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978-0-521-82851-2 - Worship as Meaning: A Liturgical Theology for Late Modernity

Graham Hughes

Excerpt

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Introduction

Like many books, this one began in a classroom. The project began (though I did not know it then) in my classes in liturgical gesture now many years ago. Each week students would be required to demonstrate to the class their ideas about movement, proxemics, posture and gesture for some specified point in the liturgy. Because in Protestantism we have no ‘race-memory’ of these kinds of things – even less a *General Instruction* – the suggested offerings frequently seemed to me idiosyncratic and, more pertinently, obscure as to their intended signification. But on those occasions on which I ventured such an opinion, the dialogue almost inevitably drove itself into the corral: ‘Well, that’s your opinion and I disagree.’ The problem seemed to be that, whereas in spoken (or written) language there is a relatively high degree of precision about the received meanings of linguistic units (“You mean “perspicacious”, not “perspicuous””), our other forms of human signification are much less ‘rule-governed’ – almost to the point, in some cases, of there seeming to be a lack of *any* clear syntax or semantics. The task at this earliest stage, then, was to give an account of meanings for those significations in worship other than the linguistic ones, which account might allow a higher degree of conversation about the nature of the signs and their signification.

Rather obviously (though this is said more quickly in retrospect than at the time) the direction in which to look was, or is, the still emergent discipline of semiotics. And indeed, as the middle part of this book shows, that proved to be a rich and productive seam.

Being now launched into the question of meaning in worship, however, I began to see (no wondrous discovery, either, though somehow these things take longer than they might) that meanings are not made in a vacuum. In other words, I began to see that the entire constellation of

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significations called a service of worship could only be meaningful for worshippers, individually and collectively, to the extent that these meanings were capable of being joined to, or set in relationship with, what, since Edmund Husserl, we have learned to call the worshippers' 'lifeworld'.

This consideration thus led to a prolonged meditation on the condition of 'modernity' which, I take it, Christians from western, industrialized societies inhabit as fish proverbially live in the sea. There are various ways of characterizing modernity, some of which I explore in greater detail in the body of the book. Max Weber, however, has given us the term 'the disenchantment of the world' as a means of encompassing these: western, technological society is a way of being in the world which has detached that world from any enveloping skein of religious reference.¹ 'Disenchantment' means two things: first, that the world is no longer seen religiously; and, second, that the fundamental mechanisms of society – legislature, judiciary, economy, medicine and education – once held within that encompassing web of meaning have, in their detachment from it, become discreet 'disciplines', each functioning in its own right and without perceived obligation to a larger social enterprise.² Of course, classical modernity is now widely assumed to have given way to postmodernity. While much did clearly change following the crucial decade of the 1960s, much remains unchanged too, including religious disenchantment.

It is hardly a secret that at the beginning of its twenty-first century institutional Christianity finds it increasingly difficult to portray itself as a viable source of meaning for people in such societies. It is hard not to suppose that 'the disenchantment of the world', now far advanced, is a major contributing factor in this. Of the multiple options available to people,³ theism is less and less seen as efficacious. Admittedly, the case is mixed. There are people, still, who find in the mythic and ritual forms of

¹. See, particularly, e.g., Weber's essays, 'Science as a Vocation' and 'Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions' in (H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, eds.) *From Max Weber: essays in sociology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 139, 155, 350–1, 357; or again, Max Weber, *Economy and Society: an outline of interpretive sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 506. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the making of the modern identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 500, says that Weber appropriated the term 'disenchantment' from Schiller.

². See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 83; or Habermas, 'Modernity: an unfinished project' in (Maurizio Passerin D'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib, eds.) *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 45; see also Daniel W. Hardy, *God's Ways with the World: thinking and practicing Christian faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), esp. 133, 135, 256–7.

³. 'Availability' is a more or less technical term coined by Charles Taylor on which I draw in the body of this work. Taylor uses it to describe the force that an idea or practice has for the members of a given society, as a way of enabling people to 'make sense' of themselves and their world; Charles Taylor, *Sources*, particularly 313–14. See further, below, page 43.

