

Interactive Web 2.0 and “Liturgy from Below”

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The ritual-functional landscape is currently characterized by great diversity. By saying that, we do not only mean the plethora of traditional liturgical acts (the sacraments, the vespers and matins, the funeral services and other ceremonies), the religious popular culture around asperges, oil and soil, pilgrimages, as well as the honoring of saints and icons, etc., but also various modern changes. The contemporary ritual-functional spectrum often goes beyond the classical form of worship in temples and the traditional forms of religious popular culture¹.

Interactive Web 2.0

Let us focus here on the technological progress and the recent developments on the World Wide Web, as well as their implications for worship and liturgy². We would like to emphasize that we are not doing

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1. See for example our article: “From Holy Sepulchre to Interactive Web 2.0: Several Current Developments of Eastern Christian Liturgy and Religious Popular Culture”, in: B. Groen – D. Galadza – Nina Glibetic – G. Radle (eds.), *Studies in Oriental Liturgy: Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy*, New York, 10-15 June 2014, Eastern Christian Studies 28, Peeters, Leuven 2019, pp. 1-24; Br. D. Spinks, *The Worship Mall: Contemporary Responses to Contemporary Culture*, Alcuin Club Collections 85, Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, London 2010.

2. Teresa Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, Liturgy, Worship and Society Series, Routledge, Abingdon & New York 2018; St. Böntert, *Gottesdienste im Internet: Perspektiven eines Dialogs zwischen Internet und Liturgie*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2005; “Liturgy Migrations into Cyberspace: Theological Reflections”, in: Teresa Berger

any sort of advertisement here, nor are we “missionaries” of interactive worship. Our main purpose is an attempt to describe some prominent phenomena that we observe.

Facts related to these developments are, firstly, the live broadcasting of worship on the internet – one could compare it with broadcasting on television. It is also possible for someone to pray and participate with others in matins and vespers via Skype or Zoom, even simultaneously with people in other parts of the world and from different time zones. One can say the hesychast “Blessing of the Heart” with others around the world guided by a priest (father or mother). We’ve been informed about Orthodox believers in Syria who could not attend the church because of the war atrocities in their country; so, they participated in an online Mass, which was being broadcast in real time from another part of the world. They placed the bread and wine in front of the screen during the Oblation, listened attentively to the readings, participated in the chants, made the sign of the cross, prayed, knelt during the invocation and received what had become for them the Holy Communion during the Mass.

A very interesting question is whether this group of Syrian Christians were actually receiving the consecrated gifts – the Christ’s body and blood. Opinions on this question are divided and the theological evaluation should have to address ecclesiological and anthropological aspects. Certainly, as always, circumstances must be taken into account: the reception of the “Holy Communion” from a comfortable chair at home while the parish is close by is very different from the situations created by the war atrocities in Syria. Moreover, one could ask those who comment negatively on this practice why the episcopal blessing – the one that the Pope gives “to the city and to the world” (*Urbi et Orbi*)

(ed.), *Liturgy in Migration: From the Upper Room to Cyberspace*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 2012, pp. 279-295; R. Gelhot, “Beten mit Bits and Bytes”, *Heiliger Dienst* 69, 2 (2015), pp. 66-74; M. Barnard, J. Cilliers & C. Wepener, *Worship in the Network Culture: Liturgical Ritual Studies, Fields and Methods, Concepts and Metaphors*, Liturgia Condenda 28, Peeters, Leuven 2014, pp. 19-22, 312-314; Birgit Jeggle-Merz, „Gottesdienst und mediale Übertragung“, in: *Gottesdienst der Kirche: Handbuch der Liturgiewissenschaft* 2.2, Pustet, Regensburg 2008, pp. 455-490. Cf. Isabelle Jonveaux, *Dieu en ligne: Expériences et pratiques religieuses sur Internet*, Bayard, Paris 2013.

for example— should have real power for TV viewers and internet users. However, during the Divine Liturgy not only the blessing of the flock plays an important role, but also the consecration of the two elements - bread and wine. This also makes us recalling the discussions that have preceded the allegedly irregular and inappropriate rebroadcasting of the Mass, especially the Anaphora, or the rebroadcasting of a concert of chant or other sacred music: fifty years ago, even more recently, there were still many who were against it, but nowadays this practice is commonplace. From a theological point of view, it makes no difference whether the Triune God is active on the Internet or not. But does that make any difference to people?

