

Liturgy: From Desacralization to Sanctification in Secular Environments

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1. Introduction

There is no issue in either denying or admitting that there is a sharp tension between quickly evolving contemporary societies, especially in ‘the West’, on the one hand and the worship activities of Christian Churches on the other hand. To a certain extent, this tension is yet another, and probably fairly normal, instance of the complex relation between faith and culture, or, to say it in a different register, ‘the gospel’ and ‘our time’. Neither of these poles can and should ever be absorbed in the other one, as the renowned Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor wisely warned in one of his many publications: ‘There can never be a total fusion of the faith and any particular society, and the attempt to achieve it is dangerous for the faith.’¹

Moreover, there seems to be a growing consensus that language only is not the most fundamental side of the problem, as many liturgists and theologians have nonetheless assumed for quite some time.² Nowadays there is an awareness that the vernacular languages, in which liturgies are celebrated since the liturgical reforms issuing from the Second Vatican Council, will never coincide with ordinary speech. One additionally realizes that the accessibility of liturgy and sacraments does not, or at least not exclusively, depend on the willingness or unwillingness to adapt, modify, accommodate, and interpret the rites and texts of liturgical services, and on the question whether or not these changes are sanctioned by competent authorities and implemented with pastoral success. In other words, there seems to be going on something strange in the liturgy.

The goal of this contribution is to shed light on that ‘strangeness’ of the liturgy and to do that from a systematic-theological perspective.³ Because of the context within which I live and work, the scope of the present contribution is

¹ Ch. TAYLOR: ‘A Catholic modernity?’, in IDEM: *Dilemmas and connections. Selected essays* (Cambridge, MA / London 2011) 167-187, p. 170. The original version of this text was published in 1999.

² Instructive in this respect is Paul de Clerck’s analysis in the first chapter of his book P. DE CLERCK: *L’intelligence de la liturgie* (Paris 2005²) 19-33.

³ This means that the method here employed is constituted by critical reflection about written sources, which were authored by thinkers who aimed at a deeper understanding of the content, the implications and the impact of Christian faith in general (along the lines of the classical phrase *fides quaerens intellectum*) and of its liturgical expressions in particular.

limited to the geographical area commonly known as 'the West'.⁴ It is not impossible, however, that the arguments unfolded are relevant to developments in other parts of the world as well, since today we are living undeniably in a globalizing world. In a similar way, my ecclesial frame of reference is Roman Catholicism but it is possible that the ideas developed below apply to other denominations as well. That, at least, is my hope in offering the current considerations as a contribution to ongoing discussions among liturgists, ritual studies scholars, and theologians.

The guiding question of the present paper is whether and, if so, to which degree, secularism has impacted on the self-understanding of liturgy and sacraments. This question may sound odd, since it is generally taken for granted that secularization processes have exerted a tremendous influence on the Church's ritual repertoire as well as on the experiences of the faithful. Nevertheless, there may be reasons to further inquire what exactly secularism did to the celebration of the sacraments in modern and postmodern settings and what it was unable to affect. The hypothesis underlying the following reflections is that it is much too simple to uphold the conviction that it is because of secularization processes that phenomena like Church attendance and the liturgical tradition started to wane, that secularization endangered, or even destroyed, the sacred character of Christian celebrations and ceremonies, and that, as a powerful token of one's being religious, one has to stand firm against secularization's ongoing *desacralization* of the entire life-world of people. For the truth is that liturgy itself can be understood as a powerful desacralizing reality. The difference with secularism may hence not be liturgy's distance towards or difference from natural sacredness but its goal and its vision. What liturgy ultimately tries to achieve, because it already participates in that dynamic, is the *sanctification* of the world, whether secular or not, postmodern or primitive, religious or atheistic. In a certain sense, liturgy maintains (and ought to maintain) an 'in-difference' towards any characteristic of the world.

To build up the case appropriately, this text is divided into two parts, the first of which lays the basis for what is elaborated in greater detail in the second one. One could call the first part the negative one, in which the connection between liturgy and desacralization is investigated. The point of departure is Alexander Schmemmann's bold claim that secularism is the 'negation' of Christian worship.⁵ This claim is critically evaluated and compared with a profound and original insight of Yves Congar.⁶ Correspondingly, the second part discusses in a posi-

⁴ This area commonly comprises Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand. The question whether, and to which extent, geographical criteria will continue to be pertinent to define 'the West' and 'Western' culture(s), cannot be addressed here.

