

Acting liturgically: Wolterstorff's philosophical reflections on religious practice

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Abstract

This review article offers an engagement with Nicholas Wolterstorff's recent publication, *Acting liturgically: Philosophical reflections on religious practice*. It begins by contextualising the project, tracing Wolterstorff's lifelong interest in liturgy, as documented in his memoir, *In this world of wonders*. This is followed by a careful exposition of each of the book's four sections (with the headings "Liturgy, Enactments and Scripts," "Liturgy and Scripture," "God in the Liturgy" and "Liturgy, Love and Justice"). The article concludes with a few critical observations about the book in which it is shown why this is indeed a significant text which makes an important contribution to the (philosophical) study of liturgy.

Keywords

Nicholas Wolterstorff; liturgy; worship; performance; analytic philosophy; Speech-Act Theory

1. Introduction

In the opening section of his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas argued that the task of the theologian, or the Christian philosopher for that matter, is to study God and all things in relation to God.¹ For many decades now, Nicholas Wolterstorff, the Noah Porter Professor Emeritus of Philosophical Theology at Yale University, has done exactly this. Following the collapse of logical positivism in the latter part of the previous century, Wolterstorff became part of a generation of analytic philosophers in the Anglophone world who have not only endeavoured to ask questions about the nature of God, the epistemology of religious belief and the working of religious

1 See Aquinas, *ST 1a.1.3. ad 2.*

experience, but have also deliberately set out to relate these questions, as well as their possible answers, to philosophical inquiries into every other aspect of human existence.² While engaging in these philosophical explorations, Wolterstorff has also shown a special interest in religious rituals and practices, and has often written on the topic of Christian liturgy, also in connection to some of his other philosophical concerns, such as the nature of language, questions of justice, and the social and political dimensions of art.³ As a culmination of his extensive work in this regard, Wolterstorff, now 88-year-old, recently published a monograph titled *Acting Liturgically: Philosophical reflection on religious practice*, a book described by him as both one of the most challenging and rewarding projects that he, as philosopher, has undertaken so far.⁴

In this review essay, I will offer an exposition of this work by one of the most esteemed philosophers of religion today. I will begin by contextualising the project, tracing and providing background to Wolterstorff's longstanding interest in liturgy and acts of Christian worship. Here Wolterstorff's own insights as expressed in his also-recently published memoir, which almost serves as an accompanying volume to *Acting Liturgically*, will prove helpful. Next, I will briefly work through the four sections of the book, attempting to illuminate the contours of his thought. Towards the end of the essay, I will offer a few observations about the book as a whole and look at the potential value of this study for both philosophical and theological reflections on

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- 2 Wolterstorff gives an account of this development in "Analytic Philosophy of Religion: Retrospect and Prospect," the first essay in the volume, Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Inquiring about God: Selected Essays, Volume I*, ed. Terence Cuneo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 17–34. See also James Franklin Harris' *Analytic Philosophy of Religion* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), especially the introductory chapter titled "The Rise of Analytic Philosophy of Religion" (1–27). Some of the other names associated with the so-called "religious turn" in analytic philosophy include Alvin Plantinga (Wolterstorff's long-time friend and collaborator), Richard Swinburne, William Alston, John Mackie, Antony Flew, and Eleonore Stump.
 - 3 See e.g. his study on speech-act theory, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), his essay collection, *Hearing the Call: Liturgy, Justice, Church and World*, Mark R. Gornik & Gregory Thompson (eds.) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); and his two important studies on aesthetics, namely, *Art in Action: Towards a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) and *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
 - 4 See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically: Philosophical Reflections on Religious Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), vii–ix.

liturgy going forward, as Wolterstorff believes that the project opens up “new and unfamiliar” avenues which “beckon to be explored” by others.⁵

2. Contextualising the project

When reading Wolterstorff’s account of his life titled *In this World of Wonder*,⁶ it becomes clear that, at least in hindsight, he has been fascinated by religious rituals and practices from a very young age. Growing up in what he describes as a deeply religious Dutch-immigrant family in a small farming community in Minnesota, much of his childhood years centred around, and were spent inside, the local Christian Reformed Church (CRC).⁷ It was here that he was first introduced to, and became immersed in, what the poet and literary critic Donald Davie called the “aesthetic experience” of Reformed worship.⁸ Wolterstorff remembers how, as a child, he was captivated by the drama of the Sunday service and, from very early on, internalised the words that were spoken, the hymns that were sung, the prayers that were offered, and the actions that were performed, both by the minister and, importantly, by the congregation itself.⁹ He writes that, even before he could fully grasp the theological meaning of what was transpiring in church, he was inducted into the tradition “by the deportment of the worshippers,” by what the gathered faithful were doing in the service.¹⁰ And, he continues, through weekly repetition these elements of the liturgy sank so deep into his “soul that nothing thereafter, short of senility, could remove them.”¹¹

5 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 294.

