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# Reforming Liturgy in a Re-Forming Age

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# Reforming Worship in a re-forming Age<sup>1</sup>

Edward Foley

## The Provocation

The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers 3 primary definitions for the adjective “provocative”: in the third place it defines provocative as having the quality of “inciting, or giving rise to a specified state, condition ... *specifically*, causing anger or another strong reaction ...”; secondly provocative is that which “excites appetite or lust”; and, oddly to my way of thinking, the first definition for provocative provided by the OED is that which “elicits forgiveness from God.”<sup>2</sup>

My belated appearance in these waning moments of this conference could be considered provocative according to at least two of those definitions, that is, eliciting forgiveness for my tardiness and, maybe even more so, for what could be conceived as an irritating display of chutzpah, having absented myself from virtually the whole of this conference and still believing I have something to contribute in this penultimate presentation. The liturgical parallel is missing the entire liturgy of the Word, most of the Eucharistic liturgy, and making a brazen, unashamed appearance only for communion and the dismissal rites.

My approach to the topic of reforming worship in a re-forming age might also seem provocative in the sense of inciting some strong reaction, since I will sidestep questions about aligning rites, rethinking our musical differences, or trying to harmonize the various liturgical theologies too often homogenized then colonized as Lutheran or Roman. Frankly, I am less concerned about what worship looks like than what such worship accomplishes, less concerned about its ecclesiology than its trajectory for what I will call a new evangelization, and maybe most disturbing, increasingly concerned about how our worship is perceived by ecclesial outsiders and not simply focused on how it serves our regular congregants.

This approach, a form of what is sometimes called “provocative pragmatism,” is anchored in my understanding of the God of Jesus Christ as well as the only-begotten himself, whose incarnational provocation is literally of biblical proportions: a divine revelation apparently more concerned with the

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<sup>1</sup> This material was first presented as a plenary address to the Institute of Liturgical Studies, Valparaiso University, 26 April 2017.

<sup>2</sup> “Provocative,” *OED Third Edition* (2007), online at [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com) (accessed 13.ii.17).

strategic than the systematic; who led with actions not doctrines; and who took embodiment, incarnation, and the sacramentality of the world seriously. Such provocative pragmatism seems a necessary strategy, at least for me, in a time when Churches are declining in number and influence; disaffiliation, deconversion and polydoxy are on the rise; secular spiritualities are flourishing; and the global Christian population over the next 40 years will flat line, while that of religions like Islam will soar.<sup>3</sup> And while I value aesthetic appeal, ritual beauty, musical brilliance and worship artistry, my provocative pragmatism is not particularly cued toward attracting more folk into our sanctuaries or increasing the Sunday collection. Rather, I am more concerned that our Church's are losing their social leverage, I am troubled by introverted worship and preaching that seems more attentive to issue of personal piety than justice and inclusion, and rituals that fail to provide a liturgical counterpoint to the current politics of exclusion, an economy of inequality, and urban environments that are all too often segregated, violent, and calloused.

### **A snapshot of our Liquid world**

In his celebrated 2000 publication, Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman christened the current era one of: "liquid modernity."<sup>4</sup> While previous periods in history have witnessed cycles of sometimes radical disintegration and renewal, Bauman argues that current modernity is different. Whereas the "solids" of a previous era (such as the monarchy in Europe) while deconstructed were yet replaced by new solids (such as communism in Russia), in this modernity melting solids are not being displaced with new and improved ones. Rather, the state of commerce, relationships, society and even self identity are characterized by liquidity, deregulation, liberalization and what Bauman calls "flexibilization": constantly poised for change.<sup>5</sup>

The Christian Churches have experienced waves of such liquidity in multiple and shocking ways over the past few decades. One such tsunami that hit the Roman Catholic Church was the infamous 2007 Religious Landscape Study from the Pew Forum on Religion and the Public Life, which noted that roughly 1 in 10 adults in the U.S. were former Roman Catholics; if you gathered all of them together as a

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<sup>3</sup> See Pew Research Forum on Religion & Public Life, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050" (2.iv15), online at <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/> (accessed 13.ii.17).