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Christianity a frame of reference which is both meaningful and meaning-giving. When the Pope travels to another country, for example, tens or hundreds of thousands of people can still be drawn together. Protestant fundamentalism seems also able to offer a religious form of meaning for a significant minority. Around these convinced believers, however, there are a great many others who attend church from a sense of obligation or habit, but who come away wondering what it all meant or was supposed to mean. There are others who, in moments of bereavement or catastrophe, dimly glimpse the point of religious reference, but find the point more elusive in ordinary circumstances. And both these groups (who are perhaps not exclusive of each other) are surrounded by an even larger populace in all the industrialized countries who may once have attended worship, or were taken by their parents when they were young, but for whom it is now, as they themselves will say, ‘meaningless’.⁴

Academic theology, in its various disciplines, has scarcely been able to isolate itself from the now near-global dimensions of disenchantment. Systematic theologians especially – charged as they are with formulating faith in contemporary idioms – have, by and large, been concerned with questions of theistic meaning in the age of modernity for at least a century and a half. Biblical scholarship, in its dedication to the hermeneutical questions entailed in finding for our time meaning in ancient texts, has similarly grasped the nettle of modernity, and, more recently, post-modernity. Liturgical scholars have tended to be more historicist in their approach,⁵ though, as I am reminded in conversation, ‘most liturgists, except those hopelessly lost in a kind of romantic dream, are engaged in the project of persuading and inviting to participation.’⁶ Engagement with contemporary intellectual method in liturgical studies has mostly taken the form of ritual studies and the study of symbols.⁷ In the most recent period a new development seems to have emerged, bringing to the study of worship sociological, hermeneutical, philosophical and ethnographical points of view.⁸ There is also a small but vibrant literature on the semiotics

⁴. See Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: the renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969), 13–20, 260–6, on *meaning* as more fundamental than questions of *validity* (truth or falsity); then see e.g., *ibid.*, 417, 420, 425, on the relationship of meaning and validity.

⁵. So, for example, Hardy, *God's Ways with the World*, 5.

⁶. Gordon Lathrop in a private communication. ⁷. See below, ch. 4, nn. 5 and 83.

⁸. I am thinking, for example, of Joyce Ann Zimmerman, *Liturgy as Language of Faith: a liturgical methodology in the mode of Paul Ricoeur's textual hermeneutics* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988); Kieran Flanagan, *Sociology and Liturgy: re-presentations of the holy* (Hounds-mills, Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1991); Bridget Nichols, *Liturgical Hermeneutics: interpreting liturgical rites in performance* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1994); Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: on*

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of worship, on which I comment in my own text, though in less detail than it deserves.⁹ I have not, however, found another work which attempts to relate worship to the theoretical discussion of meaning through the twentieth century, which is what I felt I needed to do.

Soon after beginning, I saw that to have chosen ‘meaning’ as the field of inquiry was to take the largest, most cumbersome, least sharply honed instrument available. There are many other words in English which might have offered greater precision. ‘Denotation’ and ‘connotation’, for example, is a pair which appealed to some theorists earlier in the twentieth century. ‘Sense’ and ‘reference’ is an even older pair. ‘Signification’ is a conceptualization on which I have heavily depended, along with its more or less adjacent neighbour, ‘significance’. ‘Intention’ and ‘intentionality’ also offer themselves. ‘Meaning’, by contrast, is a kind of catch-all grab-bag word that we throw around all of these. ‘Meaning’ can range from the entries in dictionaries to ‘the meaning of life’. Not only is the subject matter elusive; it is well-nigh inexhaustible. There have been times in my study for the book in which it has seemed to me that the human quest for meaning is not much different from, and not much less slight in scale than, the quest for God. I am indeed inclined to think the two quests or questions are not so far removed from one another.

Yet it does seem to me that this *is* the word, in all its breadth and complexity, which we want – for the reason that the subject matter in which we are interested, worship, itself contains this great range of senses and references.¹⁰ Sometimes the question a worshipper asks is with respect to our most sharply defined sort of meaning: that of the preacher’s words or concerning the arcane language of the prayers. On other occasions it will be more equivocal: why does the priest move to this place in the sanctuary for this part of the liturgy? And on yet other occasions the question of meaning will be as large as the worshipper’s life – what would it mean for her to try to live in the way suggested. At some points what is at stake perhaps has more to do with what we might call ‘disposition’ or ‘ambience’ or ‘feeling’ – for example the effects of the architecture,

the liturgical consummation of philosophy (Oxford: Blackwells Publishers Ltd., 1998); and Martin D. Stringer, *On the Perception of Worship: the ethnography of worship in four Christian congregations in Manchester* (Birmingham University Press, 1999).

9. See below, pp. 129–34.

10. Taylor, *Sources*, 18, similarly remarks on the useful complexity of ‘meaning’: ‘Finding a sense to life depends on framing meaningful expressions which are adequate. There is thus something particularly appropriate to our condition in the polysemy of the word “meaning”: lives can have or lack it when they have or lack a point; while it also applies to language and other forms of expression . . . The problem of the meaning of life is therefore on our agenda.’