6 See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *In this World of Wonders: Memoir of a Life in Learning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019). The title of the book references a line out of South African novelist J.M. Coetzee important anti-apartheid protest novel *Age of Iron* (1990). Wolterstorff has, of course, had a long and enduring relationship with South Africa since he first visited the country in 1975. See in this regard e.g. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Journey Towards Justice: Personal Encounters in the Global South* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), as well as Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), a work which Wolterstorff dedicated to Allan Boesak.

7 Wolterstorff, *In this World of Wonders*, 24.

8 Donald Davie, *A Gathered Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 25.

9 Wolterstorff, *In this World of Wonders*, 25.

10 *In this World of Wonders*, 25.

11 *In this World of Wonders*, 26; see also the essay “The Grace that Shaped My Life,” in Wolterstorff, *Hearing the Call*, 1–16 (especially 1–5).

After leaving rural Minnesota and eventually settling in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he completed his undergraduate studies and was later appointed as professor of philosophy at Calvin College (upon finishing his doctorate at Harvard and briefly taking up a teaching post at Yale, the institution he would also return to later in his life), Wolterstorff continued to be drawn to the liturgical life of the church. He mentions how he eagerly joined, and ultimately stood at the helm of, the worship committee of LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church, the church he and his wife attended at the time.¹² Also later, when the two of them – together with a group of their peers – founded a new church community called the “Fellowship of the Acts,” Wolterstorff became actively involved in the planning of the community’s worship services, which, unlike most other churches in the CRC – and the Reformed tradition in general – would celebrate Holy Communion weekly.¹³

Because of his involvement in the newly established “Fellowship of the Acts” community (which later came to be called the “Church of the Servant”), as well as his expertise in the field of aesthetics (on which he was teaching courses at Calvin College at that moment), Wolterstorff would, with time, be invited to become part of the CRC’s synodical committee for liturgy, a committee tasked with reviewing and recommending revisions for the liturgical texts, rules, and practices of the denomination.¹⁴ This invitation, he writes, prompted him to start reading “avidly in the history and theology of liturgy”; and as he found this reading material “profound, inexplicable, inspiring, bizarre” he soon decided to develop a whole new course on Christian worship for the humanities department at Calvin College.¹⁵ Clearly, he realised, “liturgy was too important – and too fascinating – to be confined to committees, synods, and seminaries.”¹⁶ Working on and presenting this course on Christian worship – which would be open to all students at Calvin College, as well as members of the general public – would become a defining moment in Wolterstorff’s life, and would serve as

12 Wolterstorff, *In this World of Wonders*, 143–5.

13 *In this World of Wonders*, 146–7. For more on Wolterstorff’s own views on the matter of weekly communion, see e.g. Wolterstorff, *Hearing the Call*, 3–4.

14 Wolterstorff, *In this World of Wonders*, 128.

15 *In this World of Wonders*, 129–130.

16 *In this World of Wonders*, 129–130.

impetus to also focus much of his academic work, as philosopher, on the topic of liturgy going forward.

When surveying Wolterstorff's writings since then, it is seen that many of his articles and book chapters have indeed come to explore different dimensions of Christian worship – also, as mentioned above, in connection to some of his other philosophical interests. Just one pertinent example of this is found in the important volume *Hearing the Call*, which includes several essays investigating the relation between liturgical enactment and the doing of justice, two of the church's callings which, according to Wolterstorff, cannot be thought apart, as liturgical practices inform the way we act in the world, and justice, in turn, can be regarded as a condition for authentic worship.¹⁷ A few years ago, Wolterstorff also published a full-length monograph on Christian worship titled *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology*, based on his Kantzer Lectures in Revealed Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.¹⁸ In this book he interestingly sets out – with the help of, amongst others, the Orthodox liturgical scholar Alexander Schmemmann – to look at what our enactment of the liturgy implicitly say about the One whom we worship; at how liturgical practices thus point towards, and express something about the nature of the triune God.

It was while working on the abovementioned book – which came to encapsulate many of his previous writings on this topic – and also taking part in ongoing discussions on the philosophy of liturgy with scholars such as Sarah Coakley, Reinhard Hütter, and Terence Cuneo (as part of a project sponsored by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship), that Wolterstorff realised that while it is indeed important and necessary to investigate both the formative and expressive dimensions of worship – an endeavour he and countless others, also within the Reformed tradition, have undertaken anew in recent years – it might likewise be useful for him to explore, from a philosophical point of view, what is actually done in liturgical enactment;

17 See e.g. the essays “Justice as a Condition of Authentic Liturgy” and “Liturgy, Justice, and Holiness,” in *Hearing the Call*, 39–58 & 59–79.