The interactive web 2.0 enables real participation in all ceremonies and rituals. A glance at the memorial services of the deceased clearly demonstrates this. On special “memorial websites” anyone can leave flowers on virtual graves of the deceased’s loved ones, add their name to virtual condolences lists and light candles in virtual³. This is happening not only in North America and Western Europe, but also in countries such as Greece, Romania, Ukraine, Lebanon, etc. For a large number of believers, all the above have become alternative forms of rituals, replacing the traditional funeral trisagion (thrice-holy) and other commemorative ceremonies. In addition, the participation in virtual pilgrimages, interactive votive ceremonies and many more becomes possible. Obviously, the use of the Internet from one’s office or living room implies a different kind of communion than in a church or in an open space. Nevertheless, the dimension of physical presence is not absent – we, as humans, can only communicate through our bodies. Apart from our eyes looking at the screen, our ears listening to the sounds of the loudspeakers and the movement of our fingers on the keyboard and mouse, the whole body –the person in its entirety– can be actively involved, since internet users also have the possibility to react, to pray, to chant, to be moved. There is also no lack of community formation, which is particularly true of the interactive web 2.0. It is most certain that the internet establishes a level of society that differs from all

3. For example, anyone selecting the “memorial sites” option on a search engine receives numerous results.

the others, and internet users often feel more connected to other users than to the rest of the congregation to which they formally belong. In addition, sometimes there is more freedom on the internet than in a Eucharistic assembly: No one can prevent a user from praising God in a loud voice, shouting, crying or dancing for joy, whereas if he/she did so in the temple his/her behavior might not be pleasing to other believers.

Therefore, one should be very careful when claiming that the virtual, online ritual is not real and genuine, and there is no practical and conscious functional participation through the internet. It would be like claiming that during a Sunday service everyone who attends is a devout participant who is not distracted by other thoughts! It is also worth mentioning that just as in Western Europe, so in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe only a small minority of baptized Christians attend church regularly⁴. Furthermore, even in services that are taking place offline, physical presence is not necessary and prayer for those who are absent is particularly common. According to the well-known account of the gathering by Justin Martyr († 165), the deacons took the Holy Communion gifts to those who were absent⁵. The Anaphoras of the Liturgies by St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil contain supplications for people who are not physically present, e.g. for the patriarch and the bishop, the deceased, and in general for all men and women («καὶ πάντων καὶ πασῶν»)⁶. These Anaphora supplications even request

4. In the big cities, only a very small part of all baptized Orthodox Christians probably attends the Sunday Mass on a weekly basis. In rural areas, however, the percentage is usually higher. In addition, a large number of Orthodox Christians attend gatherings only during Holy Week, Easter and other festivals, as well as “life rituals” such as baptism, marriage, funerals and memorial services, and on special occasions in monasteries and places of pilgrimage. As far as Roman Catholicism is concerned, in the city of Graz, for example, about 5% of all baptized Catholics attend mass every Sunday, while in the rural areas of Styria (one of Austria’s federal states) the percentage increases to about 10-15%. The complex issue of church attendance cannot be examined further here, because multifaceted socio-cultural factors have to be taken into account.

5. Ch. Munier (ed.), *Justin: Apologie pour les chrétiens*, Sources Chrétiennes 507, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 2006, pp. 302-313. See also R. Meßner, „Der Gottesdienst in der vornizänischen Kirche“, in: L. Pietri (ed.), *Die Geschichte des Christentums: Religion, Politik, Kultur*, Bd. 1. Die Zeit des Anfangs (bis 250), Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 2003, pp. 340-441, here pp. 430-435.

6. *Τερατικόν*, Apostoliki Diakonia, Athens 72009, pp. 135, 176.

the mediation of the Virgin Mary and other saints, who are actually present through the iconography of the temple, but do not physically participate. Moreover, the blessing of the Prothesis and the Anaphora in St. Basil’s Liturgy contain a clear prayer not only for those who bear the divine gifts, but also for all those for whose benefit they are offered⁷. In general, although a functioning community acquires a digital configuration, it can be formed even on the internet. At the same time, it should be mentioned that many participants in online liturgical rituals are also involved into worship gatherings offline. However, during the recent Covid crisis, church services were not allowed in many countries. This crisis highlighted the importance of the online worship. Thanks to this possibility, many believers could still be able to participate in a liturgical assembly⁸.