⁵ A. SCHMEMMANN: *For the life of the world. Sacraments and orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY 1973) 118; 124.

⁶ There are several reasons why it is meaningful to refer to these authors. First, it seems that present discussions about sacredness and sacramentality as well as their mediation through rituals and ceremonies in 'secular' cultures were anticipated by debates that

tive way what the connection is between liturgy and sanctification. I will again appeal to Schmemmann to see how he sees the mutual relation between the Church and the Eucharist from a liturgical and an eschatological point of view. These considerations will be supplemented by some more recent theological and philosophical scholarship that discusses the messianic dimension of the Kingdom to come and its critical distance towards the world in which we live. On the basis of all that I will finally be able to draw some preliminary conclusions about the nature of the liturgy and make suggestions about the reasons why it comes that liturgy and secularism may indeed be incommensurable, in spite of many well-intended attempts to bridge the gap.

2. Liturgy and desacralization

2.1. Schmemmann's challenge

Schmemmann observes that the phenomenon of secularism has caused deep division among Christians. Whereas some approach to it entirely positively and welcome it as a blessing, others are far more reluctant and even take a somewhat inimical stance. '[T]here are those who reduce the Church to the world and its problems, and those who simply equate the world with evil and morbidly rejoice in their apocalyptic gloom.'⁷ Clearly, Schmemmann does not want to side with either alternative. He criticizes the first option to treat the world as a reality independent from faith and liturgy. The second option is rejected because it actually turns its back to the world and does not seem to understand the implications of a theology of creation. In a certain sense, the opposite alternatives make the same mistake, in that they misconstrue the *relation* between liturgy and world, albeit with entirely different consequences.

Precisely the notions of 'creation' and 'world', however, are of paramount importance to understand Schmemmann's liturgical position. For the liturgy takes place in the world as it was created by God. It was never meant as a rejection of the world, even if, through original sin, there is something deeply wrong with the world and its inhabitants. According to Schmemmann, liturgy crotches itself

took place immediately before and after Vatican II. Second, both Schmemmann and Congar responded each in their own way to positions taken in these debates by anthropologists and sociologists and they did that from a deliberately theological angle. It is worthwhile to rediscover their responses and to investigate how they can contribute to contemporary discussions. Third, their ideas do have an importance beyond their respective denominational backgrounds. The positions they defended are to be considered as insights which deserve to be taken seriously both by research and reflection in the humanities and by philosophers of different currents of thought.

⁷ SCHMEMMANN: *For the life of the world* 8.

into the world to make it into a more beautiful tapestry;⁸ it is not and ought never to be considered as a safe harbor that protects against the evils of the world. To think that such harmless harbors exist would be an enormous illusion and eventually lead to mere disillusion. Even more, such suppositions may probably be called sinful, as they refuse to see the world as God's gift and creation.

But why is it, then, that Schmemmann seems so harsh on secularism? The reason is that he sees secularism not as a system of thought that genuinely represents the interests of the world (there would be nothing wrong with that) but as an ideology that treats the world independent of God, faith, and religion. The problem is not that secularism tries to defend the world but that it does so by distancing itself from its own roots. Schmemmann proposes the following working definition of secularism: it is 'the progressive and rapid alienation of our culture, of its very foundations, from the Christian experience and "world view" which initially shaped that culture.'⁹ Elsewhere he further explains: 'Secularism – we must again and again stress this – is a "stepchild" of Christianity, as are, in the last analysis, all secular ideologies which today dominate the word.'¹⁰

Even though this definition of secularism is quite ordinary and definitely determined by a context that reacted towards the ongoing processes of secularization in an apologetic way, i.e. above all in terms of a 'loss' (of sense and influence), it is important to stress the preeminently theological nature of Schmemmann's dealings with secularism. Interestingly, he does interpret secularism as a 'heresy', but not one about God or Christ – he definitely realizes that 'secularism is by no means identical with atheism'¹¹ – but rather one about the human being. 'It is the negation of man [sic] as a worshiping being, as *homo adorans*: the one for whom worship is the essential act which both "posits" his humanity and fulfills it.'¹² The category of *homo adorans* was introduced by Schmemmann to indicate that the most fundamental calling of the human being was praying to and/as sojourning in the intimate presence of God. But, again, that intimacy was interrupted by the first couple's disobedience and misplaced striving for independence.