18 See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The God we Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

to thus look at the performative dimensions of worship. And this is how the book *Acting Liturgically*, to which we will now turn, came into being.

3. Acting liturgically

In the introduction of *Acting Liturgically*, Wolterstorff begins by – perhaps provocatively – suggesting that both within his own field of analytic philosophy of religion, as well as in the field of theology, the tendency often is to investigate religious rituals and practices in light of questions concerning people’s religious beliefs or ethical conduct.¹⁹ Instead of thus principally focusing on “what is done in liturgical enactments,” the emphasis typically is on the meaning or significance of persons’ liturgical participation.²⁰ Also in the field of ritual studies, he remarks, this has been the case, with the focus normally being on the “functions of ritual or on the causal efficacy that participants in ritual activity attributes to their actions.”²¹ While these matters are important – as has become evident in his own work throughout the years – Wolterstorff notes that more attention could probably be given to the strictly performative dimensions of *worship*, to what could be seen as the “fine texture of liturgical enactment.”²² At a very basic level worship is, after all, something that the gathered faithful do together, an occurrence marked by a set of embodied actions. It is what is “done,” he writes, which ultimately makes liturgical enactment, for example, “expressive or formative.”²³ “What is done is basic.”²⁴

It is, then, as a corrective to what he sees as the neglect of the performative dimensions of liturgy in his own (as well as other’s) work that Wolterstorff

19 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 4–6.

20 *Acting Liturgically*, 7.

21 *Acting Liturgically*, 7. Wolterstorff makes reference here to Catherine Bell’s important survey of developments in ritual theory over several decades, titled *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practices*, wherein she affirms that ritual theorists often think of ritual in functional terms, or as “symbolic or expressive activity (i.e., communicative in some way) ... depicting, modelling, enacting, or dramatizing what are seen as prior conceptual ideas and values.” Cf. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 43, 71.

22 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 5.

23 *Acting Liturgically*, 5.

24 *Acting Liturgically*, 5.

sets out to “understand at a deep level” what we do in liturgical enactment.²⁵ From the outset, he makes it clear that he will conduct this study as an analytic philosopher, not as a theologian, and that his task will, to a large extent, be a descriptive one in which he makes use of “concepts and distinctions from the analytic tradition” as they prove useful.²⁶ He furthermore notes that, as it is Christian liturgies that he knows best, it will be these liturgies that he analyses – not only from his own Reformed tradition, but also from the Roman Catholic tradition, as well as the Orthodox tradition, given (what he describes as) this tradition’s overt inclination towards “dramatic expression.”²⁷

4. Liturgy, enactments and scripts

Wolterstorff begins the first and longest section of *Acting Liturgically by asking the rudimentary question “what is liturgy?”*²⁸ As he sets out to formulate an answer, it becomes clear that, for him, liturgy should principally be seen as a communal drama of some sort.²⁹ For he notes, at a basic level, liturgy consists of “actions to be performed and, usually, an order in which they are to be performed.”³⁰ For Wolterstorff, liturgy is indeed something that is “enacted,” with those participating doing so by following what could be seen as “a script.”³¹ By making this link between liturgy and drama, and using the language of theatre in his reflection, Wolterstorff, of course, joins many voices throughout history who has done exactly this, despite the church’s rather complicated relationship with the dramatic

25 *Acting Liturgically*, 7.

26 *Acting Liturgically*, 5 n.9. Wolterstorff refers to his approach as a “phenomenology of a certain sort.” With this he does not mean that his discussion will be representative of the philosophical movement stemming from Husserl, but simply that it will be, as he writes: “descriptive, in a certain way, of the phenomena.”

27 *Acting Liturgically*, 9; Cf. Richard D. McCall, *Do This: Liturgy as Performance* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 16–7.

28 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 11.

29 It is important to note that the word “drama” stems from the Greek word “dran,” which means “to do” or “to act.” Cf. the discussion in See Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3–4.

30 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 11.

31 *Acting Liturgically*, 11.

arts, in general.³² Already with early Christian thinkers such as Theodore Mopsuentia, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, as well as Amalarius of Metz, we find, for example, a tendency to employ the language of theatre when speaking about worship,³³ and it is notable that many later forms of religious dramas, including, for example, the medieval mystery plays, the *Corpus Christi* plays, as well as the *Auto Sacramentales* in Spain, developed out of, and could be seen as extensions of, the church's liturgies.³⁴ It is as part of this rich tradition, that Wolterstorff conducts his investigation.