<sup>4</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); in subsequent years with the same publisher he produced, among other works *Liquid Love* (2003), *Liquid Life* (2005), *Liquid Fear* (2006), and *Liquid Times* (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 3.

new “Church” they would be the third largest Christian domination in the United States.<sup>6</sup> A parallel tidal wave that hit virtually all religions in 2007 was the recognition that almost 15% of all adults in the U.S. had no religious affiliation: a number that has grown so quickly that in 2014 Pew reported that “the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth of the U.S. public - *and a third of adults under 30* - are religiously unaffiliated today.”<sup>7</sup>

An even more telling sign of religious liquidity today is the degree of disaffiliation occurring amongst those who, nonetheless, still identify with some religious body. Already in 1985 sociologist and religious provocateur Andrew Greeley documented the widespread phenomenon he dubbed “cafeteria Catholicism.” According to Greeley, cafeteria Catholics are those who pick and choose among the teachings and practices of the church they wish to hold or observe.<sup>8</sup> A stark example of this is Greeley’s 2010 report that demonstrated only 7% of Roman Catholics in Chicago accepted what Greeley called “the 5 big rules,” i.e. the church’s stance against abortion, against birth control, against divorce, against gay marriage and for infallibility.<sup>9</sup>

We are also witnessing in my own tradition what is alternatively labeled as secular or cultural Catholicism. Professor Tom Beaudoin of New York’s Fordham University actually believes that the majority of U.S. Catholics today can be characterized as secular or cultural Catholics. By these terms, Beaudoin refers

to those with a Catholic heritage, however nominal, who cannot find Catholicism central to the everyday project of their lives, and are in varying degrees of distancing from what they take to be normative or prescribed Catholicism. Secular Catholics are typically baptized Catholics who, by the time of adulthood, find themselves having to with their Catholicism, and do so as an irremediable aspect of their identity, but whom those in pastoral ministry [10a] or academic theology often call “non-practicing,” “nominal” ... “fallen away,” “lapsed,” or “bad” Catholics.... Secular Catholics find their Catholicism

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<sup>6</sup> Pew Research Forum on Religion & Public Life, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic*, at <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2008/02/25/us-religious-landscape-survey-religious-affiliation> (accessed 2.ii.17).

<sup>7</sup> “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project (9.x.12) online at <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/> (accessed 15.ii.17), emphasis mine.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Greeley, “Cafeteria Catholicism: Do you have to eat everything on your plate?” *U.S. Catholic* 50:1 (1985) 18-25.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Greeley, *Chicago Catholics and the Struggles within their Church* (Piscataway NJ: Transaction publishers, 2010).

existentially “in play” at some level that cannot be dispensed with, but do not or cannot make of it a regular and central set of explicit and conscious practices.<sup>10</sup>

A pointed example of cultural Catholicism was articulated in an article published in the *Chicago Tribune* by Illinois appellate judge Sheila O’Brien; she wrote: “Would someone in Rome formally excommunicate me, please? I want to be excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church because walking away will break my heart.”<sup>11</sup> A similar sentiment was expressed by Kate Henley Averett, a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of Texas in Austin. She wrote, “I’m sure I believed ... that I could remain a Catholic despite the institutional Church, but .... This place has become too foreign to me, and I can no longer call it home. And I’m so, so sad about that. My heart is so heavy it feels like it’s crushing me.”<sup>12</sup>

German Sociologist Ulrich Beck (d. 2015) was celebrated for his writings about the emergence of a risk society—by which he meant a society in which the powers of globalization are creating serious risks such as radioactivity, pollution, and terrorism that concern people across every strata of societies.<sup>13</sup> One of Beck’s more challenging frameworks operative in this risk society is what he calls “zombie concepts.” Zombies are the living-dead, and a zombie concept<sup>14</sup> is a social concept that is increasingly impotent (or dead)—such as, social class, family and the “United” States—but a concept that scholars keep alive to describe the growing fiction of traditional social institutions.<sup>15</sup> While such zombie concepts have lost their “explanatory power,” according to Beck, they are still powerful in that they legitimize practices, actions and explanations.

