

MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM ET FASCINANS.

LITURGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE APPROACH TO GOD

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes that the component of the Approach to God, being part of an ancient sequence of worship, is liturgically neglected and should therefore be revisited. The important contribution of Rudolf Otto in regards to the Approach to God is acknowledged here, culminating in his well-known phrase: mysterium tremendum et fascinans. In the light of this, some liturgical implications and perspectives are attended to, including liturgy as silence, awe, lament and affirmation.

1. LITURGY BETWEEN FAMILIARITY AND THE FEAR OF GOD

The fourfold ancient sequence of worship followed by the early church – namely the Approach to God (entrance), the Word of God (reading and preaching of the Word and the congregation's response to this Word), the Table of the Lord (Communion), and the Dismissal (sending into the world) – is presently being rediscovered and re-interpreted by many churches and denominations (cf. Webber 2002:45-48; cf. also the new *Vir Die Erediens* of the Dutch Reformed Church: 2007:13-14). This sequence represents the most basic and rudimentary shape of Christian worship.

In this article we will focus on the Approach to God, because it is of the utmost importance for the other components of the worship sequence, and in a sense even determines it, or as Webber puts it: *“For through the Preparation, the body of Christ is readied to hear the Word with a sense of peace and expectancy”* (Webber 2002:48). Or in the words of Witvliet: *“As with any event, the opening moments of worship accomplish a great deal: They establish... the general ethos, mood, and purpose of the event”* (2003:56). But we also revisit this concept because, in our opinion, it seems to be a much neglected area in contemporary worship services.

It is important to notice that, although the Approach to God forms part of a sequence and could therefore be understood as being imbedded in a chronological unfolding of the worship service, it is seen here rather as a *hermeneutical factor* that colours all the other components of the sequence. It is the lens through which we look at the worship service in all its constituents. Ultimately it is about the *quality of the experience of encountering God* – which takes place in different ways throughout the worship service. The important point here is that the mode in which we approach the worship service, and the God of the worship service, is of paramount significance for the experience of the service as a whole. And it is exactly here, in my opinion, that we seem to miss out on many opportunities and possibilities.

To a large extent we live in a desacralised world. Or as Ricoeur puts it: *“Modern persons no longer have a sacred space, a center, a templum, a holy mountain, or an axis mundi. Their existence is decentered, eccentric, a-centered. They lack*

festivals, their time is homogenous like their space" (1995:61). Those who *do* come to the worship service are searching for an experience of the sacred and the Mysterious, but in a meaningful and existential way. They are no longer satisfied by certain forms of worship tradition, as they experience these as being abstract, anachronistic and even without integrity. In empirical research done in America, this was found to be exactly the case: people expressly stated that the reason for their leaving or coming back to church was primarily related to their longing to have an encounter with Mystery, which for them is the Centrum and Source of life (cf. Long 2001:15-24).

The way in which we approach the worship service, of course, does not automatically or magically guarantee God's presence. Noordmans (1939:76-78) already reminded us of this tension: God can be "absent" from the pews and be silent during the sermon. He can be deaf to the congregants' prayers and the choral music. He *is* present, but this presence must be discovered and uncovered. He *is* there, but this fact may remain hidden.

This emphasizes the reality that we cannot capture God with or within our liturgies. His *praesentia realis* is an answer to our faith, but never in a causal sense. On the contrary, the relationship between God's presence and our faith could as well be reversed. The Approach to God can therefore never be a liturgical tool or recipe to manipulate God's presence, and yet it is of fundamental importance if we want to experience the mystery of this presence.

Traditionally elements such as the following constitute the Approach to God: the initial act of gathering, invocation, greeting, hymn of acknowledgement,

confession of sins, words of forgiveness, the reading of the law, confession of faith, and sometimes also the sacrament of baptism (the latter three components are typical of the Reformed worship service; cf. *Vir die Erediens* 2007:14; also Müller 1990:52 f.). In the Approach to God the congregation is confirmed and constituted as the Body of Christ: *“We are coming together from many different walks of life, from varying economic, social, and psychological conditions. As we enter, find our seats, and bow in prayer and meditation, or sing songs of gathering, the worship community takes shape. That body of people which God had called to be a sign of his redemption develops a common identity”* (Webber 2002:46).

This coming together demarcates our moving over the threshold, crossing the margin between our daily existence and the act of worship together with the gathered community of faith – in order for us to cross this threshold and margin again as we leave the gathered community and celebrate the liturgy of life, i.e. the liturgy on the street and in the market place. It may even be said that the way in which we approach God fundamentally influences the way that we approach life, i.e. the way that we come to church colours the way that we leave church.