As an exploration of the inner working and structure of liturgy as communal drama, Wolterstorff turns his attention to the script that is followed during liturgical enactment, that is, to the set of directions which prescribe the verbal, gestural and auditory acts to be performed by those participating in the worship service, enabling them “to act together.”³⁵ A liturgical script, Wolterstorff writes, could refer to a formal, ecclesially-sanctioned text – such as the *Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom* in the Byzantine Rite – but should also be seen to include all other “ways of doing” that have become embedded in, and are handed-on as part of, the “social practice” of the worship service.³⁶ Usually, he writes, these liturgical scripts have no single author, in the conventional sense of the word,³⁷ but are collectively

32 See e.g. Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 60ff; Todd E. Johnson and Dale Savidge, *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 19–50; and Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Volume I, Prolegomena*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 89–205.

33 See Richard McCall, *Do This*, 2–6 and Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Vol. 1*, 105–123.

34 For more on the relation between liturgy and the *Corpus Christi* plays (as just one example of religious drama mentioned above), see Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relations and Symbolic Act in the Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 59ff. One of the definitive texts on the relation between liturgy and drama in medieval Europe remains E.K. Chamber's *The Medieval Stage*, 2 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903).

35 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 16.

36 With reference to the work of Alasdair McIntyre, Wolterstorff writes that “for a practice to be a social practice, a number of people must be in the habit of performing actions of that sort in that way. And practitioners must be aware of other practitioners and thereby aware of the fact that other people see some good in the activity just as they do.” Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 21; cf. Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend: Notre Dame Press, 1981), 175–81.

37 Wolterstorff argues that even if a liturgy was, perhaps, composed by a single person, such is the case with Thomas Cramer and the Common Book of Prayer, the person

composed, rehearsed, and authorised by faith communities and their overseeing structures with specific “worship-functions” in mind.³⁸ The acts prescribed by liturgical scripts are indeed devised “not for their own sake,”³⁹ but to have a certain “count-as significance”; or to make use of speech-act theory, to fulfil particular illocutionary functions.⁴⁰ The directive to kneel, for example, *counts as* an invitation to humble oneself before God, just as the directive to sing a hymn of praise *counts as* an invitation to honour God. Even the directive to say the words “blessed be God’s kingdom, now and forever,” *counts as* an invitation to actually bless God’s kingdom, since, for Wolterstorff, a distinction can be made between merely uttering a sentence as a “perceptible bodily act” (a *locutionary* act in speech-act theory), and “doing something” in and through the words that are spoken in the worship service (an *illocutionary* act in speech-act theory).⁴¹

Wolterstorff continues to argue, with specific reference to theatre performances and music recitals, that to follow a script, of any sort, should not be seen as a passive act, where a person simply surrenders him- or herself to the directions offered, but rather as a creative happening, in which a person actively and freely enters into the imaginative world presented by the text, leading to a fusion and expansion of both the text and the participant’s “horizons.” To Wolterstorff notes that where we, as worshipping communities, often become locked inside one-dimensional echo chambers filled with our own “clumsy,” “prosaic,” and “cliché-ridden” worship utterings, liturgical scripts “put us in touch with traces of

should not be seen as the “author” in any traditional sense. For, he writes, Crammer’s liturgies were composed “for praying and for blessing” by others (after being authorised by ecclesial structures) and are, therefore, not examples of Crammer himself praying or blessing. He writes: “Crammer’s liturgical text, and liturgical texts in general, represent the dream come true of the New Critics and the deconstructionists. No need to treat these texts *as if* they have no author. They have no author ... To compile or compose a text for liturgical use is not to perform some illocutionary act thereby. Authorial-discourse interpretation is irrelevant because there is no authorial discourse to interpret.” See Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 35.

38 Ibid., 38.

39 There is a point of connection here with Wolterstorff’s understanding of art, which he also does not believe is devised for “its own sake.” See, in this regard, Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought*, v–xiv.

40 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 23–6, 35–8.

41 *Acting Liturgically*, 24.

liturgical imagination distinct from our own”; it presents us with “ways of praising God that never occurred to us, ways of petitioning God that never crossed our mind.”⁴² In following a liturgical script, Wolterstorff writes, we are released “from the confines of our own limited liturgical imagination and put in touch with traces of the liturgical imagination of the church at large.”⁴³ Far from thus constraining worshipping communities – as is often thought – following liturgical scripts can, therefore, have a liberating effect on them, as people are opened up to theological riches and depths far exceeding their own restricted view of things.