Zombie categories emerged in the framework of Beck’s larger work on reflexive modernization, that among other things calls into question the production and reproduction of knowledge between the laity and the experts. Beck argues that, in many cases, “lay people were probably much more

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<sup>10</sup> Tom Beaudoin, “Secular Catholicism and Practical Theology,” *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 15:1 (2011) 22-37, here 24.

<sup>11</sup> Sheila O’Brien, “Excommunicate me, Please,” *Chicago Tribune* (4viii.10), online at [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-08-04/news/ct-oped-0804-excommunicate-20100804\\_1\\_excommunication-bishops-hierarchy](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-08-04/news/ct-oped-0804-excommunicate-20100804_1_excommunication-bishops-hierarchy) (accessed 3.iii.17).

<sup>12</sup> Kate Henley Averett, “The Stories we Tell,” in *More than a Monologue- Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church*, ed. Christine Firer Hinz and J Patrick Hornbeck (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 148.

<sup>13</sup> See his *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1992 [1986]).

<sup>14</sup> Ulrich Beck, “The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 19:1-2 (2002) 14-18.

<sup>15</sup> See the useful summary in Paul W. Chan, “A Zombie Existence: Exploring Ulrich Beck’s Zombie Categories and Construction Management Research,” in S.D. Smith and D. D. Ahiago-Dagbui, eds., *Proceedings of the 29<sup>th</sup> Annual ARCOM Conference* (Reading UK: 2013), 1059-69.

knowledgeable ([or] aware) about what was going on around them than the experts ... charged with responding to challenges faced by society.”<sup>16</sup> This position has resonance with the field of “action research,” an approach preferred by some practical theologians, that recognizes people as active builders of meaning with epistemological agency, a framework that disallows separating the “knower” from the “known.”<sup>17</sup>

From my perspective, the implications—even provocations—of Beck’s work for religious institutions are critical. In this age of liquid society and liquid faith, he challenges us not to allow Churches to become zombie institutions, whose central energies go toward legitimizing practices, explanations, or religious power structures. He also prods us to theologize from the bottom up, from the grass roots, recognizing the agency and expertise of what he calls “lay people” rather than instinctively relying upon the insights and analysis of the so-called experts. But here’s the Beckian rub: if those who identify as Christian, as Lutheran, as Roman Catholic are increasingly liquid in their faith and participation; cafeteria in their creed; cultural or secular in their Lutheranism and/or Roman Catholicism; and polydoxical in their spirituality, how do we honor their practical and embodied intelligence about faith, about God, about Church or about worship? How do we respect them as subjects of religious knowing without turning potentially zombie churches into arenas of free believing or self-constructed religion, typified by what Robert Bellah and Richard Madsen reported in *Habits of the Heart* as “Sheilaism.” Remember, their informant whom they named “Sheila” reported:

I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.... It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other.<sup>18</sup>

While some contemporary thinkers do not believe that religion can make much of a contribution in this liquid era, Ulrich Beck believes otherwise, positing that religion can be a useful tool in what he considers the contemporary project of “realistic cosmopolitanism.” While acknowledging the destructive capacity of religiously-inspired violence—both past and present—Beck opines:

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<sup>16</sup> Chan, 1063.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, the overview of Elaine Graham, “Is Practical Theology a form of ‘action Research’?” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 17:1 (2013) 148-78.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Bellah and Richard Madson, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1996), 221.