Four additional important phenomena and advantages of the digital revolution are the following: firstly, the wealth of texts (both primary and secondary: liturgical texts, commentaries and so on), films presenting worship and other religious rituals which are frequently updated, and the important possibility of interdisciplinary analysis of research findings from digital databases⁹. Secondly, the possibility of preparing sermons and asperges using various online resources –e.g., collections of patristic texts– as well as delivering online academic courses on worship to those people who are interested in them and have a computer and access to the internet. Thirdly, the large number of websites with “questions and answers”, discussions, blogs and message boards on liturgical issues¹⁰. Lastly, the fourth advantage is technology, which enables us visiting historical monuments that are landmarks for worship, but which have

7. *Τερατικόν*, *op.cit.*, pp. 106, 175. Cf. N. Denysenko, “Retrieving a Theology of Belonging: Eucharist and Church in Postmodernity”, *Worship* 88 (2014), pp. 543-561; 89 (2015), pp. 21-43, here pp. 22-26.

8. See for example H.-J. Feulner – El. Haslwanger (eds.), *Gottesdienst auf eigene Gefahr? Die Feier der Liturgie in der Zeit von Covid-19*, Aschendorff, Münster 2020.

9. P. Post, „Vom religionsphänomenologischen Erbe zum e-Ritual: Trends und Themen der aktuellen Ritual Studies“, *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 55 (2013), pp. 139-181, here pp. 177-180. Cf. W. D. Ray, *Tasting Heaven on Earth: Worship in Sixth-Century Constantinople*, W. E. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI 2012, pp. 152-153.

10. Such questions are, for example, “What is the most important element of the Anaphora: the invocation, as in the Byzantine rite, or the words of the Lord, as in the Roman rite?”.

either been destroyed or rebuilt over the years, so that we have the opportunity to see what their original architectural designs were like. Therefore, the virtual reconstruction of many important buildings and streets in Constantinople and Rome makes it easier for us to gain an insight into the places where numerous services and ceremonies have been held in these two important liturgical centers¹¹. It is also possible to follow a digital tour of the catacombs of Priscilla and other catacombs in Rome, and thus to interactively visit various Christian tombs.

Whatever the different views on the digital revolution and its relation to the study of liturgy and theology might be, we should not ignore –to quote the German-American liturgist Teresa Berger– the “profound changes in contemporary ways of being both in the world and in worship... Most of us have been trained to analyze texts. But what is needed today is a new logic, a kind of multimedia, high-tech, interactive, visual literacy, as well as special attention to experiential worship practices and to all the multifaceted reality of contemporary life includes, both online and offline”¹². Cyber ritual is a challenging and innovative research field¹³. The Liturgical lesson, as a discipline, has lagged far behind electronic worship, and needs to fill that gap¹⁴. As for me, unlike many of my PhD candidates, I am a digital immigrant, not a digital native like them. I grew up in the non-digital age and, although I’m trying not to idealize innovative digital developments, I have to admit that I still have a lot to learn from them, which is probably true for many of us. The truth is, however, that we are dealing with rituals that go beyond traditional parishes and dioceses. They also lead us to the possibility of a functional

11. J. F. Baldovin, *The Urban Character of Christian Worship: The Origins, Development, and Meaning of Stational Liturgy*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 228, Pontifical Oriental Institute.

12. Teresa Berger, “@ Worship: Exploring Liturgical Practices in Cyberspace”, *Questions Liturgiques* 94, 2-3 (2013), pp. 266-286, here p. 285.

13. P. Post, “Ritual Studies”, in: *Religion: Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, <http://religion.oxfordre.com> [5.10.2023], pp. 11-14.

14. Cf. P. Post, „Met het gezicht naar de cultuur: Liturgiewetenschap als studie van ritueel en cultuur“, in: L. van Tongeren – P. Post (eds.), *Voorbij de liturgiewetenschap: Over het profiel van liturgische en rituele studies*, Netherlands Studies in Ritual and Liturgy 12, Instituut voor Christelijk Erfgoed/Instituut voor Liturgische en Rituele Studies, Groningen – Tilburg 2011, pp. 37-61, here p. 48.

cultural assimilation in the context of modern society¹⁵. It is clear that interactive online rituals could be described as a modern –perhaps post-modern– popular religious culture.

