



Reviews

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN WORSHIP: EARLY CHURCH PRACTICES IN SOCIAL, HISTORICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE by Andrew B. McGowan, *Baker Academic*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2014, pp. xiv + 298, \$34.99, hbk

The work of the *ressourcement* theologians and the overlapping Liturgical Movement included unearthing a great deal of material on early Christian liturgy. The result was the Vatican II liturgy, consciously based on the earliest sources. As this was also an ecumenical work, it both influenced and was influenced by reforms of the liturgy taking place in the Anglican/Episcopal and Reformed churches.

That was nearly half a century ago. The reform of the liturgy – and its claim to return to early Christian origins – has had a very mixed reception. Some have gone back to older forms, others think the reform did not go far enough. And indeed, the idea itself of returning to some (supposed) liturgical Golden Age of the early church has been called into question.

But wrangling about liturgy is not new: Andrew McGowan, an Anglican priest and professor of Anglican studies at Yale Divinity School, argues that this was the case right from New Testament times. Even the account of the believers united in ‘one heart and soul’ in *Acts* (4:32) hints at a nostalgia for harmony. But McGowan’s book is much more than a history of liturgical squabbles, which could only be depressing (and very long). Clearly a disciple of Paul Bradshaw, McGowan documents a diversity of practices from the earliest records up until the Fathers of the fourth century, without seeking to resolve tensions or trying to reconstruct a hypothetical common origin. He arranges his presentation under seven essays: an introduction, in which he construes worship as the practices that constitute Christian communal and ritual life, then Meal, Word, Music, Initiation, Prayer and Time, with a short epilogue.

It is the practices, very specific performative signs of allegiance to Christ, that constitute the unifying point. Nevertheless, as the chapter headings indicate, for some coherence to be lent to the list of practices, they need to be grouped under some sort of classification – such as ‘Meal: Banquet and Eucharist’. However, this immediately raises the chief hermeneutical problem of the book. While one can hardly disagree with ‘Meal’ as one possible starting point, given the abundance of New Testament references to meals, this does privilege a certain reading – *precisely when the author seeks to take a descriptive rather than normalising approach*. Because other approaches are possible. We

could, for example, read *Hebrews* as a description of early Christian Eucharistic liturgies, because, literally, ‘Christ obtained a *liturgy* which is as much more excellent than the old...’ (*Heb* 8:6), and therefore when Christ passes through the curtain to the inner shrine (*Heb* 6:19-20) this would be a description of an actual liturgical practice. If we started with that reading, then while the *agape* banquet and the Eucharistic celebration of early communities might not have been distinct rituals, we might not agree at all with McGowan’s conclusion that Eucharist *as liturgy* emerged from Christian meals.

The ‘*Hebrews* approach’ is obviously controversial. But is still one possible approach. And in fact, McGowan’s approach results in its own assumptions. He tells us that we will see that the focus of sung Christian prayer and praise was more verbal than musical (p. 111), but it is not at all clear from what follows in Chapter 4 that this is the case. Almost all of what has come down to us in the sources, after all, is words. But what about *John* 5:25, where Jesus says that the dead will hear the *voice* (*phōnēs*) of the Son of God? The sound before words... But McGowan cautions us regarding the *kithara* (harp) and incense reference in *Revelation* 5:8: since incense does not seem to have been used in Christian assemblies of the first century, we cannot assume too much about earthly harps, either. The seer’s heavenly liturgy draws on the practice and accoutrements of temples known to his readers, not on the music or ritual of their domestic meal gatherings (p. 113).

Well, what is more probable? That people’s knowledge of practice in the Jewish temple (or other religions’ temples) is being alluded to, or that he is describing something the hearers would have actually seen and experienced in their worship? Incense ‘does not seem to have been used’ in the first century because, in McGowan’s inevitably logocentric approach, there is no record of it. But St. Basil tells us that liturgical practices such as the sign of the cross and the blessing of baptismal water were handed down ‘silently and in mystery’ in order to guard the sacred nature of the mysteries (*On the Holy Spirit*, 27.66).

Now, we may argue that Basil is speaking from a fourth-century perspective (notwithstanding references to traditions that are not to be spoken of in the *Clementine Homilies*, which have earlier origins). But the problem with constructing a picture almost exclusively from written documents (McGowan does refer to early Christian art, but not much) is that we end up with texts without contexts: precisely when, as McGowan so admirably insists, the body was so important in early Christian worship – not just words.

For all these methodological problems, McGowan’s book has great strengths. It does clearly demonstrate – starting from the simple example of the two different forms of the Lord’s Prayer in *Matthew* and *Luke* – that we cannot try to postulate a single original Christian liturgy. Nor can we ignore real tensions (such as over the practice of fasting), although McGowan’s approach which is descriptive almost to the point

of exclusion of any doctrinal normativity obliges him to include the Gnostics of the *Acts of John* (who denied the physical reality of the crucifixion) and even the Marcionites as merely groups outside what would become mainstream Christianity. But more importantly, McGowan has brought together, in a highly readable way, most of the written sources for early Christian liturgy, and this makes his book a very valuable reference.

DOMINIC WHITE OP

CHRIST THE LIGHT: THE THEOLOGY OF LIGHT AND ILLUMINATION IN THOMAS AQUINAS by David L. Whidden III, *Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2015, pp. xii + 248, £32.99, pbk.*

This book intends to explain the themes of light and illumination in the theology of St Thomas. As the author points out in his introduction, although these are concepts that frequently recur in Aquinas's work, in many contexts, no synthesis of the passages in which they are found has yet been made (he quotes a recommendation from Chenu that such a synthesis should be attempted). The author aims in particular at two goals (p.3): to provide an overview of St Thomas's systematic theology and to recover the image or notion of light from being 'a dead metaphor' (p.80) to one that will deepen our understanding of revelation.

The book roughly follows the order of the *Summa Theologiae*, in that the author considers Aquinas's references to light in connection with *sacra doctrina*, theological language, the nature and inner life of God, creation, morality and the incarnation. In addition, one chapter is devoted to St Thomas's understanding of physical light. The author draws our attention (pp. 7–8) to three theses of Aquinas in particular: that illumination is a manifestation of some truth that directs someone to God; that there are three main kinds of illumination, namely of nature, grace and glory; and that the illumination of the mind is a mission of the Son. While quoting principally from the *Summa*, he also makes generous use of other writings, in particular the *Commentary on the gospel of St John*.

Thus described, this book may sound like a very valuable enterprise. There are certainly useful things in it. Perhaps the most valuable is the chapter on 'the Physics of Light', which explains St Thomas's account of this phenomenon and contrasts it with that of some other mediaevals, such as St Bonaventure. The author explains how St Thomas, on the basis of Aristotle's *De Anima* and *De Sensu et Sensato* (mistakenly called *De Sensu et Sensate* in the list of abbreviations), rejected the idea that light was a body, or something spiritual, or the substantial form of heavenly bodies. He also explains the difference that was sometimes drawn