
Several goals spurred me to write Beyond Ritual. The main one was personal: I wanted to begin to articulate something about God, or more precisely, our relationship with God, that has been emerging in my studies, in my prayer, in meals around tables, in relationships, in life's very fabric over many years. It needs fleshing-out beyond this book's scope, or my present wisdom-level, allow, but the book is a first attempt to say: God is more radically intersubjective than we have previously imagined.

My second goal was an academic one: I wanted to add a little to the literatures of feminist and practical theology, the disciplines that formed me. I wanted to say: we need to stretch to claim as theological voices and situations that have long been ignored, and stretch to talk about them in ways that, crucially, let them stay true in interpretation. I was, in short, impatient with academic cap-doffing to "marginalized" contexts, offended by gestures that tended to either pedestalize or patronize poor and excluded peoples, and challenged by my own communities of accountability to say something that would make sense to them.

The third goal was a methodological one. I wanted to find ways for scholars to access what happens, theologically, when people get together. My work focuses on Christian worship, and is based on the wager that if you want to see people negotiating their theology in its primary form, look at what they do when they gather for liturgy. The problem facing contemporary liturgical studies is that we realize we have to take account of the actual experience of the liturgy and not just its rubrics if we are to interpret worship theologically, but as yet we have far less rigor in our interpretation of experience, far fewer methods at our disposal, than we do in our interpretation of texts. What we end up with is subjective-posing-as-normative theology, which tends to be rather reductive.

To put it another way, the problem I face as a liturgical theologian is how do I, the scholar, hear, see, or otherwise know what people's self-understanding is of the things they do in liturgy? To know about the forms of Christian liturgy I can study its historical texts; to know about the doctrine that both informs and derives from Christian worship, I can study both polity and teaching; but what am I do to in order to know what another person or a community in situ understands of God in the work of ritualizing?

I don't pretend my book solves this problem. But it does raise the question in a clear way (it starts with a comprehensive assessment of liturgical studies' recent forays into Ritual
Studies/Theory) and—and this is the bit I like most about it—it tries to dig a new interpretative avenue. To do so, I take Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action and adapt it for theological ends (Habermas is an atheist—his theory was construed for the law and politics). I try to explain all my moves in ways that make Habermas understandable to a philosophically lay readership, and I admit the things Habermas cannot help us to do as well as the things he can.

I was tempted to stop there, having named the problem, adapted the model, and given serious theological treatment to Habermas's work (mine is, I think, the first theological monograph to engage Habermas). But I was very curious to actually do now what I was suggesting others do eventually, that is, to look at a community's worship through a Habermasian lens and note the theologies that emerge.

To do this I undertook a two-year-long study of six congregations’ worship. The results are given in chapter 4, which analyses what I witnessed in a "mainstream" Irish Roman Catholic parish’s worship, and chapter 5, which interprets the theologies of five "marginal" communities' worship. These five case studies are composed of a group of gay people who have gathered for worship and fellowship for twenty-five years in Dublin; a geographically isolated, Irish-speaking church in County Galway; a Protestant church in a 98% Catholic neighbourhood in Ireland; and an ecumenical and a feminist worship group, and which I traveled to the USA because, although there are such groups in Ireland, they are yet not secure enough (politically or communally) to be written-up and published about.

My method requires the recording and analysis of what is said. It is extremely limited, therefore, because most communication is non-verbal. Nonetheless, it is a step further than we have previously gone, because it attempts to uncover the shared understanding that exists (or doesn't) between the speakers and hearers in a conversation as they themselves know it.

It is probably worth giving a very brief synopsis of the theory at this point.

Habermas proposes that when we speak we raise "validity claims," meaning that when we say something we include little signals to persuade the person who is listening to us that what we are saying should be believed. Once we have done this we can examine the "conditions of possible understanding" that are latent in the exchange, upon which, indeed, the exchange depends. Generally speaking, there are three sorts of validity claims: claims to the truth of what we are saying, to the rightness of our saying it in this context, and to our own trustworthiness; while all are present in all interactions, only one is usually being explicitly aired. It sounds simple: I speak, I assure you that what I am saying is valid, you hear, we understand one another. But it is not so simple; indeed there are potential problems every step of the way. I may not have the right to speak (or I may be to inhibited to speak), what I am saying may not be appropriate to this context, I may not know to what I need to appeal in order to persuade you of my trustworthiness (or I may not be trustworthy), you may not hear me, we might be engaged in a complex web of manipulation or coercion which renders "understanding" null and void.

When a speaker raises a validity claim, the hearer has the right to ask questions and expect answers; without this, there can be no process of coming to mutual understanding. Most interactions proceed this way (e.g., I don't like cottage cheese. Why not? Because it makes me sick. Do you mean to look at it? No, I mean that when I eat it I vomit), but only if both parties
have an equal and unrestrained opportunity to talk. The example I give is mundane, but you can easily imagine that at the level of law and politics, whether or not speakers and hearers have uncurtailed opportunity to query and respond until understanding is reached, is far from a given. Situations in which the speaker does not have the right to speak fully, or the hearer to query, are easy to spot in situations that we identify as tyrannies, but they arise in subtler forms too—just think of the potential restrictions on understanding between a Hispanic working-class woman standing before a mostly white, mostly male, mostly middle class jury.

One of the things Beyond Ritual raises is how Christian liturgies are prey to the dangers of such "distorted communication." By looking not at what is scripted but what is actually said, my case studies reveal how many subtle, but significant, power-plays are operational in the local context, which might either enable or limit the conditions of possible understanding. The simplest example was, perhaps, the church in which when the priest said, "The Lord be with you," the people did not say, "And also with you." The most extreme example was, perhaps, the church in which the assembly left the building while the priest was speaking. But most examples of distorted communication (just like most examples of its opposite, communicative action) came in more subtle forms and had several potential interpretations. It is these interpretations which, I suggest, are of enormous value to theology because they reveal the conditions of possible understanding of God that a community knows within its relationships and other symbols.

The closest theological category I know for such a notion is "sacramentality." The whole book I have cast as an attempt to construct a contemporary sacramental theology. Throughout the book you can hear an ongoing conversation with Louis Marie Chauvet, whose work on symbolism and the body is, I think, going to keep us theologians in conversation for many years to come. Where Habermas's theory allowed me to make explicit self-understandings that would otherwise be implicit, Chauvet's theological categories allowed me ways of interpreting them within the Christian sacramental tradition. Sacramentality remains, I suggest, a profoundly articulate theological concept as long as we enhance our notion of the intersubjective nature of its emergence in our lives as well as the radically intersubjective nature of the God it mediates. Such notions require the elimination of all forms of domination and oppression, even those that are made apparent in the smallest liturgical gestures, like not saying "and also with you," or something like it, when offered the peace.

Note: My book is horribly expensive. Please encourage your library to buy it: if enough libraries buy it, the publisher will issue a paperback edition and the people whose voices the book records will be able to actually buy it!

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