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This is my Body – This is my Blood Inventing Authority in Liturgical Discourse and Practice¹

1. Introduction

The invention of authority in liturgical discourse and practice is a focal topic for Liturgical Studies from a feminist perspective. The construction of authority is inextricably interwoven with the exclusion of women from particular practices such as entering certain sacred spaces, reading or singing holy texts, and ministering Holy Things which mediate divine presence. These practices of exclusion reveal the androcentrism of the symbolic order which under girds Christian ritual practice and faith. However, the question of authority is not only a contested topic from a feminist perspective; it evokes a controversial debate within the ecumenical context as well. We will find a range of arguments regarding how to define liturgical authority by looking at the ecumenical spectrum from Congregationalist to Roman Catholic traditions. In addition we will discover the way in which late modernity challenges classic approaches to the invention of religious authority and opens up a variety of possibilities of how to deal with authority in ritual.

The definition of authority in philosophical and theological discourse has an opaque history. I take as a basis the following understanding: *The invention of authority is a dialogical event in which the claim that a particular text or ritual action is of special significance for the formation of religious identity is accepted and affirmed by individuals and/or groups who engage in the same ritual practice.* In this sense I follow the understanding of *auctoritas causativa*. Authoritative texts cause agreement or affirmation in the reason and faith of human beings. The bible possesses *auctoritas causativa* in so far as it stimulates faith and serves as a remedy for illumination and conversion. Following

¹ With thanks to Jennifer W. Davidson, doctoral student at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, for her many insightful comments on this essay.

Calvin here, this authority can only be proclaimed because of the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit (*testimonium spiritus sancti internum*).²

The following considerations will offer a *framework* within which it is possible to reflect on the invention of authority. Developing my thesis, I will refer to the example of the so-called words of institution, which in many Christian denominations are a heavily charged liturgical text. As can be seen from my title, I assume that the invention of authority is a construction which engages different strategies and value systems. I shall begin with a description of a concrete communion liturgy which demonstrates the complexity of the topic. Thereafter, I will turn to *dimensions, value systems, and strategies* with regard to the invention of authority.

Let me begin with the following situation: A few years ago, I attended for the first time a worship celebration in the Bay Area in California which attracts many GLBT³ people. This church had lost nearly 500 of its members during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. The members and the pastors are heavily involved in the social, political and spiritual issues that come with the disease. The service that I attended was a service of Word and Sacrament with a charismatic flavor. When it came to communion the pastor stood at the table and spoke about hospitality and the healing energies generated by the community praying together. He related the manner in which his church had prayed just one week earlier for a father and his one-year-old baby who was affected with HIV. He remembered how they had all gathered around the altar before communion with the baby cradled among them as they prayed over this fragile human being. At the conclusion of his story, the people gathered around the altar in a semi-circle, taking the bread and juice. The choir began to sing, *One Bread, One Body*, a popular song in U.S. churches which stresses the theme of unity in community that emerges from the communion celebration.⁴ People stood at the altar to receive a prayer of healing as well as bread and juice.

I remember very vividly how stunned I was, intrigued and confused at the same time. From the depth of my body the response arose: this is not a Eucharist! There was no explicit reference to the passion narrative of Jesus,

² Cf. Wilfried Härle, *Dogmatik* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter 1995), 114-115.

³ GLBT = gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender.

⁴ The biblical references of this song are to 1 Cor 10:16-17; 12:4, 12-13.20; Gal 3:28; Eph 4:46; it refers also to the *Didache* 9. Text and music by John B. Foley, SJ and New Dawn Music 1978, published by OCP Publications.

no words of institution, no telling of the resurrection story, no vision of eschatological hope. And yet, at the very bottom of my heart I felt at the same time that the pastor was right, that this was indeed a very special communion celebration.