Schmemmann correspondingly understands the liturgy as the sacramental way in which, through the Paschal Mystery of the Redeemer, women and men are enabled (again) to repose in God's company. In other words, the liturgy for him is profoundly doxological and eschatological. But that is precisely the fundamental reason it maintains strained relationships with a secular understanding

⁸ The image of a tapestry is meaningfully elaborated in H. BOERSMA: *Heavenly participation. The weaving of a sacramental tapestry* (Grand Rapids 2011). Interestingly, Boersma refers to Schmemmann (pp. 8-9) but his major source of inspiration is the *nouvelle théologie* and, in particular, the theology of Henri de Lubac.

⁹ SCHMEMMANN: *For the life of the world* 7.

¹⁰ SCHMEMMANN: *For the life of the world* 127.

¹¹ SCHMEMMANN: *For the life of the world* 124.

¹² SCHMEMMANN: *For the life of the world* 118.

of time and space. Secularism cuts itself off from the deep connection between God and the human condition – a connection which was disturbed but never made undone and, moreover, one for which not the human being but God alone took the initiative to restore. Hence, it comes as no surprise that, according to Schmemmann, ‘the real cause of *secularism*’ is ‘ultimately nothing else but the affirmation of the world’s autonomy, of its self-sufficiency in terms of reason, knowledge, and action.’¹³ Secularism is both unable and unwilling to acknowledge the world’s and humankind’s *relation* with God and may therefore indeed be regarded as a blunt ‘negation’ of worship.

Schmemmann’s bold statement raises the question what the real possibilities are to overcome the apparent opposition between liturgy and secularism and, more particularly, between their antagonistic approaches to the world. Is there continuity or discontinuity between the liturgy and the natural sense of sacredness with which human beings, even those living in secular cultures, would be naturally equipped? Somewhat surprisingly, Schmemmann himself leaves open that question, inasmuch as he contends that¹⁴

the uniqueness, the *newness* of Christian worship is not that it has no *continuity* with worship in ‘general’, as some overly zealous apologists tried to prove (...), but that in Christ this very continuity is fulfilled, receives its ultimate and truly new significance so as to truly bring all ‘natural’ worship to an end.

At this point it is helpful to complement Schmemmann’s view with an intriguing insight of Congar.

2.2. Congar’s insight

In a volume which appeared in 1967 in the immediate aftermath of the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum concilium* and which was edited by himself and his fellow Dominican brother Jean-Pierre Jossua, Yves Congar tackled the question where the sacred fits into a Christian worldview.¹⁵ Right at the beginning of his text, Congar expresses a moderate sympathy for Eliade’s work in the history of religions and the anthropology of religion, especially for his famous work entitled *The sacred and the profane*,¹⁶ but he significantly adds that Christianity is about

¹³ SCHMEMMANN: *For the life of the world* 129.

¹⁴ SCHMEMMANN: *For the life of the world* 122.

¹⁵ Y. CONGAR: ‘Where does the “Sacred” fit into a Christian worldview?’, in IDEM: *At the heart of Christian worship. Liturgical essays of Yves Congar* (transl. and ed. by P. PHILIBERT) (Collegeville 2010) 108-132. The French title of the essay is ‘Situation du “sacré” en régime chrétien’ and the original volume in which it appeared was nr. 66 in the renowned Unam Sanctam series; it was published with Cerf in Paris.

¹⁶ M. ELIADE: *The sacred and the profane. The nature of religion* (transl. by W.R. TRASK) (Orlando etc. 1987). The original version of this work appeared in 1956.

‘something completely different.’¹⁷ He thereupon engages in an interpretation of Old Testament and New Testament passages where it becomes clear that God’s revelation and salvific plan are not about maintaining a sacred order which is sharply distinguished from a profane one. To the contrary, the categories of the sacred and the profane as well as the very difference between them are of no use when it comes to understanding and explaining what Christian faith and sacraments effectuate and mean. It strikes Congar that the profane in particular seems to have no place in the logic of the Scriptures: ‘The Gospel abolishes the sacred as a kind of withdrawal from the world only by abolishing the category of the profane.’¹⁸ Hence, it ‘teaches us clearly enough that nothing is profane for the Christian, because everything can be sanctified. Everything that God has made is good.’¹⁹ Just like Schmemmann, Congar develops, or at least relies on, a theology of creation to make sense of Christian worship and liturgy.