After looking at how liturgical scripts enlarge “our liturgical universe,” as we freely enter into and come to embody the “strangeness” of the worship text, Wolterstorff goes on to explore, in meticulous detail, how they also enable worshipping communities to act and worship God “with one accord,” so that the worship service can truly become a communal drama, where those who participate “do so together.”⁴⁴ He furthermore sets out to investigate how liturgical scripts prompt Christians “to worship God with their bodies,” something he regards as central to the drama that is Christian worship.⁴⁵ Wolterstorff notes that, over against the Platonic emphasis on the “ascent of the mind,” Christian worship has been “relentlessly bodily” from the beginning, with the focus being on “assembling” rather than on “ascending.”⁴⁶ It is with our bodies, he writes, that “we participate in liturgical enactment,” and with our bodies that “we meet God.”⁴⁷ Bodily acts of worship, Wolterstorff writes, are not preliminary or optional “causes” on the way to worshipping God as a cognitive activity, but – in and of themselves – thick and meaningful worship expressions in and through which “body and mind are conjoined in a mysterious manner,” to fulfil various illocutionary functions, as mentioned above.⁴⁸ For Wolterstorff, as

42 *Acting Liturgically*, 53.

43 *Acting Liturgically*, 54.

44 *Acting Liturgically*, 56–77.

45 *Acting Liturgically*, 78.

46 *Acting Liturgically*, 78–83.

47 *Acting Liturgically*, 84; Nathan Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Worship, Sacraments* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 185.

48 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 85–6.

for someone like Augustine (whom he quotes extensively at this point),⁴⁹ our worship – and especially our communal worship – is greatly impoverished if we do not purposely enlist our bodies and “other items and substances of the material world,” as it is in and through bodily activity that our whole selves are turned towards God, as well as, importantly, to our fellow human beings in their embodied existence.⁵⁰ As is arguably the case in all Christian life and doctrine – Wolterstorff notes – the body is and remains the “hinge of salvation,” to quote Tertullian, and should therefore be seen as an essential part of Christian worship.⁵¹

5. Liturgy and Scripture

Wolterstorff devotes the second section of *Acting Liturgically* to the role of Scripture in the drama of Christian worship. Like other religious traditions, he writes, Christianity’s “liturgical enactments are not only formed and shaped by its sacred text,” but also explicitly “invoke this text” in its performance of the liturgy.⁵² He accordingly argues that to grasp what transpires in Christian worship it is necessary to also investigate how the reading of scripture functions within liturgical enactment.

Wolterstorff first explores what the liturgist does in reading (or “rehearsing” in her/his own words),⁵³ for example, a narrative passage of Scripture aloud as part of the liturgical drama. His suggestion in this regard is that, when engaging in this activity, the liturgist performs the simple yet important illocutionary act of re-telling the story, of re-narrating the narrative, of

49 Ibid., 91. In the sections quoted from the writing *De cura pro mortuis*, which forms part of Augustine’s *Treatise on Marriage and Other Subjects*, Augustine says for example that “by the [bodily] actions of the visible man, the invisible soul which prompted them is strengthened,” thus bringing forth a “proper state for praying and fasting.”

50 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 91.

51 *Acting Liturgically*, 91.

52 Wolterstorff mentions that already in the second century it was common practice in worship gatherings, centring around the Lord’s Table, to read aloud passages from what is now the New Testament. He quotes Justin Martyr, who says about the Sunday liturgy in 150 AD: “the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as time allows”; *ibid.*, 121; Justin Martyr, *Apologia* I.57.

53 Wolterstorff writes: “What I mean by a “rehearsal” of some episode is a narrating of the episode couched wholly or in part in the speaker’s own words or arrangement of words, rather in the very words of Scripture, or couched in the words of whoever it was that composed the liturgical script”; Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 153.

re-presenting the written account as it has been passed on to us. The idea is thus not that the liturgist takes in a specific “narrational stance” towards the text – regarding, say, whether it is a factual report or a parabolic story – but simply that they “re-state” or “re-perform” what the original author or editor put forth, so as to “immerse” participants in the drama of the text.⁵⁴ For Wolterstorff, the act of reading (or rehearsing) a biblical passage, indeed “counts-as representing” whatever it is that the original author/editor of the text voiced.⁵⁵ This also holds true for narrative passages containing first-person pronouns. Wolterstorff argues that, when reading a text such as the opening of Luke’s Gospel – where Luke speaks in the first person – the lector is not “impersonating” the author, *per se*, but “tacitly inviting us to imagine” Luke speaking these words to the text’s implied audience (as well as, derivatively, to the congregants present in the here and the now). Thus, not only cognition, but also “imagination is brought into the picture,” the imagination of both the liturgist doing the reading and the congregants listening to the text.

Wolterstorff continues to show that there are, however, texts where the “I” of the original author is conjoined with, or rather translates into, the “I” of the reader and the larger congregation. The most pertinent example is when the psalms are prayed, in spoken word or song. In uttering the words of the psalmist, Wolterstorff notes, people are not merely “*imagining the psalmist praying; nor are they imagining themselves to be the psalmist praying,*” but are “*themselves actually praying, doing so with the words of the psalm rather than with their own words.*”⁵⁶ Wolterstorff notes that, in this instance, worshippers taking part in the liturgical drama are engaging in what he would like to call a “appropriation of speech”; the taking of an extant “speech-token” and performing “some illocutionary act” with it, which typically correspond to the illocutionary act performed by the original author.⁵⁷

54 *Acting Liturgically*, 127–8, 166–7; Here, Wolterstorff draws strongly on the work of his friend and former student Terence Cuneo’s essay “Liturgical Immersion,” in Terence Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith: Essays on the Philosophy of Liturgy* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 2016), 66–87.

