Bryan D. Spinks


Distilling a life’s liturgical scholarship, this volume comprehensively surveys the eucharistic prayers (technically termed anaphorae) of every documented Christian tradition and grouping, beginning with Saint Paul and continuing up to the ranted Beat Mass of Rough Edge, a Christian collective dispersed around Durham in the north-east of England. It will be an invaluable resource for liturgical scholars and practitioners as well as for theologians wishing to engage with the liturgy, directing the student to many of the best classic and recent sources and filling the inevitable gaps in the general knowledge of the specialised researcher. Indeed, every reader will discover facts and arguments that they did not realise they did not know. During the third and fourth centuries the vast majority of Christians worshipped in cemeteries, with only a tiny elite regularly attending Sunday worship in churches (p. 93). Part of the motive for defining ‘moments’ of consecration in the Roman rite was to guard against the idolatry of premature adoration of the host or chalice (p. 228). The kissing of the Gospel book was part of Zwingli’s rite in Zurich (p. 277). In her private chapel, Queen Elizabeth I retained an altar furnished in the Roman Catholic style (p. 325). In the 1689 Liturgy of Comprehension the Beatitudes took the place of the Ten Commandments (p. 337). The Peculiar People of Essex and Kent were not an Anglican splinter group claiming direct lineage from the Augustinian mission, but a Methodist offshoot with a brief directory-style liturgical order complemented by theologically rich hymnody (pp. 372–5). Within the East Syrian Church the bread is prepared using elaborate baking rituals (p. 144).

A critical appraisal of this outstanding study is difficult because the author’s own views on any given topic are normally unclear, with liturgies as diverse as the Ethio-Eritrean, the Swedenborgian New Church service and the Church of Scotland’s Common Order expounded in succession with little or no assessment of their merits. In this review I shall therefore address two issues: the ecumenical implications of some of Spinks’s expositions, and the possible limitations of a study of the liturgy that focuses on eucharistic prayers.

Spinks’s material has suggestive ecumenical implications. (The reader needs to work to identify these, because the index comprises names but not concepts.) For instance, the anaphora of Addai and Mari lacks an institution narrative, as does Theodore of Mopsuestia’s mystagogy. What each instead contains is a strong epiclesis of the Spirit on the elements, which are viewed until then as representing Christ’s dead body and blood. These notions and their accompanying practices contributed to the Byzantine liturgies, in which
an epiclesis of the Spirit rather than words of institution effects the change in
the elements. The Spirit is also prominent in some contemporary Pentecostal
liturgies, such as those of the Church of God. Spinks quotes Daniel Tomberlin's
description of the sacraments as ‘material substances which the Spirit touches'
(p. 427) and Chris Green's avowal that ‘in the Eucharist-event, the Spirit “broods
over” the cosmically-enthroned Christ, the celebrating congregation, and the
elements on the Table' (p. 429). This suggests that an Orthodox–Pentecostal
dialogue on liturgical theology and pneumatology could be fruitful, especially
in view of the incomprehension and often outright hostility that exist between
evangelical missionaries and Orthodox clergy in many Orthodox countries.
Furthermore, Green is reluctant to conceive of eucharistic conversion as dis-
continuous or momentary, stating that the bread is not transmuted into a new
kind of thing but becomes what it fully is in the new world of the liturgical
eschaton. This position is also traceable from Theodore into Byzantium, where
the bread and wine are set apart in the prothesis ceremony, which precedes
the public liturgy, and are treated with tremendous reverence at the Great
Entrance. At the altar mere bread and wine do not become Christ's body and
blood; rather, Christ's body and blood are resurrected by the power of the Spirit
and thereby receive life.

Spinks hints that his own view is that there is greater continuity between
‘ordinary’ eating, drinking, bread and wine on the one hand, and the Eucha-
rist and Christ’s body and blood on the other, than has been recognised in the
teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and the expositions of both Luther
and Calvin. He develops this reflection when discussing bread-making and
wine-making as processes of ‘transmutation through destruction, or immola-
tion’ that nevertheless involve ‘skill and art, a new creation’ (p. 437), as well as
in a moving anamnesis of the last Christmas dinner shared with his wife Linda,
who had been discharged from hospital with terminal leukaemia.

It would be impossible to cover all aspects of the Eucharist in a single volume,
and the decision to focus on eucharistic prayers is fully justified. Nevertheless,
such reference has the effect of giving interpretive privilege to a portion of the
liturgy in which the presider has more agency than the laity. This is especially
ture in the Orthodox liturgy, in which, usually, the eucharistic prayer is said
and its associated rituals are performed behind the iconostasis screen, shut
doors and closed curtains. In many of the Western Churches attempts have
been made to give the laity greater involvement by interpolating acclamations,
which can work well. Even so, Spinks's perspective would usefully be comple-
mented by an understanding of the whole liturgy as commemorating Christ
and making him present, as was offered by its medieval allegorical exegetes.
To take but a few examples, the standing congregation were the Israelites