The Approach to God is clearly a pivotal moment in any worship service. This implies, *inter alia*, that the first rituals or events of the worship service should contribute towards the expectancy and experience of a (further) encounter with God during the unfolding of the service. It should not be cluttered by too many words (for instance, the announcements about the special “boerewors” being barbecued at cut prices at the church fete, or the film being screened in aid of the

fund for the restoration of the church's roof), or even by too many hymns of "worship and praise" – we in fact do *not* know how to worship and praise God, and should therefore perhaps first wait to be touched by his grace before opening our mouths in song. The Approach to God should definitely not initiate the worship service with a show of familiarity with holy things and the Holy One. We should rather approach God with bated breath, with empty hands, with fear and trembling – which does not contradict the fact that we may also approach God with joy and confidence, being part of the Family of God (cf. the discussion in 3 below).

Perhaps we tend to bypass this important component in the act of worshipping God in a premature effort to get to other phases and experiences. But the consequence of this bypass is indeed a short-circuiting in which we unplug the power of what was to come, and a diminishing of the quality of the experience of having an encounter with God. But the question could then be raised: How *are* we supposed to Approach God?

2. RUDOLF OTTO'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE APPROACH TO GOD

Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) was a pioneer in articulating the importance of the abovementioned question and his work deserves to be revisited. It is not possible to do justice to the richness of his thought within the limitations of this article. We rather focus on some aspects of his theories in the light of our discussion of the liturgical Approach to God.

Otto's contribution must be understood as being part of a wider discourse of his time taking place within the philosophy of religion and the emerging religious sciences concerning the experience of the Holy, probably ignited by Windelband's book entitled *Das Heilige*, published in 1902. Otto developed some of these religious theories but, for instance, differed in principle from someone like Wundt, who proposed that religion could be explained solely in terms of the historical developments of religious traditions. In contrast, Otto stated his belief in the immediacy of revelation ("*Unmittelbarkeit der Religion*"; cf. Schneider 2005:101-102).

Otto's theories were also decisively influenced by people like Kant (1724-1804) and Fries (1773-1843). With Kant, he could state that there are inexpressible components in the consciousness of human beings, and that this consciousness forms part and parcel of anthropology. He also made use of Fries's concept of "*Ahndung*", which signifies an intuitive knowledge of eternity within time, and also the notion of accountability. Otto, however, understood religion to be much more than just the product of mythological projections by people or religious clans, or solely an experience-based phenomenon, or simply an irrational event.

He distinguished between three religious feelings, namely inspiration, consecration and trust ("*Begeisterung, Ergebung und Andacht*"; 1917:12 f.). He found many corresponding themes between his own thought and that of Schleiermacher, especially the idea that human beings have an innate feeling of dependency, but he used the concept of "creatureliness" ("*Kreaturgefühl*") to express this (1917:8 f.; cf. also Schneider 2005:103). For him religion was the

experience of the mystery of God, which shone through the veil of time and all our experiences of transience. He understood his concept of creatureliness as a religious *a priori*, being manifested as a basic and consistent anthropological structure (cf. Schneider 2005:102-103).

The key concept that held all of this together was his understanding of the *numinous* – according to him, this was the experience that formed another *a priori*, namely the nucleus and essence of all religion. The numinous is *das Heilige minus seines sittlichen Momentes und... minus seines rationales Momentes überhaupt*” (1917:6). Whilst he accepted that the experience of the numinous could be described as irrational, and could only be articulated by means of symbols and analogies, he never equated religion to irrationality or anti-intellectualism. On the contrary, he firmly believed that the rational element was important, as it describes and explains the numinous in a different mode. It could be said that Otto succeeded in bringing the so-called irrational and rational elements of religious experience into synchronism. For him, religion signified a truly unique experience.

According to Otto, the numinous mystery of the Holy God can be experienced in two ways: as attraction (*fascinosum*) or as object of fear (*tremendum*). In our approach to God we normally undergo both these experiences – hence God could rightly be called a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The components (or moments) of the experience of the numinous as *tremendum* included the following: awe (“*des Schauervollen*”), acknowledging God’s majesty (“*des Übermächtigen*”), vitalization (“*des Energischen*”), and experiencing the mystery

of a totally different and completely strange God (“*Das Ganz Andere*”; 1917:12-35). But the approach to God does not only entail an experience of *tremendum*, it also attracts us towards God (*fascinans*). Otto describes the latter *inter alia* as the experience of overflowing affection (“*das Überschwengliche*”; 1917:46 f.). We are attracted to God because He approaches us – through grace.