It seems, thus, that there is no natural or spontaneous continuity between the realm of world and history on the one hand and sacramental reality on the other, because creation and redemption do not coincide. ‘The world of grace, the source of our communion with God, is a distinct, original domain, never completely homogeneous with the world itself.’²⁰ In this respect, moreover, Congar sides with profound theological intuitions of his contemporaries Marie-Dominique Chenu and Louis Bouyer. The two of them had argued that the human being is not in and of itself *liturgiefähig*.²¹ As a human being, a woman or a man is not Christian but can only become one through entering into the liturgico-sacramental order of the Rison One, i.e. through baptism.

Christian liturgy and sacraments share ontologically both in God’s good creation and in Christ’s redemptive work. Their reconnecting work is called sanctification but in no way coalesces with any ‘natural’ sacredness. The reason is that in and through Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension the old cultic dividing lines have ceased to exist. They are no longer valid and have moreover been replaced by a much more powerful alternative, the body of Christ. Congar is very firm on this: ‘[T]here is only *one* sacred reality, the body of Christ’²² – whereby he is aware that the use of the word sacred in this context is only but analogous to the commonly known ‘sacreds’. He explains: ‘Jesus Christ, to whom we become mystically incorporated and identified, is himself the fullness

¹⁷ CONGAR: ‘Where does the “Sacred” fit’ 108.

¹⁸ CONGAR: ‘Where does the “Sacred” fit’ 117.

¹⁹ CONGAR: ‘Where does the “Sacred” fit’ 121.

²⁰ CONGAR: ‘Where does the “Sacred” fit’ 125.

²¹ M.-D. CHENU: ‘Anthropologie et liturgie’, in *La Maison-Dieu* 12 (1947) 53-65; L. BOUYER: *Le rite et l’homme. Sacralité naturelle et liturgie* (= Lex orandi 32) (Paris 1962). To both these works Congar refers in CONGAR: ‘Where does the “Sacred” fit’ 124.

²² CONGAR: ‘Where does the “Sacred” fit’ 126; cf. *Ibidem* 123.

of sanctity, the Holy One of God. Every aspect of the question of the sacred needs to be seen in relation to Christ.²³

In sum, with a reference to both Schmemann and Congar, it seems fair to conclude that the liturgy has an unmistakable *desacralizing* dimension. It does not only not coincide with natural sacredness, it puts it under critique. It doesn't do that, however, in a defying, repudiating, or derogatory mode, but with a clear invitation to join in the soteriological dynamic of the Christ event. In other words, it *sanctifies*.

3. Liturgy and sanctification

3.1. Church and Eucharist

When the presider of the liturgical assembly uses the second Eucharistic prayer of The Roman Missal, which is arguably the one most frequently used in contemporary Catholicism, one hears God acclaimed as the *fons omnis sanctitatis*, 'the fount of all holiness.'²⁴ That happens right after the preface, so that the phrase somehow recaptures the solemn doxology of the *Sanctus*, the 'Holy, Holy, Holy'. What this powerful liturgical action implies at a theological level, is that there is no doubt whatsoever about the origin of sacredness, or sanctity. It is not the upheaval of something immanent in nature but the infusion of something transcendent or supernatural which, moreover, does not destroy or render superfluous that into which it permeates (cf. the well-known Thomistic dictum *gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit*). As such, the liturgy respects and reinforces the fundamental provocative logic of Christian revelation.²⁵

This infusion of meaning is realized most efficiently through the celebration of the Eucharist, which has no other purpose and mission than to connect, or reconnect again more solidly, the entire universe with its creator. The Eucharist is there to offer the real body of Christ to humanity (sacramentally) so that humanity can reestablish itself as the true body of Christ (ecclesially).²⁶ This intricate relationship has been paradigmatically explored by Alexander Schmemmann.

For Schmemmann, everything about the Eucharist is genuinely *sacramental*. In his famous study on the Eucharist, which was published posthumously, he discusses the entire course of its *ordo* – from the act of gathering and the en-

²³ CONGAR: 'Where does the "Sacred" fit' 128.

²⁴ *The Roman Missal. English translation according to the third typical edition for use in the dioceses of the United States of America* (Collegeville 2011) 646 (nr. 100).

²⁵ Cf. J. GELDHOF: *Revelation, reason and reality. Theological encounters with Jaspers, Schelling and Baader* (= Studies in philosophical theology 39) (Leuven etc. 2007).