... it is hardly possible to overstate the potential of the religions as cosmopolitan actors - not only because of their ability to mobilize billions of human beings across barriers of nation and class, but because they exercise a powerful influence on the way people see themselves and their relationship to the world. Above all, they represent a resource of legitimation in a battle for the dignity of human beings in a civilization at risk of destroying itself. Thus, what is on the agenda is the competence and readiness of the world religions to assume the role of spokespeople and champions on issues affecting humankind: climate change, the plight of the poor and excluded and, not least, the *dignity* of ethnic, national and religious others.<sup>19</sup>

Maybe Beck has given Lutherans and Roman Catholics a credible path forward for reforming our worship in this re-forming, liquid, polydoxical age. Maybe it can no longer be worship from the inside-out, Church as “light to the nations,” liturgy as “mission-sending,” whose trajectory only moves in one direction: from organ or pulpit or altar to the world. Maybe this re-forming moment is a time to reimagine and recommit to worship designed and enacted in a distinctively Johannine mode: in service to a world where God’s Spirit already and constantly broods. This is embracing anew Karl Rahner’s contention that the liturgy of the world, not the liturgy of the church, is primary.<sup>20</sup> This is a liturgical recalibration that reenvisions Word and Sacrament, so that such do not attend only to the spiritual needs of our coreligionists, but transmutes into public theology responding to a world threatened with the environmental risks and growing marginalization of the poor, the excluded and the subaltern that Beck has so eloquently identified.

### **Public Theology and the new Areopagi**

“Public theology” is a recent term in Western theology, with Martin Marty as its apparent progenitor. During the 1970s Marty was engaged in exchanges about the nature of “civil religion” in the United States. This dialogue was sparked by Robert Bellah who had presented a lecture on “Civil Religion in America” in 1966.<sup>21</sup> In that lecture, Bellah argued that alongside Christianity—which he characterized as the “national faith” in the US—there existed “an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion” in the US, clearly differentiated from the churches.<sup>22</sup> Marty joined the dialogue early, and

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<sup>19</sup> Ulrich Beck, *A God of One’s Own: Religion’s Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence*, trans. R. Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 198; also, see Simon Speck, “Ulrich Beck’s ‘Reflective Faith’: Individualization, Religion and the Desecularization of Reflexive Modernity,” *Sociology* 47:1 (2013) 157-72.

<sup>20</sup> See Rahner, “Considerations on the Active Role of the Person in the Sacramental Event,” in *Theological Investigations XIV: Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, The Church in the World*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 169; for a further expansion see Michael Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner’s Theology of Worship* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Dædalus* 96:1 (1967) 1-21.

<sup>22</sup> Bellah, 1.

already in 1774 spoke of “public theologians.”<sup>23</sup> Later, Marty turned to the writings of Benjamin Franklin (d. 1790) who had anonymously penned a pamphlet in 1749 that argued for the necessary of “public religion” in education and its usefulness to society.<sup>24</sup> Marty adapted Franklin’s term, suggesting that it was more helpful to speak about public church than civil religion.<sup>25</sup>

Marty defined “public church” as “a family of apostolic churches with Jesus Christ at the center ... that are especially sensitive to the *res publica*, the public order that surrounds and includes people of faith.”<sup>26</sup> According to Marty, this public church engages in “public theology” defined as an effort “to interpret the life of a people in the light of a transcendent reference.”<sup>27</sup> Marty argued that the people whose life is being interpreted here are not simply registered members of congregations “but the pluralism of peoples with whom the language of the church is engaged in a larger way.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, this public church is not so much concerned with “saving faith,” or how people are grounded in or reconciled to God, but is more focused on what Marty called “‘ordering faith,’ which helps constitute civil, social and political life from a theological point of view.”<sup>29</sup>

To some, reframing the divine mysteries as public theology might seem like a stretch, maybe even a perversion of the liturgy whose purposes, according to *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, are the glorification of God and the sanctification of people.<sup>30</sup> From my perspective, however, ritualizing as a counterpoint to the politics of exclusion, praying in a way that honors Abrahamic religions and the believing other, singing texts and tunes that hymn the dignity of all, processing as a symbolic Emmaus walk that accompanies the throngs of refugees around the globe, and preaching that explicitly confronts the political, social and economic forces that privilege the few and demean the many is precisely giving

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<sup>23</sup>Martin Marty, “Two Kinds of Civil Religion,” in *American Civil Religion*, ed. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 155.

