgy as they are often raised in Protestant, especially evangelical or charismatic, contexts and employs phenomenology (Ricœur, Marcel, Merleau-Ponty) to respond to them. He deals with five objections—the lack of spontaneity, the apparent absence of authenticity, the emphasis on symbolism, the use of the liturgical calendar, and liturgy's repetitive nature—in each case showing that basic insights about the human condition can help mitigate the theological presuppositions at work in the objection. First, the order and structure of liturgical worship need not inhibit spontaneity, and even the “freest” form of worship still assumes a certain order and predictable structure. Second, liturgy does not eliminate authenticity of feeling or inculcate insincerity by exhorting us to say or do things we do not mean. Marcel's account of creative fidelity, as commitment rather than feeling, demonstrates that commitment need not signal inauthenticity. Third, the objection that symbols cannot mediate the divine

who instead should be apprehended through doctrinal convictions disregards the fact that all human experience is mediated in some form. Yet, symbols are not merely a crutch abetting our human weakness, but means for finite human creatures to access the divine. Fourth, some people object to the cyclical nature of the liturgical calendar, which seems to disregard the linear directionality of salvation history. Holy times and places are not merely a pedagogical tool but enable finite creatures to commemorate meaningfully, maintaining the balance between fasting and feasting. Finally, repetition need not necessarily display hypocrisy, legalism, and boredom, but instead cultivates virtuous habits acquired over time and through practice, which can occur even on subconscious levels. We are transformed not by information but by deeply embodied habits. To practice something consistently is to *become* it. The ultimate purpose of liturgy is to orient us toward God and away from ourselves. Such displacement operates at all of the levels mentioned.

Drawing on Dufrenne, Merleau-Ponty, Marcel, and others, Hannah Venable considers the role of the body in liturgy by asking how worship changes when it is conducted in a virtual environment. Drawing on aesthetic experiences she suggests that there are both benefits and drawbacks to “virtual liturgy.” She highlights the importance of presence, both in terms of being physically “there” in body and in the sense of paying full attention, in order to account for the complexity of human experience. Art constitutes a particularly important way of manifesting presence, of bringing presence to us, and of enabling us to be present in a heightened fashion. What art points to or communicates—or even the “original” itself—need not necessarily be physically “there” in order to have this function of making something present to us, thus operating a kind of “virtual” presence either via a recording or copy, or via mimetic extension or representation of experience. Art can even communicate a “reality” of presence that one might not experience when physically “there.” This does not mean, however, that the body does not matter. Even the experience of a “copy” or the representation of an experience in a poem involves corporeal and affective dimensions. While art can change us “at a distance,” it does so far more fully and more profoundly when we are physically there, alone or—even better—with others. Venable applies this thinking to liturgy both as communal worship and as daily being before God. Similar to art, liturgy makes things present to us in embodied and communal fashion. While certain aspects of liturgy might emerge more fully and enter us more deeply at a “virtual” distance, many other dimensions require bodily presence, such as the sacraments. The communal element—physically being with others—is missing to a large extent in virtual liturgies. Physical presence can reveal us to ourselves and enables an active engagement with the practices of liturgy.

Thus, many of the contributions (Turcan, Woody, Jones, Faulconer, Venable, Belcher and Hadley, and, in a different sense, Aspray and my article challenging theology’s frequent identification of liturgy as a form of “play”) show how phenomenology as a method might illuminate particular aspects of the liturgical phenomenon, make a substantive contribution to liturgical theology, or describe an aspect of liturgy more adequately or more fully than a purely doctrinal approach can do. Other contributions (DeRoo, Roggero, and, in a different sense, Manchon and Bradley) provide a glimpse of how a thoroughgoing analysis of liturgy might have implications for an analytic of the human condition more broadly. Together, they not only open a path for further explorations of various liturgical phenomena or of ritual experience more broadly—including in traditions other than Christianity—but also raise fundamental philosophical questions: Is it possible to explore the existential or transcendental dimension of the human condition without paying close attention to how it is variously embodied in particular existentiell practices and traditions? How do examinations of specific liturgical practice relate to this broader dimension? Can we speak of a fundamental liturgical or religious dimension of the human “as such”?

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