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or the way in which the space is lit, or the style and arrangement of the furnishings. The music will always have been of central importance. And hardly less significant will have been the style, the manner, the bearing of the leader(s) – whether this communicated distance, officialdom, ritual propriety or pastoral warmth; or perhaps, at an opposite extreme, informality and conviviality. In the end, each of these things will have contributed directly to the meaning – and the ‘meaningfulness’ or otherwise – of the event. Enveloping all of these – that is, on its largest and most daunting scale – is the question whether ‘God’, as represented in the Judaeo–Christian tradition, can ‘mean’ anything for people living in our thoroughly secularized age. All these angles are held within the question of ‘the meaning of worship’.

In my own search for illumination I began with the theories of meaning which were (just) still being explored in Anglo-American analytic philosophy. This was to some extent because the term ‘theory of meaning’ had been especially associated with this style of philosophy. It was quickly apparent to me that any theory of meaning for worship would have to be funded differently. I mentioned just now, for example, the great range in *kinds* of meaning transacted in a worship service. Much, perhaps the preponderance, of such meaning is transmitted not in linguistic signifiers as such, but in what has been called the ‘the grain of the voice’ – not just *what* is said but *the manner of its being said*.¹¹ But of this, analytic philosophy could have no comprehension; it methodically excluded all meanings other than semantic and syntactical ones. Nor do meaning theories conceived in this style have a sense of what has been called ‘the creation of... a public space’ – a shared perspective from which speaker and hearer are able to ‘survey the world together’;¹² whereas one of the most critical aspects of the meaning of a worship service is that it is constructed collaboratively – by those who are the sign-producers (those who have been its planners and who now bring it into effect) and the sign-recipients (those who must ‘make sense’ of the signs in the comprehensive way I have already suggested).

For these and associated reasons I turned to what are loosely called (by English speakers!) ‘Continental’ styles of philosophy. These used to be grounded either in Husserl’s phenomenological ‘constitution’ of

¹¹. Roland Barthes, ‘The Grain of the Voice’ in *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 179–89.

¹². See Charles Taylor, ‘Theories of Meaning’ in *Human Agency and Language: philosophical papers* 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 259.

meaning by a perceiving subject, or in Saussure's structuralist and semi-otic analyses of language. The one lives on, though massively and critically adjusted, in 'construction of meaning' theorists such as Paul Ricoeur and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and, more recently, with these writers' disciples. The other legacy has passed to the so-called post-structuralists or deconstructionists, of whom I suppose Jacques Derrida is still the most widely known.

Notwithstanding major differences between these 'late-modern' theorists of meaning or signification there are certain similarities: Derrida's 'difference' has affinities with Ricoeur's 'distanciation' and with Merleau-Ponty's 'gap' or 'dehiscence'.¹³ No one, that is, is able now to endorse the notion of 'pure' meanings – self-evident independently of any context and stripped of all material signification. On the other hand those standing in the phenomenological tradition do still argue that one can speak of the production of meaning, albeit through what Ricoeur calls 'the round-about route' – 'through the mediate comprehension of human signs.'¹⁴ I have generally followed this way.

In the middle part of my book, I join to these middle and late twentieth-century theorists the writings of a thinker of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, grievously overlooked in his own day but now widely recognized as perhaps the foremost thinker produced in the United States, Charles Sanders Peirce.¹⁵ In the company of much more erudite students of his work, I have come to think that Peirce perhaps offers the best chance we have at this time of theorizing our construction and transaction of meaning.

By the 1970s all the major theoretical frames within which twentieth-century theorization of meaning had been undertaken – analytic philosophy, phenomenology, structuralism and formalism – had pretty much fallen into desuetude. Further, in the widely influential deconstructionist postmodernity which ensued, the question of meaning was itself deemed virtually to be meaningless. One of my convictions – a kind of axiom for

¹³. Leonard Lawlor, *Imagination and Chance: the difference between the thought of Ricoeur and Derrida* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); and M. C. Dillon (ed.), *Ecart & Différence: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on seeing and writing* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1997).

¹⁴. See for example, Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 112, 155, or 266.

¹⁵. See the 'Open Letter to President Bill Clinton Concerning the Fate of the Peirce Papers', *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 33 (1997), 836, signed by twenty eminent German philosophers who, among other things, say: 'Peirce is considered by many scholars and scientists as the most important, versatile and profound American philosopher.'

