David W. Fagerberg


‘How do these three terms – liturgy, theology, asceticism – interrelate and interpenetrate? How can we explain liturgy as a substantially theological enterprise, asceticism as a product of and prerequisite for Christian liturgy, and see the mutual integration of all three?’ David W. Fagerberg begins his essay on Liturgical Asceticism with these excellent questions, his choice of the three terms, liturgy, theology and asceticism being the fruit of his encounter with the thought and work of the Benedictine liturgist and theologian Aidan Kavanagh, and, through him, the more significant writings of the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann. Unfortunately, Fagerberg’s search for answers to these questions does not really satisfy. In the main this is due to two flaws in his study. The first resides in his very unequal treatment of the three key terms which form his starting-point. He is clearly interested most of all in theology, and makes a very cogent and timely plea for the work of the Christian theologian to be undertaken in an ascetical, rather than narrowly academic spirit. He also says a great deal about asceticism, though from a very particular point of view, that of the spirituality of the Desert Fathers, amplified and reflected in the commentaries of four theologians of Eastern Christianity, Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius of Pontus, John Cassian and Maximus the Confessor. But about liturgy itself Fagerberg is almost silent, perhaps because there is very little in the Desert Fathers that is overtly liturgical. Even what there is, namely the practice of continuously reciting the Psalter, which gave shape to the monastic Office both in the East and the West, Fagerberg completely ignores. This is a shame, because the insight, which seems to come from the Desert Fathers, of taking the Psalter as one single entity and seeing it as an analogy of the whole of humanity is both intensely ascetical and inherently liturgical.

This brings me to the second flaw of this book, a flaw which strikes at the very heart of what the author is setting out to achieve. It is simply that the whole idea of the Christian liturgy is framed by him in a very opaque and even heterodox way. Fagerberg defines Christian liturgy as ‘the perichoresis of the Trinity, kenotically extended’, and he defines the work of what he terms ‘the liturgical ascetic’ as amounting ‘the reversal of the Fall’. By the former he means that the internal dynamism (perichoresis is literally ‘a dancing-around’) of the Trinity is poured out, so to speak, upon humanity in a movement of self-emptying. And by ‘the reversal of the Fall’ he clearly must mean ‘an Ascent’. The attentive reader will recognise in this latter definition the shadow of the ‘Exitus and Reditus’ of neo-Platonism, as found in Origen and...
Boethius, which was taken up later by some of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century English divines and given superb expression in the writings of Thomas Traherne. But the only authentically Christian interpretation of this scheme of Exitus-Reditus is through Jesus Christ and the Paschal Mystery, as is clear from the sophisticated theology of the letter to the Hebrews. To attribute this ‘work’ to ‘the liturgical ascetic’ in general, without specific reference to Christ, cannot be a correct understanding of Christian liturgy, even in an analogical sense.

There is also a problem in the unhappy phrase ‘the perichoresis of the Trinity, kenotically extended’, even though Fagerberg appears to claim Patristic authority for it. For it presents us with a liturgy whose meaningful action is entirely heavenly, and which is, so to speak, already accomplished. This is surely to deny both the sacramental and doxological reality of the liturgy we celebrate here on earth. If there is a sacramental and sacrificial reality to what we celebrate in the liturgy, then it must reside, once again, in the continuing unfolding of what Christ has accomplished and is still accomplishing, not only in the participation of the life of the Trinity, but also in the ongoing drama of our salvation.

So, even on a theological level, these formulations lead us into a tricky dilemma: either all the meaning and efficacy of the liturgy depends on the heavenly dynamism of the Trinity, which reaches down to us, or the liturgy, being the work of reversing the Fall, depends on the efficacy of our liturgical asceticism reaching up to Heaven: there are shadows of gnosticism on the one side and Pelagianism on the other. And why? Because there is no consideration in Fagerberg’s account of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. In fact, his account demonstrates with crystal clarity, but, so to speak, by omission, the absolute centrality of this idea in Christian thought and life. A better starting-point would be to take Christ as the only authentic ‘liturgical ascetic’, just as Hebrews considers Christ the only authentic priest of the New Covenant.

Now, it is undoubtedly true that some, at least, of this confusion is attributable to the language used by the Eastern theological traditions, notably in its neo-Platonism and in the concepts of ‘theosis’ and ‘perichoresis’. But I do not believe, despite certain hints that Fagerberg drops, that we are really dealing here with the classic dichotomy of ‘Western over-rationalisation versus Eastern subtlety’. Rather, it is a case of his using the definitions and descriptions of asceticism to be found in the Eastern authors without taking account their frames of reference. To cite just one example, Fagerberg is happy to follow Evagrius’ use of the triple division of the soul (into rational, concupiscible and irascible parts) without considering the significance of Evagrius’ own admission that this scheme comes directly from Plato. Of course, this is a similar