Otto’s theories underline the fact that our experiences of the Holy are complex and not to be taken too lightly. His contribution to this discussion is important, because he somehow succeeded in combining both the realities of the so-called subjective side of religion, incorporating, on the one hand, all the existential components of humanity (*existentialia*), and on the other, also the reality of the revelation of God. *We approach God because God approaches us*. It is therefore not strange that exponents of both so-called dialectical theology as well as liberal theology found connections and affinities with Rudolf Otto (cf. Schneider 2005: 106). In this *tension* within which Otto operates, the approach to God is a deeply human and existential experience, but never equal to sentimentalism or emotionalism. It is also a deeply divine experience, born out of the revelation of God, but never abstract or inhuman.

What happens on a Sunday morning when we attend worship services is indeed more than meets the eye. Therefore we need constantly to revisit and reflect on what we are doing when we approach God. We consequently attend to some liturgical perspectives.

3. LITURGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE APPROACH TO GOD

In the introduction we mentioned the typical constituents of the Approach to God. What follows, however, is not an attempt to describe the *liturgical order* of these constituents, but rather to identify some *liturgical perspectives* that are at stake during the period of Approach. These perspectives are discussed briefly in terms of the following key words, without proposing that they necessarily follow one another in a *chronological order* when approaching God, namely *silence, awe, lament and re-affirmation*. As already mentioned, these perspectives on the Approach to God serve as a hermeneutical lens through which the whole act of worship could be viewed. It will therefore become clear that they are intrinsically connected, and in fact cannot be separated.

3.1 A liturgy of silence

Otto reminded us that we simply stand in awe before God. We are attracted, but at the same time also want to flee from this mystery. We have no words left to describe what we experience. It is truly an inexpressible feeling, best “articulated” in silence (cf. Schneider 2005:104). As a matter of fact, the ultimate goal of the whole of creation, including people, is to worship in this way, to breathe out (stop speaking), in order to come into the rest of God, and to find security in his breath (Cornehl 2005:39). To be silent in God’s presence, however, does not mean to be inactive; on the contrary, it could be described as a focused awe and an attentive silence (Richter 2005:341). We need to listen before we speak –

because God Himself often speaks to us not in words, but through silence (Peeters 2001:156, 157).

Ricoeur uses the term “hearkening” (*l’écoute*) to refer to a pre-ethical form of obedience – before you can or should do anything, you should first listen. It represents a way of *being*, before it can become a way of *doing*. In this process of hearkening you are no longer in control, but rather dependent on that which you are about to receive. Ricoeur even goes back a step and states that you need to be silent before you can listen. Silence is the source of “hearkening and obedience” (cf. Snodgras 2002:29; also Cilliers 2008b:73).

I am of the opinion that we are in dire need of silence in our worship services, because:

Liturgists are in constant danger and temptation of becoming institutionalized speakers, producing automatic, clerical speech. But, even if our liturgies are seemingly faultless, and our clerical procedures in order, we still are people of unclean lips, and we dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips (cf. Isaiah 6:5). We tend to churn out epidermal, skin-deep jargon. Therefore we do not need more liturgical techniques or know-how that guarantees flamboyant success – like television evangelists, pouring out religious and pious words – we need silence. We surely do not need jackhammer services that drill and bang the truth into our fibres – we need silence. Indeed, we are so driven, but by what,

by whom? We are driven, but wherefrom and whereto? Truly, we need to be re-educated in the holy uselessness of silence. We need to be freed from our conviction that God can only be praised through and amidst an avalanche of words. *Tibi silentium laus* – Lord, to you silence is praise (Cilliers 2008a:28, 29).

Otto also reminded us that the inexpressible experience of encountering God can best be “expressed” through symbols and analogies. The implementation of a responsible form of *liturgical aesthetics* can be of great help here. Perhaps we need fewer words during the time of Approaching God, and more silence, coupled with the meaningful use of symbolism. Silence is not only related to an absence of words, but also to the presence of symbols. Symbols speak out of silence. They also have the ability to silence us. They can communicate louder than a thousand words.

In this regard the use of *aesthetic expression* is important for liturgy for a number of reasons, for example, because it is part of our anthropological make-up (also neurologically speaking), because it takes our body-liness seriously, because it coincides with the culture of images in which we live, and because the Bible itself is permeated with images – specifically also of God (cf. Cilliers 2007a:55-78). It is furthermore important because it serves to silence us – which is an appropriate attitude when we approach God.