I tell this story in order to illustrate what ritual theorists mean when they talk about ritualized bodies and how authority is inscribed into them. My reaction to this particular communion liturgy reflects my own upbringing as a German Lutheran. I had learned from the years of my childhood that the very holy moment of the *Gottesdienst* was when the pastor said or sang the “words of institution.” Both my mother and my grandmother had always forced me to be silent in that moment and to imitate the posture of reverence that adults would demonstrate as they listened to the proclamation of the institution narrative. I remember how they lifted up their eyes and straightened their spines to watch the pastor speaking and lifting up the bread and the chalice at the altar.

Probably these early experiences were foundational for the acceptance of the authority of the words of institution without any conscious knowledge of their theological meaning and tradition. Long before I encountered the historical background of my ritual practice, such as the position of Luther,⁵ or the Formula of Concord,⁶ which ascribe the highest authority to these words, I had embodied their significance and submitted to their authority.

This example also demonstrates that what happens to ritual participants is much more ambiguous than it may appear from the outside. I was negotiating

⁵ For Luther the words of institution were at the heart of the Eucharistic liturgy. He understood them as *benedictio* and *testamentum*, as blessing and promise. “[...] we must be particularly careful to put aside whatever has been added to its original simple institution by the zeal and devotion of men: such things as vestments, ornaments, chants, prayers, organs, candles, and the whole pageantry of outward things. We must turn our eyes and hearts simply to the institution of Christ and this alone, and set nothing before us but the very word of Christ by which he instituted the sacrament, made it perfect, and committed it to us. For in that word, and in that word alone, reside the power, the nature, and the whole substance of the mass. All the rest is work of man added to the words of Christ” (Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church [1520], in: *Luther’s Works*, vol. 36: *Word and Sacrament II* [Muhlenberg Press: Philadelphia 1959], 3-126, here 36).

⁶ The Formula of Concord stresses the consecratory efficacy of the words of institution: “For where Christ’s institution is observed and his words are spoken over the bread and cup, and the consecrated bread and cup are distributed, Christ himself, through the spoken words, is still efficacious by virtue of the first institution through his word, which he wishes to be there repeated” (*Formula of Concord*, Article VII, *Status Controversiae*, §75).

different reactions which moved between rejection and attraction. I was disturbed deeply by the omission of something that was crucial to my practice. On the other hand I sensed the intense energy that unfolded itself in this community of marginalized people, many of them coming to the table all too familiar with the experience of rejection. I sensed that they were indeed embodying what Holy Communion is about: a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, an expression of unconditional hospitality, in which there is plenty for all who wish to eat and to be nourished. This is the Eucharist as medicine to enable resurrection.

The invention of authority in liturgical practice and discourse is a complex phenomenon. Analyzing it means understanding liturgy as a *dialogical event* in which individuals or groups have to come to consent to the authority of a holy text, a deity, or a person. The invention of authority is a praxis which may evoke all kinds of reactions shifting between resistance and consent. Its complexity is due to the fact that the evoked responses can be ambiguous (as my case shows), or even invisible. Someone may partake in a Eucharist and by this participation show a certain degree of consent even though he or she does not in fact approve the perceived meaning of the ritual activity.

Since I understand the subjective response to ritual as a crucial factor in Liturgical Studies, I oppose the understanding of those liturgists who are of the opinion that only the visible, communal liturgical practice is important. For instance, Nathan Mitchell suggests that

when a “liturgical order” is enacted, those who engage in it indicate to themselves or to others that they accept whatever is encoded in the canons of the liturgy they are performing. In short, they accede to the liturgical rites authority, an authority that yet remains independent of those who participate in it. ‘...’ For what gives liturgical rites their authoritativeness is not ultimately, the participants’ approval or fidelity. What makes the liturgy socially and morally binding is not the participants’ private prayerful sentiments (however worthy these may be) but the visible, explicit, public act of acceptance itself.⁷

I oppose this hierarchy of public over private because it leaves no room to understand the formative process that moves between opposition/resentment and consent in the invention of authority. If authority is constructed in a dialogical progression of claiming something as religiously significant and

⁷ Nathan Mitchell, “Americans at Prayer,” in: *Worship* 66 (1992), 177-184, here 181-182.

responding to it, the dissenting voices of women or laity can be muted if attention is paid only to the public or official dimensions.

