Barnard, M., J. Cilliers & C. Wepener


This book presents the review and results of ten years of research by three established scholars in the field of liturgical ritual studies. The research involves extensive empirical work, which forms the basis for much of the proposed theories and interpretations of worship. Therefore, the first part of the book is titled ‘Fields and methods: mapping and exploring the field’. The first chapter consists of a large number of descriptions of actual worship practices. In the second chapter, the authors define worship as ‘liturgical ritual’. ‘Liturgical’ refers primarily to the theological component of worship; ‘ritual’ to the anthropological component.

Before exploring these two perspectives on worship in part two of the book, the authors engage with the question of how liturgical ritual can be investigated at all. Here, ontological and epistemological issues are discussed at length. The authors argue that the number of interpretations for any ritual practice is limitless. In the second part of the book, the authors propose to understand worship in terms of liminality. With the arrival of huge worship festivals, internet churches, and the change in society to much more fluid structures and networks, liturgical studies need to find new ways of researching worship.

The sensitising concept of liminality serves this purpose well. The concept has its roots in anthropology (chapter 4), but in chapter 5 it is theologically appropriated. Yet the concept is also reinterpreted by the authors, because the traditional meaning (of a threshold between the secular and the sacred, or between phases in the life cycle) no longer fits the changes seen in church and society (pp.78-79). In their epilogue, the authors — looking back on their use of ‘liminality’ — identify three layers in which the concept works: the layer of the worshipping act itself, the knowledge the participants generate by worshipping, and academic reflection on liturgical ritual.

Part three of the book approaches liturgical ritual — primarily from an anthropological point of view — in six chapters, each offering a double perspective: Bricolage/Particularity; Language/Silence; Image/Sound; Embodiment/Performance; Play/Function; and Time/Space. In the last part of the book a theological review is offered, in two chapters — again, each from two perspectives: Sacrament/Word, and Worship/Prayer.

_Worship in the Network Culture_ is a most welcome addition to the field of liturgical ritual studies. Whereas historical and systematic perspectives (still)
dominate the field of liturgical studies, this book advocates an anthropological approach to liturgy, combined with a theological one. In the Embodiment/Performance chapter, the authors argue convincingly that liturgical ritual cannot be understood without participating in it. This has clear epistemological implications, and has the methodological consequence that participant observation is indispensable.

Nevertheless, the anthropological stance raises the question of how it relates to theology — an important debate in liturgical ritual studies, and in practical theology in general. The authors propose that the two relate to each other as a river (theology) flows through a river bed (anthropology): “Religion flows in the bed of culture, but the sand of the bed also flows along the stream, and the water penetrates the surface of the bed.” (pp.47-48). However, the authors seem to be slightly biased towards anthropology; almost without exception, the anthropological approach to the phenomena under scrutiny is placed first in their description. Also, the third part of the book — which has anthropology as its primary focus — is much longer than the theological part. At the same time, it must be said in favour of the authors that part three also contains many theological reflections, which proves the interrelatedness of anthropology and theology.

The authors present this work as the fruits of ten years of research. A lot may be gained by reading it. It seeks to redefine the field of worship studies by claiming that a new paradigm for understanding worship must be taken into account, a paradigm they propose and explore in chapter 4 of their book: the network.

Until the 1960s, beliefs defined faith; after that came the period of studying practices, influenced by the anthropological bent in practical theology. Since the turn of the century, however, religion has been expressed in forms, which here the authors equate to networks. Whether one agrees with this classification of liturgical ritual or not, the authors make it clear that culture and religion have changed; and researchers of worship should take these changes into account. On a critical note, it should be said that the way anti-structures to the dominant structure are described — a section that precedes and follows the hypothesis of the new paradigm — omits the fact that those anti-structures make use of the features or tools of the dominant societies. This point is only made much later in the book (chapter 9).

This last critical note is characteristic of a general criticism of this work. The book is divided into brief sections; this enhances readability, but in a number of instances, the sections should have been somewhat longer — either to clarify the point made (and sometimes, even to clarify exactly what point is made), or to relate the argument of that section to other parts of the book.