It is interesting to note what role symbolism plays in the following religious experience described by Dostoyevsky (freely translated from *Die Brüder*

Karamasoff 1959:584). The young boy is prepared for the reading of the Word not through a long explanation of what is about to happen, but by means of a series of visual, symbolic stimuli. In this classical description of religious experience, silence and symbolism precede verbal clarification:

Even before I learnt to read, before I was eight years old, I had a spiritual experience. On the Monday of the Passion Week, my mother brought only myself (I don't know where my brother then was) to the Holy Communion. It was a fine day, and I recall, as though I can still see it, how the incense gently arose from the incense-burner. From above, through the narrow window of the dome above us, the light of God shone in, and the rising incense merged with the sunshine. A holy experience entered me and, for the first time, I purposely assimilated the Word of God. A boy, carrying a big Book, walked to the middle of the church, and the Book was so large that, to me, it seemed that he had difficulty in carrying it. He placed it on the cathedra, opened it and started to read. Suddenly, I understood something of it and, for the first time in my life, I understood that reading from the Book took place in the church.

Indeed, the best way to express the inexpressible is through symbolism and imagery. Herein lies the potential of our worship being joined with the heavenly

worship, and to be ultimately being brought beyond imagery to reality itself in the presence of God (Doig 2008:xxii).

3.2 A liturgy of awe

In God's presence (inappropriate) familiarity disappears, because God is *not* available at our beck and call. He is, as Otto also reminded us, the God of majesty ("*des Übermächtigen*"), and a totally different and completely strange God ("*Das Ganz Andere*"; 1917:12-35). When people lose their sense of God's mystery in the worship service then *liturgical familiarity* follows, as it were, automatically. Then the elements of the liturgy flow easily from one to another, joyfully and carelessly, as though the worship service is but another item on our weekly programme that we must put behind us. We are never shocked to silence or led to (true) humility or to amazement – we mechanically “go through the motions” of doing liturgy. We then no longer understand the art of *contemplating the face of God* (St Augustine), and standing in awe before Him (cf. Cilliers 2004: 41 f.).

We have lost the art of awe. But awe forms the backbone of liturgy. Truly, if a liturgist and congregation lose the art of awe, or have never learned it, it would be better for both liturgist and congregation to abandon the enterprise called *worship*. Worship services can become so identical with what happens in day-to-day life, so adapted to the fashion of the week that one no longer knows whether there is any difference between church and concert, between liturgy and television, between a worship service and shopping. We no longer know with

Whom we are dealing. We forget that a person cannot see God and live (Ex 33:20). Only He has eternal life; He lives in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16). Even when He reveals Himself, He conceals Himself in darkness (Ps 18:11,12). Our God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29). Yes, when we attend a worship service, we play with fire! One recalls the classic image from Annie Dillard:

I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible, aware of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blindly invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children, playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning... It's madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may awake someday and take offence, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return. (1982:40-41).

Indeed, those who begin to understand something of the word "God" do not rush in where angels fear to tread. They rather don their crash helmets and fasten their safety belts. Familiarity then makes room for trepidation, yes, for fear of God, which is different from fear of humans. It is not a negative fear, but a positive, a respectful acknowledgement that God is *God*. It is living in reverence

for, and before, the Lord during the time of our lives as strangers in the world (1 Pet 1:17). It represents a *liturgical style* in which the service is commenced and can be recognized throughout, until the last *amen* and beyond.

3.3 A liturgy of lament and affirmation

Silence and awe in God's presence inevitably lead to lament. Lament can entail a personal confession of sin or flow from experiences of vulnerability – then the cry, often articulated in liturgical tradition as *kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy on us) is intended to evoke God's grace and compassion. But lament can and should also take place with a view to the sufferings of the world (Van Nijen 1998: 177). It is systemic and vicarious in nature.

