

TRDL7061 Modern Orthodox Theologians

'One who prays truly': Orthodox liturgical theology: Alexander Schmemmann and John Zizioulas

A basic insight shared by Eastern and Western Christians is that prayer is fundamental to theology. In the East, around the turn of the Fifth Century, Evagrius Ponticus claimed, 'If you are a theologian, you will pray truly; if you pray truly, you will be a theologian.' About a generation later, Prosper of Aquitaine wrote in his *Letter 8*, 'The order of supplication establishes the order of belief' (*legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*) – an affirmation that is better known as '*lex orandi, lex credendi* [...]' The law of prayer is the law of faith: the Church believes as she prays' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1124). In Orthodox Christianity as in Catholic Christianity and Anglican Christianity, this affirmation is held to apply first and foremost to the corporate worship of the church. The liturgical cycle of the Byzantine tradition is complex, but one feature is constant: with rare but entirely predictable exceptions, the accepted form of Eucharistic worship is the Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom. So great is this ritual stability that for all practical purposes it is one of the markers for the Byzantine Orthodox tradition. Furthermore, this particular Eucharistic liturgy has enjoyed pride of place for many centuries. So when we say with respect to Orthodoxy that the law of prayer is the law of faith, we need to pay particular attention to the impact of the Divine Liturgy on Orthodox belief.

There are two major domains in the theological study of Orthodox liturgics, which, although they overlap to a certain extent, can be distinguished by their emphases. The first area is historical criticism; the second, theological exposition. Within the domain of historical criticism of the liturgy, typical questions are about the development of forms of worship. The Divine Liturgy alone supports a huge amount of scholarship: a virtual library on the subject has been single-handedly published over the last several decades by the liturgiologist Robert Taft. It is possible to isolate discreet elements within the Liturgy and to evaluate them. Such an undertaking can be in service of liturgical renewal within a Christian community. Around the turn of the Twentieth Century, several prominent Benedictine scholars and churchmen (e.g., F. Cabrol, O. Casel and, amongst the Anglican Benedictines, G. Dix) promoted serious study of liturgics for precisely this reason. Though they occasionally praised the Orthodox Church for her seeming excellence in matters liturgical, it is nevertheless the case that the foremost Orthodox liturgiologist of recent times – Alexander Schmemmann – was far from convinced of the accuracy of such an assessment. He identified several areas in which the theologically informed study of the liturgy was required to redress problems in the Orthodox Church.

Schmemmann (13 May 1921 - 13 Dec. 1983) was born to Russian émigré parents who were living in Tallinn, Estonia. His family moved to France, where he was educated

and completed his theological studies at Saint-Serge in the early 1940's. He taught church history at Saint-Serge (1946-51) before joining the newly formed St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in 1951. In 1962, he became Dean of St Vladimir's and in the same year was invited as an Orthodox observer to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Schmemmann was heavily involved in securing the right of self-governing ('autocephaly') from the Patriarchate of Moscow for the Russian Orthodox Metropolia in North America in 1970, which thereafter has been known as the Orthodox Church in America. He taught and lectured widely, and his sermons were broadcast in Russian on *Radio Liberty* for three decades. The constant theme of all this teaching was the theological significance of Orthodox worship.

Schmemmann's basic approach to the subject matter was historical, though he insisted throughout that the critical study of historical documents could address theological questions. He insisted that theological study is needed to reveal the meaning of the practices that are prescribed by liturgical rubrics. On a practical level, he also insisted that theological understanding should be promoted amongst the faithful, whom he believed (not without reason) to be susceptible to an unhelpful sentimentality that obscures the importance of Christian worship even as it arrests the natural development of worship in favour of a piety that disconnects liturgy from 'real life.' Schmemmann's strategy for promoting such an understanding was through expositing the rationale that made sense of the evolution of Orthodox liturgy. By treating liturgics, seriously and reverently, as an object for historical study, Schmemmann could further two distinct but related agendas: by identifying liturgy as a meaningful human product, he could engage with its meaning; and by studying its historical development, he could reject as naïve and complacent any insistence that the Orthodox liturgy is static in its perfection.

The second major area for liturgical study amongst the Orthodox is chiefly preoccupied with the theological exposition of liturgical worship in systematic terms. An early specimen of this approach to the liturgy is arguably the *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* by Nicholas Cabasilas (c. 1319/21-?1391), though it must be added at once that Cabasilas' commentary was by modern standards more dramatic than systematic: he had little evident interest in articulating a theological vision on the basis of the liturgy, and instead focussed on linking the sequence of prayers in the liturgy to (e.g.) the life of Christ. Modern research in this domain is compatible with a serious historical interest in the subject, but such an interest is still ancillary to the project of systematically accounting for the theological meaning of the liturgy. A prime example of such an account is to be found in the writings of John Zizioulas (born 1931), Metropolitan of Pergamon and sometime professor of systematic theology in the University of Glasgow (as well as visiting professor in the University of Geneva, King's College London and the Gregorian University).

Zizioulas seeks to ground a robust theological project on ontological reality of personhood, i.e., on the claim that persons are ontologically basic (rather than, say, temporary expressions of an underlying reality), by exploring the ways in which an 'ontology of personhood' bears on Trinitarian theology, Christology, Pneumatology, eschatology, ecclesiology and above all sacramental theology. His interpretation of catholicity will be familiar from our consideration (in Unit One, above) of *sobornost* according to Khomiakoff and Bulgakov, but Zizioulas goes further in claiming that the fullness and wholeness of the Body of Christ is portrayed in eucharistic communion with its characteristically strong eschatological orientation. Like Schmemmann, Zizioulas is critical of pietistic and otherwise individualistic misunderstandings of the theological significance of liturgical worship. However, Zizioulas extends this basic point by insisting that the Eucharist itself discloses important facts about how we as humans are and how we are to relate to each other and to God. Throughout his works, Zizioulas is aware of the ambivalence of the English word 'communion,' which is broader in application than eucharistic communion – but Zizioulas would find in any communion worthy of the name, a replication of the ontological relationships between persons that are exemplified in the eucharistic liturgy. In this way, Eucharistic worship is guaranteed to play a fundamental role in Zizioulas' systematic theology.

Alexander Schmemmann

Source:

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The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom, Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1988.

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John D. Zizioulas

Source:

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