2. Dimensions in the invention of authority

The invention of authority can be analyzed on various levels, including the interaction of people with each other, with texts, and with spaces. Lawrence Hoffman's discussion of the construction of meaning in ritual can then be used also to consider authority.⁸ Hoffman differentiates between *private* meanings, which people make up for themselves (however idiosyncratic these might be), *official* meanings expressed through the voices of authorized experts, and *public* meanings as agreed-upon meanings by a number of ritual participants, which do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the experts. Hoffman also proposes a fourth category: *normative* meaning, "a structure of signification that ritual affixes upon the non-ritualized world that participants re-enter when the rite has been concluded."⁹ Hoffman's framework indicates that the process of meaning-making is attached to different participants, agents, and experts. This process of meaning-making evolves in the ritual event itself and beyond. It seems to me helpful to distinguish these dimensions with regard to the invention of authority as well:

- a) The *private or inward dimension* signifies the space of visible or invisible negotiation about the claim attached to the authoritative text; it can express itself in different ways of ritual participation and embodiment, and in unofficial discourse beyond the ritual itself.
- b) The *official authority* is invented in theological discourse, such as Luther's treatises on the Mass, the Formula of Concord, or the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council. In most cases, the invention of official authority comes with the power to exclude or discipline ritual agents, such as pastors or priests, who do not subscribe to it.
- c) The *public dimension* of the construction of authority includes the participants' own theologies about the significance of the words of consecration together with the attitudes and postures by which they enact ritual practice.
- d) The *normative dimension* of ritual authority would include, for instance, ideologies about sacrifice which shape political discourse, or the ethos of Christians concerning how they should live out their faith in the world.

⁸ Cf. Lawrence Hoffman: "How Ritual Means: Ritual Circumcision in Rabbinic Culture and Today," in: *Studia Liturgica* 23 (1993), 78-97, esp. 79-82.

⁹ *Ibid.*

This normative dimension has probably only a mediate connection to the actual ritual practice. It produces transformed fragments which develop a life of their own. This can be observed in public discourses, for instance, in the call to give one's life for the sake of the nation in times of war. Civil religious rituals come into play here. They are utterly powerful e.g. in the current public discourse of the United States dominated by a government which claims to fight the war against terrorism for the sake of the world.

Recognizing these dimensions may make it possible to create a kind of map which helps to determine on which level the discourse on authority takes place, and how particular dimensions are privileged and others neglected.¹⁰

3. Values undergirding the invention of authority

The invention of ritual authority is accompanied by values which undergird people's preferences and choices with regard to the acceptance of liturgical authority. Ronald Grimes summarizes two different attitudes. He labels the first as *liturgiocentrism* implying the following axioms:

(1) that "public orders", such as the liturgy, are by their very nature superior to personal or private ones; (2) that Christian liturgy is somehow above its ambient culture ... (3) that the fundamental shape of Christian liturgy is "invariable", that ritual invariance (if there were such a thing) is one important factor that helps to guarantee the authority of the liturgy.¹¹

¹⁰ Similar models circulate in other theological disciplines. New Testament scholar Mary Ann Tolbert offers a helpful distinction with regard to the invention of biblical authority (see also the article by Anne Marie Korte in this volume). I think her approach is also instructive for the reflection on the invention of authority in Liturgical Studies. Referring to Max Weber she distinguishes three levels: A biblical text gains *narrative or existential* authority for the individual to guide the personal search for meaning. Secondly, *formational or foundational* authority comes into play in the realm of collective identity formation. And thirdly, *doctrinal or juridical* authority is put into action when institutions legitimate and exercise power in order to guard identity formation and the development of organizations. These levels are related to one another. They come together in the performative act of the actual liturgical celebration as well as in the writing of liturgical texts. However depending on the individual and her tradition each of those dimensions might have a different weight. Cf. Mary Ann Tolbert, "Reading the Bible with Authority: Feminist Interrogation of the Canon," in: Harold C. Washington / Susan Lochrie Graham / Pamela Thimmes (eds), *Escaping Eden: New Feminist Perspectives on the Bible* (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield 1998), 141-162.