<sup>24</sup>See his *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania* (1749), on line at <http://www.ushistory.org/franklin/biography/app03.htm> (14.ix.03).

<sup>25</sup>Martin Marty, *The Public Church* (New York: Crossroad Press, 1981), 16; also, see his earlier “Two Kinds of Civil Religion,” in *American Civil Religion*, ed. Russell E. Richey and Donald C. Jones (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1974), 139-160.

<sup>26</sup>Marty, *The Public Church*, 3.

<sup>27</sup>Marty, *The Public Church*, 16

<sup>28</sup>Marty, *The Public Church*, 16.

<sup>29</sup>Marty, *The Public Church*, 16-17.

<sup>30</sup> These two elements are consistently conjoined when that Constitution speaks about the nature of the liturgy, e.g., nos. 5, 7, 10, 61 and 112; online at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html) (accessed 15.ii.17).

glory to God and reverencing humanity that, only in all of its diversity, refracts something of an authentic *imago Dei*.

It also seems deeply resonant with the revelation we have in Jesus Christ, whose life was that of a public figure, and whose death was that of a public criminal. The only-begotten theologized with the coin of the realm in his hand (Mt. 22:19-21), publicly narrated parables about the nature of God's reign and its in-breaking in human history (Mt. 13:11-17), and ritualized that parabolic in-breaking with multitudes on both the Jewish (e.g., Mk. 6:34-44) and Gentile (e.g., Mk. 8:1-10) sides of the Sea of Galilee. After trial before both religious (Mt. 26:57) and civil authorities (Mt. 27:11), he was executed in the public square as an enemy of the state (Mt. 27:33-40). From the perspective of Christian theology, Jesus was the aboriginal public theologian. Unlike other rabbis of the time, Jesus did not have a stable dwelling in which he schooled disciples.<sup>31</sup> His school was the open road, the public inn, the village square, the Court of the Gentiles. Similarly his story-telling was not some mystical *disciplina arcani* but what Lohfink calls “world illustrating ... [illustrating] the world of rulers and politicians, business people and great landowners, just as we also find the world of housewives and poor day laborers, fisherfolk and farmers.”<sup>32</sup> Jesus’ parabling and ritualizing, teaching and table ministry, healing and lived homiletic can confidently be framed as those of a public theologian.

If we take the revelation of Jesus seriously, worship as public theology is dangerous for multiple reasons. Liturgizing in this mode recognizes that many, some, or maybe even most of those who will interpret our worship, will be from outside the faith circle in which the worship originates: just as Jesus’ table ministry was interpreted by those who did not share his dining circle. This means that our bishops, books, official documents and dogmatically proclaimed teachings will not ordinarily provide the lenses for interpreting what we do in our worship. Rather, our worship is and will be interpreted by the deconverting, the polydoxical, the religious skeptic, the believing other, even the sworn enemy. That we will be sometimes misinterpreted and misunderstood is taken for granted—on the other hand, as we should admit, that already happens.

And what is to be gained by this public turn, this recalibration from inside to outside, this weighing the relevance of our worship from the viewpoint of the believing or non-believing other?

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<sup>31</sup> See Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What he wanted, Who he was*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2012 [2011]), 73-6.

<sup>32</sup> Lohfink, 103.