²⁶ H. DE LUBAC: *Corpus mysticum. The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages. Historical survey* (transl. by G. SIMMONDS et al.) (London 2006).

trance hymn until communion and concluding prayers. Schmemmann considers the Eucharist to be most fundamentally 'the sacrament of the Kingdom.'²⁷ When dealing with the central part of the Eucharistic celebration, the anaphora or Eucharistic prayer, he lucidly underpins his emphatic choice to call everything a 'sacrament' as follows:²⁸

I see the entire task at hand in demonstrating as fully as possible that the divine liturgy is a single, though also 'multifaceted', sacred rite, a single sacrament, in which all its 'parts', their entire sequence and structure, their coordination with each other, the necessity of each for all and all for each, manifests to us the inexhaustible, eternal, universal and truly divine meaning of what has been and what is being accomplished.

It follows from this that the Church's deepest vocation is to continue to realize, establish, and live up to its sacramentality, which she first receives from Christ before she can offer it to the world. The Church's sacramental nature is a profoundly mysterious reality which precedes her but in which she at the same time ontologically shares, however, just like manna and sacramental grace, not in order to store it but to pass it on, present it, and 'radiate' it always and everywhere.²⁹ Inasmuch as the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the faithful

are made participants of the Messianic Banquet, of the New Pascha; it is from there, 'having seen the true light, having received the heavenly Spirit', that [they] return into 'this world' (...) as witnesses of the Kingdom which is 'to come'. Such is the sacrament of the Church, the *leitourgia* which eternally transforms the Church into what she is, makes her the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit.³⁰

In other words, the Church, inasmuch as she *actually* celebrates the Eucharist, is a powerful motor for the *transformation* of the world.

For the Eucharist (...) is a *passage*, a procession of the Church into 'heaven,' into her fulfillment as the Kingdom of God. And it is precisely the reality of this passage into the *Eschaton* that conditions the transformation of our offering – bread

²⁷ A. SCHMEMANN: *The Eucharist. Sacrament of the Kingdom* (transl. by P. KACHUR) (Crestwood, NY 1987). Cf. also IDEM: 'Liturgy and eschatology', in Th. FISCH (ed.): *Liturgy and tradition. Theological reflections of Alexander Schmemmann* (Crestwood, NY 1990) 89-100, p. 95: 'The whole liturgy is to be seen as the sacrament of the Kingdom of God, the Church is to be seen as the presence and communication of the Kingdom that is to come.'

²⁸ SCHMEMANN: *The Eucharist* 160-161.

²⁹ See in this context the profound reflections of L.-M. CHAUVET: *Symbol and sacrament. A sacramental reinterpretation of Christian existence* (transl. by P. MADIGAN & M. BEAUMONT) (Collegeville 1995) 44-45.

³⁰ A. SCHMEMANN: 'Theology and Eucharist', in FISCH (ed.): *Liturgy and tradition* 69-88, p. 83.

and wine – into the new food of the new creation, of our meal into the Messianic Banquet and the *Koinonia* of the Holy Spirit.³¹

Apparently, for Schmemmann, the entire celebration of the Eucharist can be considered consecratory. The consecration is not limited to one individual rite, but can (and should) be extended to the sacrament as a whole. The fact that the Church Fathers used the word *eucharistia* to indicate ‘both the prayer of consecration and the consecrated gifts’³² is seen as a corroboration of this idea.

Schmemmann strongly criticizes those theological tendencies which have led to a reduction of this broad understanding of the transformational and consecratory dimension of the Eucharist, which he thinks is especially manifest in Western scholastic interpretations of transubstantiation. In his own Orthodox tradition, so he argues,³³

the *metabole* itself – the change of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ – and the communion of the Holy Gifts are viewed as the fulfillment, the crowning point and the climax, of the whole Eucharistic liturgy, whose meaning is precisely that it *actualizes* the Church as the new creation, redeemed by Christ, reconciled with God, given access to heaven, filled with divine Glory, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and *therefore* capable of and called to participation in divine Life, in the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ.

Another word for ‘consecration’ could be ‘sanctification’. Through the Eucharist the Church connects herself and the world with the sanctifying dynamic that finds its origin in God’s initiative of salvation. Therefore, it is important that the Church continuously acknowledges that the deepest roots of her ritual are not immanent but transcendent.

The Church is not a natural community which is ‘sanctified’ through the cult. In its essence the Church is the presence, the actualization in this world of the ‘world to come,’ in this *aeon* – of the Kingdom. And the mode of this presence, of this actualization of the new life, the new *aeon*, is precisely the *leitourgia*.³⁴

The consequence of this position is as lucid as it is harsh: the liturgy entails ‘the abolishment of cult as such, or at least (...) the complete destruction of the old philosophy of cult.’³⁵ The reason is that the cultic household, or ritual ‘economy’, presupposed a radical distinction between sacred and profane, and that the maintenance of this distinction runs contrary to the unifying and reconciling

³¹ SCHMEMANN: ‘Theology and Eucharist’ 82.