In lament the congregation declares its guilt in the light of, and as opposed to, the majesty of God. And this declaration of guilt becomes a cry for God's compassion in Christ (*kyrie eleison*) in order to experience the freedom of grace in a new way (Immink 1998:186). It would seem as if lament has to a large extent been lost or neglected in contemporary worship services for a number of reasons, such as the influence of a success-driven society in which there can be no place for frailty or vulnerability, or to certain God-images that dominate our theology and liturgy, or specific understandings of soteriology that reduce lament to the confession of individual sin only (cf. Cilliers 2007b:160-162). *Perhaps it could also be said that the loss of lament is connected to a loss of a liturgy of silence and awe.*

As we have seen, this loss of a liturgy of silence and awe results from an ignorance of the importance of the Approach to God. As the worship service starts out, so it often also ends. Witvliet formulates this poignantly:

Perhaps the greatest enemy of this [i.e. the function of lament, JC] today is the ritual of the weekly witticism with which worship often begins. In leading worship, we often borrow patterns of speech from self-help seminars and late-night television comedians. We feel compelled to begin with references to the weather or with a dandy quip to incite a cheap laugh. (2003:57)

Lament is of paramount importance, but it is never an end in itself. The language of hope and the language of lament are flip sides of the same coin (Cilliers 2007b: 159) Without the “counterbalance” of lament, praise becomes “smug satisfaction”, or vice versa, lament can be misunderstood as a perpetual denial of grace (Witvliet 2003:40). In this regard Lathrop (2003:79) speaks about a fundamental tension between lament and praising God in liturgy because He has re-affirmed us through His grace as His people:

One way to sum up the central tensions of Christian liturgy is to recall that every basic act of the assembly is marked by both praise and lament, thanksgiving and beseeching... These tensions give us a way to live. They propose an orientation in

the world, an ethos, though not concrete answers to every question.

This juxtaposition of lament and praise plants the liturgy firmly within the realities of life, but also within the reality of God's Kingdom – the latter being understood in an eschatological manner, which means that we celebrate the reality of this Kingdom as one that has come, is coming, and therefore is present. But because we daily face so many realities that seem to contradict the reality of God's Kingdom, we enter into God's presence and approach Him also with lament. God's response to our lament is one of affirmation and indeed re-affirmation. In approaching God with lament, we are (re)affirmed and formed as being the forgiven and liberated people of God.

According to Cornehl (2006:275-287), the latter condition was part and parcel of the basic structure of the early Christians' worship gatherings, as it was geared to create spaces for integration and expression, but also for orientation (as to our position "in Christ") and affirmation of all that the latter entails. We are reminded again of Otto's description of the encounter with the mystery of God as one that energizes and vitalizes us ("*des Energischen*"). This means that, in approaching God, we are reminded of our vulnerability (and the suffering of the world), but also of our identity in Christ (and therefore our hope for the world).

The early Church did indeed understand this affirmative character of the worship service. Chrysostomus formulates this movingly:

The people, once less sensitive than stones, are raised to the worthiness of angels in one deed of God's grace, simply through God's Word and their faith, without any merit on their side. *This* is the glory and richness of the mystery of Christ. It is like when a scruffy and mange dog, ugly and deformed, which cannot even move himself anymore but lies with four legs in the air, is instantly transformed into a human being and set on a kingly throne. It is like when people who once worshipped the stars and the earth, has now gained insight that they are better than the heavens and the earth and that the whole world is there at their service. Once they decayed in the dungeons and chains of the devil, but now, of a sudden, they stand high above him, and they flagellate *him*. First they were the captives and slaves of the demons, but now they have become part of the body of the Lord that reigns over angels and archangels. First they were without knowledge of God, now, in an instant, they sit on the throne *next* to God (freely translated from Ihlenfeld:35).

We are reminded that God is not only the majestic (Otto's "*des Übermächtigen*"), and a totally different and completely strange God ("*Das Ganz Andere*"), but that He has come close to us in Christ (*incarnation*) and through His Spirit and indwelling in the church (*inhabitation*). We become silent and filled with awe, because God is the majestic and totally different God; but we are also brought to

silence and awe with the knowledge that God reveals Himself as gracious and compassionate, that He is close by, closer than our dress or shirt (Luther). We stand in silent awe in the light of the Numinous, yes, but this silent awe is deepened when we realize that the Numinous in fact does care about the “boerewors” at the church fete, and the fund-raising efforts to salvage the church’s roof. But, and this is the fundamental difference, this understanding of God as being so closely connected to the realities of our lives that He in fact affirms us as His own, grows out of the way in which we approach God, i.e. it is a process that cannot be manipulated or hurried through or prematurely blundered into.

Lathrop (1993:119, 120) formulates this as follows: *“First of all, we need to acknowledge that we are ourselves the persons requiring formation, reconciliation, and entrance rites...God is other, ancient and unknown. Yet, God is gracious. In Jesus Christ, God stands with and welcomes the outsiders, the suffering, the sinners, the godless, and, finally, the dead.”*

And the good news is that we may indeed approach this God. Just to discover that He has already approached us.

The glory of the Lord fills the earth (Isaiah 6:3).

Mysterium tremendum et fascinans.

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