¹¹ Ronald L. Grimes, "Liturgical Supinity, Liturgical Erectitude: On the Embodiment of Ritual Authority," in: *Studia Liturgica* (1993), 51-69, here 58.

The underlying dichotomies of public versus private, culture versus ritual, invariance/tradition versus creativity/personal authenticity are reversed in the second approach to ritual authority:

(1) that personal insight and private passion, such as one finds in contemporary Anglo-American ritual groups, are by their very nature more authentic than public liturgical orders; (2) that women's concerns, merely because they are rooted in women's bodies (or men's concerns merely because they are rooted in men's bodies) are universal and timeless, the same now as in ages past and in other cultures; and (3) that ritual creativity and authenticity displaces the need for ritual authority in the more public or conventional sense.¹²

Grimes identifies the first group primarily with Roman Catholic and some Protestant liturgists and theologians, whilst the second group is exemplified by women's groups which invent new rites of passages and new ways of ritualizing significant life experiences beyond institutionalized religion. The issue is probably even more complex, since there are many women who are interested in the reform of Sunday public worship, and others who are working on authenticity with regard to one's own embodiment, such as the use of voice, and gesture in worship, as seen in the German context in Thomas Kabel's workshops on *Liturgical Presence*.¹³

Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of these two sets of values offers a typological framework for understanding the dynamics that accompany the invention of liturgical authority. Both reflect the distinction between institutional and personal authority which is particularly important in the ethical discourse on authority. In the realm of institutional authority, the individual identifies herself with regard to the identity of the institution and acceptance of authority is achieved through obedience; whereas the model of personal authority is based on the idea that the individual becomes the bearer of authority, often in opposition to institutional claims. I proceed on the assumption that the value systems that undergird the invention of authority reflect arguments from the tradition either of institutional or of personal authority.

4. Strategies

These values are put into practice by particular strategies that intend to invent liturgical authority. I am going to name seven different strategies used by

¹² Ibid., 61.

¹³ Thomas Kabel, *Handbuch Liturgische Präsenz*, vol. 1: *Zur praktischen Inszenierung des Gottesdienstes* (Gütersloher Verlagshaus: Gütersloh 2001).

scholars who do research on liturgies and used by people who participate in liturgies.

a) Finding the original words – the original prayer

Up to the first half of the twentieth century, searching for the original version of the Eucharistic prayer and of the words of institution was the predominant paradigm of doing liturgical history. Historians engaged in this search supposed that there was only one original version of the Eucharistic prayer. Many of them were working from the assumption that the Eucharist must be combined with the words of institution and that the text would otherwise reflect “merely” the praxis of an agape meal (e.g. in the *Didache* 9-10). The dualistic construction “eucharist versus agape meal” privileged the former over the latter and assigned higher authority to those liturgical texts which included the words of institution. The whole debate as to whether Jesus’ Last Supper was a Passover meal and its accompanying attempt to discover the original words of institution had the tendency to construct homogenous views, so that the perspective on a range of practices in diverse communities were marginalized. Scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were motivated to find the *Urtext* which was supposed to have been handed down from the early apostles to the emerging Christian communities. The publication of the *Apostolic Constitutions* initially seemed to confirm this motivation, until Dom Gregory Dix in his classic *The Shape of the Liturgy* (1945) rejected the *Urtext* hypothesis. However, Dix still proceeded from the idea that there was a classic shape to the early liturgy, a pattern held in common by the worshipping communities of the early church. While Dix thought that this fairly homogenous shape diversified as the church grew over the centuries, contemporary scholars have reversed his view, assuming that diverse liturgical practices were channeled into a process of unification of rites by the growth of Christianity and particularly by its legalization. This development in historical research shows how values and strategies with regard to the invention of authoritative texts have changed. It is no longer the unique voice but the diversity of traditions that is esteemed.

b) Tracing the words back to divine institution

Closely connected with the first strategy is the attempt to trace a particular ritual practice to divine institution. A classic example is the manner in which Paul introduces the account of the institution of the Last Supper as being invented by Jesus Christ himself. In 1 Cor. 11:23, Paul stresses that he received from

the LORD what he handed on to the Corinthians, emphasizing that the words used are not his words. They gain highest authority because they are Christ's own words and commands.