³² SCHMEMANN: ‘Theology and Eucharist’ 83.

³³ A. SCHMEMANN: *Of water and the Spirit. A liturgical study of baptism* (Crestwood 1974), 117.

³⁴ A. SCHMEMANN: ‘Theology and liturgical tradition’, in FISCH (ed.): *Liturgy and tradition* 11-20, p. 16-17.

³⁵ SCHMEMANN: ‘Theology and liturgical tradition’ 16.

dynamic intrinsic to the grand operation of grace, salvation, love, and sanctification in the Christian regime.

Through this brief exploration of the intrinsic connection between Church and Eucharist it has moreover become apparent that the concept of 'time' is of paramount importance. Concretely, eschatology seems to be necessarily involved when one thinks through what sanctification in general and the sanctifying nature of liturgy and sacraments really are. Therefore, it is only but appropriate that we now shift the attention to the eschatological dimension of liturgy, while bearing in mind the question how the liturgy relates to secular culture(s).

3.2. The Messianic Kingdom

For Schmemmann, it is evident that eschatology is by no means a flight from the world. Rather, eschatology sheds a light on the specific way of Christian inheritance in, and habitation of the world: as the gospel of John teaches at several occasions, they are in the world, but not 'of' the world.³⁶ Hence, it does not come as a surprise that he sees eschatology as a fundamental and all-pervasive dimension of Christian faith and theology; it is much more than a chapter in the book of faith which explains how Christians imagine 'the last things'.

Eschatology has been transposed into personal hope, personal waiting. But in reality the whole of Christian theology is eschatological, and the entire experience of life likewise. It is the very essence of the Christian faith that we live in a kind of rhythm – leaving, abandoning, denying the word, and yet at the same time always returning to it; living in time by that which is beyond time; living by that which is not yet come, but which we already know and possess.³⁷

According to Schmemmann, it was above all a deeply eschatological awareness that shaped the identity of Christian faith and its ritual expression in liturgy and sacraments. He is not afraid to speak about a radical 'change' in people's religiosity brought about by Christianity.³⁸ The very meaning of that change, he argues, consisted³⁹

³⁶ See in this context the interesting reflections of P. VALADIER: *La condition chrétienne. Du monde sans en être* (Paris 2003).

³⁷ SCHMEMMANN: 'Liturgy and eschatology' 95.

³⁸ Schmemmann does not stand alone with this interpretation; it can be found among other liturgical theologians. See, e.g., G. WAINWRIGHT: *Doxology. The praise of God in worship, doctrine, and life. A systematic theology* (New York 1984) 154: '[T]here are hints that the early Christians saw their eucharist as the successor of the Jewish passover, and this will account in part for the eschatologically charged atmosphere which surrounded the Christian sacrament from the first and which has never entirely disappeared.' Historical observations and theological interpretations are interwoven here in quite emphatic a way.

³⁹ A. SCHMEMMANN: *Introduction to liturgical theology* (transl. by A.E. MOOREHOUSE) (Crestwood 2003) 102.

in the appearance of a new understanding of the cult, of a new liturgical piety wholly determined by the faith of Christians in the ontological newness of the Church as the eschatological beginning in this world, in this aeon, of the Aeon of the Kingdom.

Schmemmann specifies that this eschatological newness of the cultic life of Christians is not a 'mediation between the sacred and the profane, but the fact of the accomplished consecration of the people by the Holy Spirit [and] their transformation into "sons of God"'.⁴⁰ This powerful event of transformation is predominantly realized through the celebration of the Eucharist:⁴¹

By participating in His Supper Christians receive into themselves His life and His Kingdom, i.e. the New Life and the New Aeon. In other words, the eschatology of the Eucharist is not world renouncing, not a turning away from time, but above all the affirmation of the reality, the certainty and the presence of the Kingdom of Christ which is 'within', which is already here within the Church, but which will be manifest in all glory only and the end of 'this world'.