55 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 128.

56 *Acting Liturgically*, 138.

57 *Acting Liturgically*, 139; 142–3.

This also then applies to certain non-biblical texts and prayers where first person (as well as second person) pronouns are used, of which Wolterstorff explores, amongst others, the Orthodox liturgy for Vespers on the eve of the Sunday before Lent, where Adam's "I" becomes the congregants' "I."⁵⁸ For Wolterstorff, the repetition of these words from the liturgy in the first person, could be described as "intentional instantiations of the act-type" expressed by the original text, whether that is, for example, to *confess* to God, to *praise* God, to *lament* before God, to *intercede* with God, etc. – an idea he also goes on to explore with regards to "liturgical commemorations" and cases where the so-called "liturgical present tense" is used (that is to say, where passages from Scripture or liturgical texts are spoken or sung "as if certain event-tokens from the distant past are happening now").⁵⁹

6. God in the liturgy

After the two longer sections discussed above, *Acting Liturgically* has another two shorter sections – the first of which centres on *God's activity in the liturgy*, a theme Wolterstorff has been interested in for many years and also explores extensively in *The God we worship*.⁶⁰ Wolterstorff writes that, when "Christians participate in liturgical enactment so as thereby to worship God, they do so in the expectation and with the prayer that God will participate along with them in enacting the liturgy."⁶¹ Taking for granted, then, that God is – or at least could be – "a liturgical agent,"⁶² Wolterstorff briefly explores various forms that God's agency could take in liturgical enactment.

58 The text reads e.g.: "In my wretchedness I have cast off the robe woven by God, disobeying They demand command, O Lord, at the council of my enemy; and I am clothed now in fig leaves and in garments of skin. I am condemned to eat the bread of toil in the sweat of my brow, and the earth has been cursed so that it bears thorns and thistles for me. But, Lord, who is the last times wast made flesh of a virgin, call be back and bring me into paradise." Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 134; *The Lenten Triodion*, trans. Mother Mary & Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 168–9.

59 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 150–1, 171–87, 188–208.

60 See e.g. Wolterstorff, *The God we Worship*, 53ff.

61 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 209.

62 *Acting Liturgically*, 209.

Wolterstorff proposes that God first acts in the liturgy by both enabling and accepting our worship. He shows that many liturgical scripts, in fact, invite worshipping communities to ask this of God, to pray the self-reflective prayer “that God will enable them to worship worthily” and also that God would “accept” their acts of worship.⁶³ Wolterstorff notes that, while being pervasive throughout the liturgy, this invocation is particularly pertinent in prayers related to Holy Communion. In Calvin’s Genevan liturgy it is asked, for example, that God – through the “sending down” of God’s Spirit – grants the congregation the grace of receiving the “benefit and gift” of Christ’s body and blood with “true sincerity of heart,” with “ardent zeal” and in “steadfast love” – words that also echo in many other eucharistic prayers.⁶⁴ When God answers this prayer, Wolterstorff writes, God indeed “acts liturgically” by preparing and enabling participants to receive the bread and wine rightly.⁶⁵

The fact that the abovementioned prayers are offered to God, and it is believed and professed that God acts upon them, also serves as a tacit assertion that, during worship, God “performs the act of listening” to God’s people.⁶⁶ Wolterstorff notes that while we often take for granted God’s activity in this regard, it remains one of the central assertions of Christian worship that God hears “what we say to God,” that God listens to and comprehends our utterings (as they go on to fulfil various illocutionary functions).⁶⁷ Wolterstorff continues to say while we assemble during worship to speak to the God who listens, we also do so to listen to the God who speaks. Also central to Christian worship is thus the act of God speaking, a speaking which, in fact, precedes, renders possible and reverberates through all our speaking *of God and, perhaps even, to God.*

Regarding God’s act of addressing us as part of the drama of the liturgy, Wolterstorff focuses, once more, on the reading of Scripture, as well as on the event of preaching, where, as most traditions attest, listeners are

63 *Acting Liturgically*, 210.

64 *Acting Liturgically*, 211; Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Cleveland & New York: Meridian Books, 1962), 202.

65 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 211.

66 *Acting Liturgically*, 213.