“Worship/Liturgy from Below”

Therefore, Liturgists need to take into account both empirical practice and contemporary developments. The eminent liturgist Father Robert Taft (1932-2018) has encouraged the study of “worship from below”. He has also taken into account our own research on the sacrament of the Holy Unction in the Orthodox Church of Greece as a classic example of “worship from below”¹⁶. Fortunately, more and more research has been conducted on the daily ritual-liturgical practice. Questions such as how the sacrament of marriage is actually performed in Greece, how life really is in an average Greek parish, or whether and why in South-Eastern Europe’s rural areas exorcisms and apotropaic rituals for “the evil eye”, and many others are still popular, are increasingly being researched in a more systematic context. (Since the period of the 19th century national movements in South-Eastern Europe, for example in Greece and Serbia, ethnographic research has been promoted –financially and otherwise– while at the same time special attention has been given to the ritual and functional elements of the issues under investigation¹⁷. In addition, researchers from the West have conducted pioneering fieldwork researches).

In many cases, the result of sufficient fieldwork results shows us that the empirical reality deviates significantly from the official liturgical

15. Cf. P. Post, „Rituell-liturgische Bewegungen: Erkundungen von Trends und Perspektiven“, in: Al. Gerhards – B. Kranemann (eds.), *Christliche Begräbnisliturgie und säkulare Gesellschaft*, Erfurter Theologische Studien 30, Benno, Leipzig 2002, pp. 25-60, here pp. 46-47.

16. See for example R. F. Taft, “Good Bye to All That: Swansong of an Old Academician”, in: *Studies in Oriental Liturgy* (see note 1), pp. 357-383, here p. 371 (note 33).

17. It suffices to refer to two examples: the Greek journal *Λαογραφία/Laographia* and a Serbian study: Bojana Jovanović, *Магија српских обреда у животном циклусу појединача*, Novi Sad 1995.

books. It is necessary to carefully and unambiguously research the liturgical books; yet, the mere examination of theme is not enough and cannot obtain us with the rich results of the field research. Worship is not identical with a book, and the focus of our attention must be on the actual worship itself, the ritual in its entirety, as well as its socio-cultural context. I am convinced that beyond the “defined faith” of the liturgical books, doctrine, moral theology and canon law, the “lived faith”, i.e. the numerous ways in which believers experience their faith, should be further integrated into our research and teaching programs than it already is¹⁸.

The adequate field research consists of two important elements: the field research proper (especially the attendance of rituals, observation of participants and interviews with people regarding the meaning each person attributes to worship) and the study of the relevant literature. The application of empirical-functional methods makes it easier for us to systematically examine what the participants -above all the laity- are actually experiencing during the liturgy. This practice is truly important since, as we have already demonstrated, there is often a wide gap between the believers’ actual experience and the books’ content. Some liturgists tend to pay special attention only to the formal texts and liturgical canons, yet it is impossible for someone to deny that many believers are not in position to follow and understand these “difficult” texts, however beautiful and theologically important they may be. Here we are confronted with a crucial topic: the liturgical language, the difficulty of understanding it, its performative aspects, etc.¹⁹.

During our long research on the Holy Unction, the small holy water, the funeral and the memorial rituals of the Greek Orthodox Church²⁰,

18. Cf. Teresa Berger, „Die Sprache der Liturgie“, in: H.-Chr. Schmidt-Lauber, M. Meyer-Blanck, K.-H. Bieritz (eds.), *Handbuch der Liturgik: Liturgiewissenschaft in Theologie und Praxis der Kirche*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 3²⁰⁰³, pp. 798-806, here pp. 802 and 805.

19. Cf. B. J. Groen, “Liturgical Language and Vernacular Tongues in Eastern Christianity”, in: P. van Geest, M. Poorthuis, E. Rose (eds.), *Sanctifying Texts, Transforming Rituals: Encounters in Liturgical Studies – Essays in Honour of Gerard A.M. Rouwhorst*, Brill’s Studies in Catholic Theology 5, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2017, pp. 407-424.

20. B. J. Groen, „Ter genezing van ziel en lichaam“: *De viering van het oliesel in de Grieks-*

we have made some interesting discoveries: according to the official Holy Unction ritual²¹, the sacrament concerns the healing of both the spiritually/mentally weakened (all of us) and the physically sick “for the healing of soul and body” («εἰς ἵσιν ψυχῆς καὶ σώματος»). However, in reality, the Holy Unction in Greece is not performed mainly in the case of physical illness; the participants usually consider the sacrament as an element relevant to their general well-being (“for the good”). Moreover, the long and complex ritual requires the participation of seven priests; in reality, though, there is usually only one, is very concentrated and those that are present are anointed with the consecrated oil only at the sacrament’s conclusion. If we had limited our research to the study of the Euchologion alone, we would never have been able to arrive at these results²².