From my perspective, two particular values emerge here. First is an enlightened vision of a new evangelization for the current age. While evangelization is sometimes misconstrued as proselytizing, in my own tradition Pope Francis has recently shown us a different way. In his rich and exuberant 2013 exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)*,<sup>33</sup> Francis acknowledges that this new evangelization does spring from the so called great commission of Matthew 28, to make disciples of all nations (*EG*, no. 19). As he probes the mission of evangelization, however, he presents a more holistic vision rooted in the principle of “encounter.”<sup>34</sup> While that encounter theologically places an encounter with Jesus (*EG*, no. 8) at the center, Francis yet illustrates that true evangelization is an encounter with Jesus’ broader spirit of joy, hospitality, mercy and justice. Thus, the only way to encounter others with a right attitude “is to accept and esteem them as companions along the way .... to find Jesus in the faces of others, in their voices, in their pleas” (*EG*, no. 91). Such encounter does not presume our dialogue partners will embrace Jesus the Christ as much as it missions us to embrace them in the spirit of that Christ. Francis models such an attitude when, speaking of the unaffiliated and the agnostic, he notes: “As believers, we also feel close to those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, yet sincerely seek the truth” (*EG*, no. 257). He calls such unaffiliated and agnostics “precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation” (*EG*, no. 257). Especially fascinating to me is his mention of the “new Areopagi”: fresh incarnations of the “court of the Gentiles” imagined as special places of encounter “where believers and non-believers are able to engage in dialogue about fundamental issues ... and about the search for transcendence” (*EG*, no. 257).

Specifically regarding preaching, Francis contends that Roman Catholic homilizing—and I would extend that to truly catholic worship with a small “c”—needs to be concerned about “the soundness of civil institutions ... [and] events affecting society” (no. 183). Similarly he asserts that evangelizers needs to demonstrate a concern for “building a better world” (no. 182) and seems to insist that the church has a sustained “dialogue with society” (no. 238).

Embodying this principle came early in Francis’ pontificate. On Holy Thursday of 2013, just four weeks into his pontificate, he transferred the opening Triduum liturgy from the splendor of St. Peter’s Basilica to a juvenile detention center in Rome during which, instead of the feet of princes or prelates or

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<sup>33</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) (accessed 2.iii.17).

<sup>34</sup> *EG*, nos. 1, 3, 7, 8, 44, 75, 78, 87, 88, 91, 120, 128, 132, 135, 151, 153, 171, 188, 220, 239, 249, 257, 262, 264, 265, 272, 285.

priests, the bishop of Rome washed the feet of young gypsies and North Africans, women and men, Christians, Orthodox and Muslims: a stunning image of the new evangelization devoid of any proselytizing.<sup>35</sup> I know that our joint statement *From Conflict to Communion*<sup>36</sup> notes that this is the first commemoration of the reformation to take place in the ecumenical age (no. 4). Yet, with all due respect, I believe the ecumenical age is on its way to become a zombie concept and content; we are not in an ecumenical age, but to my way of thinking, in an age of interfaith and interbelief.<sup>37</sup>

While it may not be a traditional framework, what happens when we reconceive events of Word and Sacrament as dynamic manifestations of the “new Areopagi,” “fresh incarnations of the court of the Gentiles.” We may not perceive that our naves or choir lofts are populated by believers and non-believers, yet given the state of cafeteria Christianity polydoxy, deconversion, and disaffiliation in our midst, aren’t our Sunday assemblies at least *leaning in that direction*? Then ponder all of those occasional services—especially the weddings and funerals—attended by a whole panoply of believers and seekers, tolerators and on-lookers, skeptics and critics. Isn’t every funeral, especially of the young, an Areopagite exercise in which Gandolf or some other embodiment of hope bears as much or more authority as the Galilean peasant we proclaim to be the only-begotten? I have been there, more often than I would like to admit.

What happens when our homilies are posted, our worship is podcasted, or our rituals documented by those ubiquitous iPhones and their droid cousins who have not only police but priests in their cross-hairs? Take, for example the 2002 funeral of eighty-year-old Ben Martinez at St. Patrick’s Roman Catholic Church in Chama, New Mexico. During the sermon, the Pastor allegedly said that the deceased had been [quote] “living in sin, was lukewarm in his faith and that the Lord vomited people like Mr. Martinez out of his mouth to hell.” After the funeral nine members of Mr. Martinez’s family proceeded to sue the priest, the church and diocesan leaders for what their court filings characterized as severe emotional and physical suffering.