67 *Acting Liturgically*, 213; 230–48.

also somehow presented with “the Word of God.”⁶⁸ Wolterstorff argues that, for him, the sermon’s function is to “convey to the listeners, in its own distinct way, the continuant discourse of God that the reading aloud of Scripture already conveyed to them” and to “make clear how that continuant discourse applies to their lives.”⁶⁹ It is thus a form of “continued illocution”; an instance of the preacher’s words sustaining the illocutionary act performed in and through the biblical text, so as to serve, through the working of God’s Spirit, as God’s ongoing speech through the preacher’s words. Instead of the preacher, therefore, simply transmitting to the congregants “what God once said” or acting as some ventriloquist of God “then and there,” Wolterstorff sees preaching as re-presenting and extending God’s discourse to the congregation, a discourse grounded in and flowing forth from the biblical text.⁷⁰

After discussing this question of how God speaks to us, particularly through preaching, Wolterstorff briefly alludes to other divine activity in the worship service, including the fact that God, for example, greets us, absolves us, blesses us, meets us through music, and offers Godself to us in and through the Eucharist – emphasising, thereby, the fact that God can indeed be seen as a liturgical agent who acts through, alongside, and in response to the acts of the worshipping community.

7. Liturgy, love and justice

In the brief final section of *Acting Liturgically*, Wolterstorff explores what he calls liturgical love and justice; that is, the way liturgical enactment expresses, or at least elicits a hunger for, love and justice (virtues that have, as said above, been central to Wolterstorff’s thought, since his first visit to South Africa during the apartheid years).⁷¹

68 *Acting Liturgically*, 213. Wolterstorff here quotes different confessional documents spanning the ecumenical church all asserting in one way or another that the sermon/homily conveys God’s Word.

69 *Acting Liturgically*, 228.

70 *Acting Liturgically*, 228.

71 See e.g. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, 146–161; Wolterstorff, *Journey towards Justice: Personal Encounters in the Global South* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 3ff; Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); and also Wolterstorff, *Hearing the Call*, especially 39–58 (the essay “Justice as a condition of

For Wolterstorff, worship does not only form congregants to perform acts of love and justice outside of the church building, but could also, perhaps, be regarded as a provisional “manifestation” of love and justice in itself; as a “site” where “agapeic love” and “reconciliatory justice” are enacted.⁷² This is seen, according to Wolterstorff, by the way the liturgical drama brings and binds together (as the work of God’s Spirit) diverse groupings of people to worship God “with one accord” and so defy the usual divisions (social, economic, political, racial, etc.) marking – and marring – everyday life.⁷³ While often falling short in this regard, Wolterstorff notes that, in principle, the worship assembly serves as a “rejection of all natural and social categories of exclusion,” as a place where “each is the equal of each.”⁷⁴

Wolterstorff moreover notes that many of the actions explicitly or implicitly prescribed by liturgical scripts are actions not merely directed towards God, but also towards the well-being (*shalom*) of others, including, he notes, those “who belong to various out-groups.”⁷⁵ In most Christian liturgies people are invited, for example, to pass the peace (thereby sharing, in the form of an embrace, the peace that Christ gave to us),⁷⁶ to pray and intercede for one another and humanity at large (thereby “giving voice to

authentic liturgy”) and 69–89 (the essay “Liturgy, justice and holiness”). One is struck by the strong continuity between these texts and the final section of *Acting Liturgically*, a continuity which testifies to Wolterstorff’s lifelong commitment to issues of justice.

72 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 249, 257.

73 *Acting Liturgically*, 266.

74 *Acting Liturgically*, 264.

75 *Ibid.*, 251–2; Cf. Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith*, 24–5. It is important to note that the idea of *shalom* is highly significant for Wolterstorff and has played a central role in his work throughout the years. Clarence Joldersma writes: “... *shalom* is more than a vision for Wolterstorff: it is a command to humans living here and now, in a fallen world, in a society that is filled with pain, suffering, and woundedness ... *Shalom* [Wolterstorff believes] ... asks us to respond – now – to the cries and tears of human suffering: to pangs of the hungry, to those abandoned to refugee camps for generations, to squalor of inner cities, to the places of war around the globe.” See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education*, edited by Clarence W. Joldersma and Gloria Goris Stronks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), vii. See also Nathan Shannon, *Shalom and the Ethics of Belief: Nicholas Wolterstorff’s Theory of Situated Rationality* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

76 See Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 262. Referring to Cyril of Alexandria, Wolterstorff writes that this embrace – which goes back to the very start of the Christian liturgical tradition – is not a *sign* of peace and reconciliation, but an act of peace and reconciliation.

the solidarity of emphatic concern, grieving, and rejoicing”),⁷⁷ to confess one’s sins (thereby seeking reconciliation with God, as well as, importantly, with those who have been sinned against),⁷⁸ and to collect an offering (thereby raising funds “as support for various social causes and as alms for impoverished members of the church”).⁷⁹ These actions, Wolterstorff argues, do not merely serve a formative function, but are tangible enactments of the love and justice demanded by God.