Schmemmann underscores the 'strangeness' of this Christian newness vis-à-vis pagan forms of rituality, which upheld forms of piety based on a sharp difference between the sacred and the profane. The conservation and protection of this difference went along with 'the understanding of the cult as primarily a system of ceremonies and ritual which transmits sacredness to the profane and establishes between the two the possibility of communion and communication.' Schmemmann correspondingly claims to⁴²

know that Christianity set itself in opposition to the mystery religions on this point.⁴³ It professed salvation not as the possibility of an individual or even collective deliverance from evil and sin, it professed sanctification not as the possibility for the 'profane' to touch the 'sacred,' but proclaimed both as the eschatological fulfillment of the history of salvation, as the event leading man [sic] into the Aeon of the Kingdom of God.

As a consequence, the Eucharist is not so much to be understood as a mimetic operation which displays the incarnation or mimics the last supper Jesus held with his disciples. Rather it should be seen as 'the manifestation of the Church

⁴⁰ SCHMEMANN: *Introduction to liturgical theology* 103.

⁴¹ SCHMEMANN: *Introduction to liturgical theology* 73.

⁴² SCHMEMANN: *Introduction to liturgical theology* 126.

⁴³ This reference to the ancient Greek mystery religions is obviously meant as a critical comment on the work of Odo Casel. For a recent theological discussion of Casel's work, see J. GELDHOF: 'Meandering in mystery. Why theology today would benefit from rediscovering the work of Dom Odo Casel', in IDEM (ed.): *Mediating mysteries, understanding liturgies. On bridging the gap between liturgy and systematic theology* (Leuven 2015) (forthcoming).

as the new aeon' or 'the lifting up of the Church into His *parousia*, the Church's participation in His heavenly glory.'⁴⁴

Yet, very interestingly, Schmemmann's profoundly theological intuitions have found support from an unexpected angle. The Italian philosopher and political theorist Giorgio Agamben, who considers himself an atheist, recently devoted a great amount of attention to the history of ideas and thereby uncovered that many of them can be traced back to a Christian origin.⁴⁵ Agamben demonstrates that modern democratic systems including the bureaucracies undergirding them as well as the economical paradigm which increasingly permeates different spheres of life, are somehow rooted in Christian faith and worship.⁴⁶ While he admits that '[t]he thesis according to which the real Christian politics is liturgy and the Trinitarian doctrine founds politics as participation in the glorious worship of the angels and saints may appear surprising',⁴⁷ he assembles a lot of material to support this line of argument and interprets the many data convincingly.

Agamben's ideas at least raise the question what the relation is between liturgy and politics in a secular realm, especially in view of the etymology of the word *leitourgia* (public service). Inasmuch as he observes that 'Christ coincides without remainder with his liturgy' and that 'precisely this coincidence confers on his liturgy its incomparable efficacy',⁴⁸ he is theologically well-informed, to say the least. The question of efficacy and the way it is managed and controlled is what fascinates him the most, as it functions as the essential link with present-day neoliberal economies.

What defines the Christian liturgy is precisely the aporetic but always reiterated attempt to identify and articulate at the same time in the liturgical act – understood as *opus Dei* – mystery and ministry, that is, of making the liturgy as effective soterio-

⁴⁴ SCHMEMMANN: *Introduction to liturgical theology* 72.

⁴⁵ The whole construction of Agamben's *Homo sacer* project must be left out of our scope here. For a thorough introduction to and discussion of his work from a theological perspective, see C. DICKINSON: *Agamben and theology* (London / New York 2011).

⁴⁶ Although theologians (in addition to philosophers, sociologists, pedagogues, and scholars from many other fields) do engage in critical studies and discussions with Agamben's work, the liturgists among them are surprisingly silent. See B. LEVEN: 'Auf der Spur der Engel. Giorgio Agambens, Herrschaft und Herrlichkeit' aus liturgietheologischer Perspektive', in *Questions liturgiques / Studies in liturgy* 93 (2012) 117-133. This apparent lack of attention for Agamben among liturgical theologians is an additional reason to refer to him in the context of these reflections. The primary reason is of course the pertinence of his theories for the topic under consideration.

⁴⁷ G. AGAMBEN: *The Kingdom and the glory. For a theological genealogy of economy and government* (transl. by L. CHIESA) (Stanford 2011) 15.