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<sup>35</sup> Philip Pullella, “On Maundy Thursday, Pope Washes 12 Prisoners’ Feet, including Women and Muslim Man,” *Sojourners* 13.iv.17, online at <https://sojo.net/articles/maundy-thursday-pope-washes-12-prisoners-feet-including-women-and-muslim-man> (accessed 13.iii.17).

<sup>36</sup> Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, *From Conflict to Communion* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt and Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2013), no. 4.

<sup>37</sup> See my *Theological Reflection Across Faith Traditions: The Turn to Reflective Believing* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

Admittedly this is a somewhat bizarre case, and most of us do not get sued for our preaching – which does not mean, however, that sometimes we should not be. While outlandish, this botched liturgical enterprise yet throws into bold relief the challenge of preaching and ritualizing in this digital age. The fact that the obsequies of an octogenarian in a small Roman Catholic parish, attended by less than 200 people, in a city whose population is roughly 1100 was broadcast around the globe by the BBC and other international news outlets and still garners almost three-quarter of a million results on Google and other search engines yet today<sup>38</sup> reminds us that what happens in our sanctuaries does not necessarily stay in our sanctuaries. Rather, our preaching and our ritualizing has the potential to be shared with increasingly wider circles of interpreters, sometimes providing actual good but other times offering decidedly not good news.

### **Pandering or Leitourgia?**

Lest my Areopagite provocation be equated with some form of liturgical pandering, I would argue that reenvisioning worship in this manner respects the authentic meaning of *leitourgia*. Worship as public theology in a new evangelizing mode is not an ecclesial marketing tactic, but worship precisely in service of the *missio Dei* to the world revealed in Jesus. Sometimes the term *leitourgia* is erroneously translated as “work of the people,” which renders liturgy to be at least a slightly heretical, semi-Pelagian enterprise that ignores the theological tenet that liturgy is something that God does in Christ through the Spirit. If we ponder the original usage in ancient Greece, *leitourgia* was not simply work that people did, but a public work accomplished—especially by the privileged and powerful—on behalf of ordinary folk, such as sponsoring a festival, commissioning a play, underwriting sporting events or leading a diplomatic delegation to another city-state. Consequently, *leitourgia* is best translated not as “the work of the people,” but rather “work on behalf of or for the people.”

From an Areopagan perspective, the “people” for which this work is done are not simply the baptized but the whole people of God, Abrahamic believers and Agnostics, Sikhs and seekers, Hindus and Humanists, thus including those non-theistic “precious allies” of which Pope Francis spoke. If Christianity exists not simply in service of its own mission—a sure fire formula for becoming a Zombie institution—but in service of God’s mission to the world, then it seems right and just that our preaching and ritualizing, our praying and singing, our processing and communing must also be in mission to that same world. And what does liturgy in service to the world look like? Sound like? Feel like? To borrow

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<sup>38</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3074245.stm> (accessed 27.iv.17).

the language of Pope Francis, it is worship that respects others, heals wounds, builds bridges, and strengthens relationships to bear one another's burdens (*EG*, no. 67). It nurtures "precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation" (*EG*, no. 257). Such worship does not invite the baptized to abandon their faith, but to fine-tune such faith so that it enables us—as the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* reminds us—to be citizens of this world and citizens of God's reign, loyal to both, liturgical ministry as a distinctive form of leaven in human society (nos. 40 & 43).<sup>39</sup> It is also worship with a sense of humility, that recognizes that not only do Christians have something to say to the world, but—again recognizing an insight from that same conciliar document—that the Church is "abundantly and variously helped by the world" (nos. 40, 44 & 45).

Some may protest that such an approach is fundamentally humanistic, and allows Christian doctrine to be trumped by secular frameworks. I would argue, however, that such an approach is authentically Christological. We fiercely hold that Jesus the Christ was truly human and divine. My reading of the scriptures, however, was that the divinity of Christ was precisely revealed through his humanity; and that encountering his humanity led Peter and the rest to recognizing his divinity and pondering their own call to transcendence. Similarly, in word and worship we are called to affirm the very wedding of God with humanity—a humanity that, as the Dalai Lama reminds us<sup>40</sup>—is the only thing all people have in community. We affirm this human-divine wedding in the hopes that, like so many unbelievers in the New Testament, it might invite others to ponder transcendence in service to the world.