In conclusion, Wolterstorff also then offers a few reflections centring on the Lord’s Supper (in relation to love and, especially, justice). Following John Calvin, Wolterstorff notes that the Lord’s Supper is the place *par excellence* where the worshipping community is bound together in a loving unity, the place where – in being joined to Christ – they are, as Calvin remarks, “joined together by such great agreement of minds that no sort of disagreement or division may intrude.”⁸⁰ He cautions, however – with reference to the work of James Cone – that since it is at the Lord’s Table that we are confronted anew with Jesus’ crucifixion and death, it should not only be seen as a sign of unity, but also of division, a reminder of the “gruesome, demeaning, and accursed perversion of justice” which especially affect people on the margins of society. While binding us together in love, Wolterstorff notes, the Lord’s Supper should also thus serve as an exhortation to lament and counter the injustices in the world, as we perform God’s coming kingdom outside the four walls of the church building as part of what could be seen as the liturgy of life.

8. Concluding remarks

*Acting Liturgically is a peculiar book, as Wolterstorff himself confesses.*⁸¹

While the topics dealt with might be familiar to those who are interested in liturgy and/or regularly attend worship services, the way in which Wolterstorff approaches these topics is unusual, to the extent that the text might, at times, come across as estranging – both to liturgical scholars

77 *Acting Liturgically*, 263.

78 *Acting Liturgically*, 261.

79 *Acting Liturgically*, 258.

80 *Acting Liturgically*, 268; Calvin, *Institutes* IV.xvii.38.

81 Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 8, 292–4.

and ordinary churchgoers alike. To my mind, this is a good thing; in fact, part of the reason why the study could prove helpful. By “making strange” that which is often taken for granted during worship, namely what we actually do (with our words and our deeds), Wolterstorff helps the reader to intentionally identify, think through, and ask critical questions about the concrete actions standing at the very core of our liturgical participation. What these liturgical actions are, and how they function, are, of course, of critical importance, as someone like Siobhán Garrigan has shown (especially through her empirical research in Northern Ireland),⁸² and Wolterstorff, therefore, does us a great service by demarcating and describing the performative elements in our liturgies – not merely as an end in itself but as a first step to further philosophical and theological reflection (which would include, of course, the expressive and formative dimensions of worship).

For the most part, the analytical philosophical method employed by Wolterstorff also then serves as an interesting and, to my mind, effective means to undertake this endeavour, often offering intriguing and novel insights into the gestural and, especially, verbal acts of worship (as hopefully seen throughout this review essay). One of the main strengths of *Acting Liturgically* is indeed the bold manner in which Wolterstorff attempts to bring the field of analytic philosophy of religion, and especially also speech-act theory, to bear on liturgical enactment. It is clear that this approach holds much promise, both for analytic philosophers and theologians interested in worship. Potential readers should, however, note that, for Wolterstorff, the analytic tradition – like any intellectual tradition perhaps – is as much about style as it is about method, with the result that *Acting Liturgically* often becomes a rather laborious text to work through. Writing self-consciously in the mode of an analytic philosopher (maybe more so than in many of his other writings, especially other writings on liturgy), Wolterstorff employs a lot of technical jargon, uses what could arguably be seen as excessive illustrations and analogies (in a search for precision in his descriptions), and often states questions so that they run over many pages (just to answer, in a few cases, that he does not know

82 See Siobhán Garrigan, *The Real Peace Process: Worship, Politics and the End of Sectarianism* (New York: Routledge, 2010), especially the chapter “Space, Gestures, Bodies and Visuals” (pp. 63–91).

how to respond to his own question).⁸³ *Acting Liturgically* is thus not light reading and would, most likely, require some translation work to be used and appreciated in (theological and ecclesial) settings unfamiliar with the world (and also style) of analytic philosophy.

That being said, Acting Liturgically is a fascinating work which serves as a celebration of Nicholas Wolterstorff's lifelong interest in liturgy, as described in the opening section of this essay. Even though one would, perhaps, have expected a more comprehensive conclusion to the book (it concludes with a mere one page summary), its content is so rich and thought-provoking that – in the end – this is not really necessary. Hopefully, other scholars will further develop the project Wolterstorff started here – especially given the rise of analytic *theology at the present moment*.⁸⁴

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83 See e.g. Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 101.

84 See e.g. Oliver D. Crisp, James M. Arcadi and Jordan Wessling (eds.), *The Nature and Promise of Analytic Theology* (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2019) and the upcoming volume, James M. Arcadi and James T. Turner (eds.), *T&T Clarke Handbook of Analytic Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

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