⁴⁸ G. AGAMBEN: *Opus Dei. An archaeology of duty* (transl. by A. KOTSKO) (Stanford 2013) 8.

logical act and liturgy as the clergy's service to the community, *opus operatum* and *opus operantis Ecclesiae*, coincide.⁴⁹

This coincidence, Agamben explains, is an ingenious and far-reaching invention of the Christian religion, which made it possible that systems and institutions – political, economical, educational, and otherwise – employed people whose will and actions integrally coalesced with that of the institutions and systems themselves.⁵⁰

It is evident that these thoughts entail a thorough criticism of the Christian faith, both theoretically and with regard to its practical implications. Among other things, Agamben suggests that many developments in contemporary cultures – not to mention secularism in both politics, economy and private life – have a hidden, but ineradicable, genesis in Christianity. So the suggestion is that, to secure common and current forms of Christianity, is simultaneously to endorse the environment which seems hostile to it. On the other hand, however, this intriguing critique enables one to rediscover and explore with renewed vigor the truly and fundamentally eschatological dimension of the Christian religion. For it is precisely through this dimension that faith can distinguish itself from culture, politics, economy, etc.

In a lecture he gave in the Notre Dame cathedral of Paris, Agamben urgently warned the Church that she should always keep and live up to the eschatological difference with any place and time where she takes root. 'Will the Church finally grasp the historical occasion and recover its messianic vocation? If it does not, the risk is clear enough: it will be swept away by the disaster menacing every government and every institution on earth.'⁵¹ That danger is nothing else but disappearance. In other words, the Church needs to reconnect with its untimely or anachronistic nature, which makes it possible that she can *desacralize* whatever is necessary and *sanctify* everything. But, Agamben realizes, '[i]t is precisely this tension which seems today to have disappeared. As a sense for an economy of salvation in historical time is weakened, or eliminated, the economy extends its blind and derisive dominion to every aspect of social life.'⁵²

⁴⁹ Agamben: *Opus Dei* 19.

⁵⁰ AGAMBEN: *Opus Dei* 28: 'By defining the peculiar operativity of its public praxis in this way, the Church has invented the paradigm of a human activity whose effectiveness does not depend on the subject who sets it to work and nonetheless needs that subject as an "animate instrument" to be actualized and rendered effective.'

⁵¹ G. AGAMBEN: *The Church and the Kingdom* (transl. by L. DE LA DURANTAYE) (London etc. 2012) 41.

⁵² AGAMBEN: *The Church and the Kingdom* 35.

4. Conclusive observations

In this paper a case was made to overcome stereotypical and antagonistic views on the relation between liturgy and secular cultures. If one looks more closely at the theological core of what is at stake in the actual celebration and performance of liturgy and sacraments, one realizes that it is not the case that secularism desacralizes the holy rites and cult of Christians and thereby threatens to destroy it, so that Christian believers have no other option than to arm themselves against these devastating influences. Neither is it the case that there is a smooth continuity between a general sensitivity for sacredness, which possibly still endures even in radically secular cultures, and the Christian sacramental regime as it is embodied in the liturgy. The detour around eschatology made it clear that there is a fundamental difference but not an insuperable opposition between liturgy and the world. The difference can best be imagined as a creative and necessary tension. Accordingly, the nature of the relation the liturgy always entertains (and should keep) with the world is one of inviting, embracing, and including it into the grand sanctifying dynamic which is rooted in God's revelation and redemption.

It has become clear that the eschatological dimension of the liturgy is an indispensable interpretation key to deal with the difference between the sacred and the secular. This insight helps one understand that the worship practices of Christians do not simply side with the sacred. Moreover, inasmuch as they tend to upkeep an unworldly sacrality more than they share in the divine sanctification of the world, they need to be desacralized or, indeed, secularized. Reverse-ly, if liturgies tend to simply coincide with natural rituality – whatever that may be – it needs to be torn away from nature and reconnected with the supernatural, not massively but gradually. One can find such a balanced view in the work of Geoffrey Wainwright, who talks about the importance of avoiding 'the danger of an ideological sacralization' and 'the risk of degenerating into ideological secularism'.⁵³ The real problem, I would add, is not the sacralizing or the secularizing, but ideology. And that ideology can, maybe paradoxically, only be overcome inasmuch as there is room for eschatology.

The eschatological *reserve* requires the distinction between sacred and secular or profane. The eschatological *hope* promises that the distinction will prove to have been temporary. The eschatological *gift* already forbids an absolute separation between sacred and secular or profane and provokes even now their interpenetration.⁵⁴

That eschatology is above all embodied in the liturgy, which is the reason one should rediscover it in the church-world encounter.

⁵³ WAINWRIGHT: *Doxology* 407.

⁵⁴ WAINWRIGHT: *Doxology* 405.

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