Writing on "Liturgy and the Holocaust," ethicist John Pawlikowski examined the symbolic genius of Nazi leadership—using Reinhold Niebuhr's distinctions between the vitalistic and the rational<sup>41</sup>—as a way to underscore the importance of symbolic mediation for the good not just of a church but of a

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<sup>39</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html) (accessed 13.iii.17).

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, his *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World* (Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I: *Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1964); Tracy generously draws upon Niebuhr in *The Analogical Imagination*, especially for his ethical-political theological emphasis; the traces of Niebuhr's vitalistic-rational polarity are clearly visible in Tracy's own analogical-dialectical frame.

republic.<sup>42</sup> As Pawlikowski summarizes, "vitalistic" covers those areas of human consciousness not controlled by the rational faculty, e.g., feeling, memory, and myth-making. While many wanted to locate ethics primarily in people's rational capacity, Niebuhr stressed that authentic and effective human ethics required involving the vitalistic energies. Pawlikowski illustrates this point by demonstrating how "the regeneration of the vitalistic side of humanity ... stood at the heart of the Nazi enterprise." He notes—with special references to their "public liturgies"—how perceptive Nazi leadership was in recognizing the influence of symbolism in human life. Pawlikowski concludes:

One of the convictions that has continued to deepen with me ... is that moral sensitivity remains an indispensable prelude to moral reasoning. We ethicists can provide the necessary clarifications of human response mandated by such sensitivity. Such clarifications are absolutely essential if religious experience is not to degenerate into religious fanaticism. But, as an ethicist, I cannot create the sensitivity itself. [32a] Mere appeals to reason, authority, and/or natural law will prove ineffective by themselves. Such sensitivity will reemerged only through a new awareness of God's intimate link with human kind, in suffering and joy, through symbolic experience. Nothing short of this will suffice in light of the Holocaust."<sup>43</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The 1997 movie *Contact*<sup>44</sup> is both a science-fiction examination of a first direct contact with life forces from outside our galaxy and a parable about religious righteousness. In the movie, an initial stage of contact with extra terrestrials is the reception of an audiovisual message sent from outer space. After some confusion, the scientists are finally able to discern the message and it stuns them. The message is a television transmission of then Chancellor Adolph Hitler speaking at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The scientists are distraught by the transmission, and wonder aloud whether the transmission reveals malevolent intent on the part of the sender. But finally a more sobering realization dawns on them: the human race is receiving back—at least in part—exactly what we ourselves first sent out; that is, we are receiving back the images and sounds from the first large scale television transmission in the history of the planet: the 1936 Olympics. Unaware of what we had sent, the scientists were unprepared for what was received.

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<sup>42</sup>John Pawlikowski, "Liturgy and the Holocaust: How do we Worship in an Age of Genocide," in *Christian Responses To The Holocaust: Moral And Ethical Issues*, ed. Donald Dietrich (Syracuse University Press, 2003).

<sup>43</sup>Pawlikowski, "Liturgy and the Holocaust."

<sup>44</sup><http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118884/> (accessed 2.iv.17).

Analogously, many faith communities may be unhappy with the “return transmissions” we are receiving about the way we conduct ourselves in the liturgies of the church and their continuity or discontinuity with the liturgies of the world. Maybe, however, we are unaware that we are receiving back what is in effect our “original transmissions.” The more we are empowered to understand our exercise of the liturgies of church and world as acts of public theology and powerful gifts of *leitourgia* for not only the baptized but also for all of humanity, the more it is possible that we can nuance those transmissions so that they encourage dialogue and mutual respect, rather than return static. Maybe such bridge building is the work of our next 500 years together, not simply in the hope of shared communion between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, or even between Christianity and humanity, but nothing less than but a new communion between humanity and divinity, through Christ our Lord.