Continuity and Renewal in Liturgical Studies: An Introduction

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1 Gerard Rouwhorst and the Development of Liturgical Studies

In 2010 a book was published by Dutch liturgists that attracted international attention: Patterns and Persons: A Historiography of Liturgical Studies in the Netherlands in the Twentieth Century.¹ The volume, co-edited by Gerard Rouwhorst, describes the twentieth-century history of the liturgical movement in the Netherlands, in both the Catholic and the Protestant Churches, as well as the relation between liturgy on the one hand and the arts and architecture on the other. Included were also critical observations and reflections on the discipline of liturgical studies and its perspectives as such. The third part of the book includes biographical sketches of Dutch scholars who either played an active role in the liturgical movements in the Netherlands after Vatican II, among whom Herman Wegman, or who were sceptical about the liturgical innovations in the Catholic Church in the post-Vatican II period, like Christine Mohrmann and Frits van der Meer.

It is true, the scholar to whom the present volume is dedicated, never presented himself as a pioneer in new liturgical developments as his mentor and predecessor Herman Wegman did, although both were trained as scholars in the field of the history of liturgy. Nor has he expressed himself critically and in the spirit of Mohrmann and Van der Meer on developments in the liturgy after Vatican II. Yet, his contribution to the domain of liturgical studies over the past decades has been, and still is, highly significant. During his dissertation research on developments in the Easter liturgy in Nisibis and in the first Christian kingdom of Edessa on the basis of the paschal hymns of Ephrem of Nisibis, Gerard Rouwhorst walked a path different from the one chosen by his predecessor. In his first book, based upon this research, Rouwhorst clearly shows that his research is aimed at describing in detail the developments in specific liturgical traditions as they appear from the sources.²

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² G. Rouwhorst, Les Hymnes pascales d’Éphrem de Nisibe: analyse théologique et recherche sur
Rouwhorst’s findings were internationally considered as a solid contribution to a rather neglected area of liturgical studies. Thus, Paul Bradshaw recently offered the following assessment of a number of Rouwhorst’s contributions:

[…] credit should be given in particular to Gerard Rouwhorst for attempting to persuade us to look differently at Christian liturgical traditions on the basis of their particular point of origin, and thus correct our misapprehensions.3

Furthermore, Bradshaw pointed out that Rouwhorst’s research had led to a more nuanced understanding of certain liturgical developments:

Indeed, Rouwhorst has rightly argued that even making a distinction between churches with Jewish roots and those with Gentile origin is too simplistic a categorization: there are likely to have been intermediate forms, as for example, churches that were Gentile in origin but having hardly any affinity to Pauline theology and for one reason or another still being open to Jewish influences. Rouwhorst has shown how such an approach helps to explain a number of divergent phenomena in early Christian liturgical practice.4

That Rouwhorst deliberately chose this direction is evident from the contribution he made to the Liber amicorum for Wegman, published in 1990. He opens his article by noting that in the years prior to 1990

[…] plusieurs liturgistes, parmi lesquels il faut compter Herman Wegman, ont plaidé en faveur d’un élargissement de l’horizon dans la recherche sur l’histoire de la liturgie. Ils ont—à mon avis à juste titre—appelé l’attention sur les limites qu’a l’approche ‘classique’ […] [I]ls ont souligné le fait que cette approche concernait trop exclusivement la liturgie ‘officielle’ telle qu’elle est décrite et prescrite dans les sources liturgiques normatives.5