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which I find it difficult to give further substantiation – is that people for the most part shape their meanings from the stocks of meaning available to them.¹⁶ It also seems to me that, though there may *seem* to be a ‘great gulf fixed’ between academic formulations and such forms of thought as occur naturally to people in everyday life as ‘making sense’, in fact powerful lines of continuity can be traced between them – even when such connections are submerged or not apparent. Especially in a postmodern age, but before that, too, the most abstruse theorizations are immediately present to people in the forms of the built spaces they move through every day, in the technologies of mass communication, in the effects of globalized economies, and doubtless in other carriers of public meaning.¹⁷ If my suppositions are correct, both these large cultural circumstances – our dependence on cultural norms and the immediacy to people of postmodernist precepts – will, in their combination, have contributed to an ongoing sense of difficulty experienced by people in personal and public life in ‘making sense of anything’.¹⁸ One does have this impression. Paradoxically, I have found it equally impossible to rid myself of the conviction that people do succeed in meaning things every day, as they also constantly seek to apprehend the meanings of others. Some theorists thus have the candour to admit that the business of meaning goes on even when our most powerful intellects are unable to say how that happens.¹⁹ More directly, notwithstanding the deleterious condition of institutional Christianity from which I began these remarks, there continue to be priests and leaders (on one side) and worshippers (on the other) who greatly desire to know how to let these ancient mythic forms on which – for whatever reasons – we have come to depend as our sources of meaning, be meaningful. The work which follows has been directed and empowered by this simple need on my own part. I think this is the only reasonable explanation for a classroom assignment becoming the virtually all-consuming obsession of a decade.

The great sweep of the word ‘meaning’, in its application to worship, has given to the work something of an hourglass shape, wide at either end, narrow in the middle. Led by my conviction about people shaping their meanings from the meanings available to them, the work attempts in Part I to set liturgical constructions of meaning within the larger cultural

16. So Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (University of Chicago Press, 1975), 66:
‘Man [*sic!*] lives in the meanings he is able to discern. He extends himself into that which he finds coherent and is at home there.’

17. See further, below, p. 45. **18.** See below, ch. 1, n. 9, and pp. 50–1.

19. See below, ch. 1, n. 8.

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context of late twentieth-century meaning-theory. This, then, is one of the wide ends of the work. In the middle part, drawing upon Charles Peirce's semiotic theories, I attempt to say how meaning is constructed, transmitted and apprehended actually within a worship service. But – again because the meanings of worship cannot be sealed from the meanings available to people in their lifeworld generally – the last part opens out once more to consider the question of theistic meaning for people deeply ensconced in, and shaped by, the axioms of disenchantment.

No such undertaking will escape an equivocation between description and prescription. My supposition that we can only make meanings from meanings available to us has meant that I have tried to be descriptive – descriptive, that is, of our time and of our cultural dispositions. I have tried to understand what makes sense to us and why it does so, but, of course, I can scarcely conceal from myself (let alone anyone else) that in all this there is little that is strictly objective. At every point I have been making hefty judgements – about how we *should* or how we *could* make meaning, not least theistic meanings, in such an age.

Perhaps the simplest thing, then, is to come back to the quasi-confession; to own that it has from the beginning been my own quest, my own question. I have wanted to know as well as I could how, in this age of Christian belief, we might 'make sense' of – i.e., draw sense from – the ritual acts of Christians assembled in worship. That the chronicle of this personal quest has become a book perused by others strikes me as a happy accident – a 'surplus' Paul Ricoeur might have called it.

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Part I

The making of meaning

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Meaning in worship

Meaningful worship

A worshipper attends a worship service. Perhaps the event is for her deeply meaningful. Or conceivably she will leave doubtful as to its point and purpose. Someone, a priest or minister or possibly a team of people, had planned and administered the service of worship presumably with the intention of undertaking some meaningful thing in the world.

What sort of meaning is this which some people construct and in which other people participate which we call a liturgical event? Or, to put the question in a slightly different way, what would a theory of meaning look like which could guide or facilitate the achievement of this kind of meaning? Or, to have yet a third shot at it, is it possible to give some account of the ways in which the meanings of worship are organized and transmitted by those who lead and are appropriated by those who participate in a worship service?

In many respects this question in its multiple versions is my quarry in all that follows. The subject matter, meaning, will lead us soon enough into various kinds of abstraction. But we are also to speak about an urgent practical assignment undertaken weekly (at least) by those who lead public Christian worship, and about a lived experience on the part of those who participate. (If this seems at this early stage to suggest an essential bifurcation between leaders and participants, let me indicate in advance my steady insistence that these are symbiotic engagements.) I propose therefore to begin by constructing a typical scenario in which something of ‘the meaning of worship’ is played out. Of course, two or three hundred such conjectural scenes could be regarded as