Orthodoxe Kerk, Theologie & Empirie 11, Kok and Deutscher Studienverlag, Kampen – Weinheim 1990, pp. 98-213; “The Anointing of the Sick in the Greek Orthodox Church”, *Concilium* 27, 2 (1991), pp. 50-59; „Die Krankensalbung im orthodoxen Griechenland“, *Liturgisches Jahrbuch* 45 (1995), pp. 178-182; “Continuity and Discontinuity of the Anointing of the Sick”, in: P. Io Skaltsis – Archim. Nikodimos A. Skretas (eds.), *Γηθόσυνον σέβασμα: Αντίδωρον τιμῆς καὶ μνήμης εἰς τὸν μακαριστὸν καθηγητὴν τῆς Λειτουργικῆς Ιωάννην M. Φουντούλην* († 2007), vol. I, Afoi Kyriakidi Publications, Thessaloniki 2013, pp. 467-498, here pp. 492-494; “‘Burying the Dead is Christian, Burning Them is Pagan’: The Present Controversy about Cremation in Greece and Greek Orthodox Funeral Rites”, *Het Christelijk Oosten* 53 (2001), pp. 201-218; “‘Wash your sins, not only your face’: Therapeutic Water and the Evolution of the Small Water Blessing in the Greek-Byzantine Tradition”, in: Diliana Atanassova – Tinatin Chronz (eds.), *Σύναξις καθολική: Beiträge zu Gottesdienst und Geschichte der fünf altkirchlichen Patriarchate für Heinzgerd Brakmann zum 70. Geburtstag*, orientalia – patristica – oecumenica 6, 1 LIT, Münster, Berlin – Wien 2014, pp. 249-268; “Curative Holy Water and the Small Water Blessing in the Orthodox Church of Greece”, in: B. J. Groen, D. Galadza, Nina Glibetic, G. Radle (eds.), *Rites and Rituals of the Christian East: Selected Papers of the Fourth International Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy, Lebanon, July 10-15, 2012*, Eastern Christian Studies 22, Peeters, Leuven 2014, pp. 387-404.

21. *Μικρὸν Εὐχολόγιον ἡ Ἀγιασματάριον*, Apostoliki Diakonia Publications, Athens¹⁸2009, pp. 162-215.

22. Cf. our Seventh Annual Lecture “in memory of Ioannis M. Fountoulis”, 13 February 2023, and also the website of the Laboratory of Functional Studies at the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki: <https://elm.past.auth.gr> [11.9.2023].

The Tradition: Passing on the Flame

All the aforementioned require a reflection on worship anew, not only as a spiritual event –the liturgy by the Holy Spirit’s grace– but also through an anthropological prism. Consequently, the discipline of Liturgics should take into account not only the theological level but also the anthropological one, especially since the two are so closely intertwined. Science requires from us not only to be familiar with the traditional and solid scientific methods, but also receptive to new challenges and paradigms. For any branch of scientific research, the liturgical studies included, to remain alive, life itself needs the risky venture of exploring other areas, of taking a new course, both in research and in teaching. Therefore, it is also vital for the tradition of the liturgical studies to remain open to revision²³. Just like the Church, the study of worship is *semper reformanda* (constantly reforming). Tradition is a dynamic process²⁴. The dictum: “Tradition does not consist in honoring the burnt ashes, but in passing on the flame”²⁵ should inspire us in our daily journey.

23. Cf. P. Galadza, “New Frontiers in Eastern Christian Liturgy: Studying the Whole of Worship”, in: *Rites and Rituals of the Christian East* (see note 20), pp. 1-19.

24. Cf. R. F. Taft, “The 2001 Vatican Addai and Mari Decision in Retrospect: Reflections of a Protagonist”, in: C. Giraudo (ed.), *The Anaphoral Genesis of the Institution Narrative in Light of the Anaphora of Addai and Mari: Acts of the International Liturgy Congress, Rome, 25-26 October 2011*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 295, Orientalia Christiana, Roma 2013, pp. 317-334, here pp. 333-334; J. Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood NY 1975, pp. 7-9, 13-26; Tim. Ware (Metropolitan of Diokleia Kallistos), *The Orthodox Church*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1993, pp. 198-199; Th. Pott, *Byzantine Liturgical Reform: A Study of Liturgical Change in the Byzantine Tradition*, transl. P. Meyendorff, prologue R. F. Taft, Orthodox Liturgy Series 2, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood NY 2010.

25. The dictum is attributed to Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), an English politician and Roman Catholic martyr, as well as to several other important intellectuals and artists.