These first two strategies are related to the *auctoritas* model invented in antiquity, in which the *auctor*/author gives significance to another person, event or symbol by means of his/her *potestas*/power. This model was reconfirmed during the Reformation when the reformers used it to point to the significance of the *verba testamenti*.¹⁴

c) Focusing on particular words/texts, people, or ritual actions that mediate divine presence

In this case, the declaration of divine institution does not give authority to a text except in the sense of honoring the past. What is significant is rather a text's ability to mediate divine presence in the here and now. This can be recognized, for example, in the Formula of Concord and a variety of other texts which deal with the sacraments. It should be remembered that it was not until after the third century that theologians began to talk about specific isolated consecratory moments in the Eucharistic liturgy. Ambrose and Augustine were the first to identify the consecratory power exclusively with the *verba testamenti*. Following them the Western Church began to consider the institution narrative as the principal Christological agent of the prayer. The Eastern churches, however, developed a stronger pneumatological approach to the Eucharistic liturgy, considering the epiclesis to be the consecratory force and assigning higher authority to it.

d) Following the rubrics

So far, I have referred to strategies that belong to the theological and historical discourse *about* liturgy; however, now we turn toward strategies that are more directed toward the performed liturgy. Pastoral reflections about the role of liturgists and congregation come into play here. In some traditions, the instructions contained in the rubrics are of great importance and must be followed. The Anglican Book of Common Prayer and other books of worship gives detailed instructions about what to do during the proclamation of the institution narrative.¹⁵ Following the rubrics determining ritual action opens

¹⁴ Compare Luther's words in footnote 5.

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. "Holy Eucharist I," in: *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church. According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (1979), 334: "At the following words concerning the bread, the Celebrant is to hold

up another aspect of the invention of authority. We enter into the world of embodiment, gesture, and *habitus*. *Habitus* and custom are crucial for the invention of liturgical authority. Many people of faith have a strong sense of what they consider as appropriate or inappropriate behavior which is intimately connected with granting authority to liturgical leadership.

e) *What works (for me)*

A further strategy is connected to a mere quantitative understanding of church growth. Authority is granted to what *works* with regard to raising the worship attendance. Building up the body of Christ (*oikodome*) through worship is understood in the framework of the goals of church growth. *What works* guides the choice of texts, music and visual arts. *What works* is what celebrants appreciate and affirm; this is accorded highest authority. Biblical interpretation, liturgical traditions, and esthetics are subordinated to this strategy. The individualistic version of that strategy is *what works for me*. Less oriented to quantity or attendance, what works for me is what moves me, what makes me feel that I had a spiritual experience. It is not worship unless it *felt* like worship to me.

f) *Being authentic*

Striving for authenticity is another strategy for building up liturgical authority. Being authentic means working at the highest standards of congruency between role and person. An authentic use of liturgical formulae requires the full theological affirmation of the person who recites them. Authentic liturgical practice does not produce dissonance, but creates a harmonious interplay of reason and emotion. The following questions are raised: Do we embody what we say? When we talk about hospitality in our services, are we really a welcoming church for guests and outsiders? Does our proclamation of God's peace and justice in our sermons and our call for justice in the world reflect our ethical commitments in our every day lives? Does it have a resonance in our communities of accountability? Striving for authenticity as a strategy for the invention of liturgical authority thus implies a threefold dimension: it is about the personal faith and theology of the liturgist and the people; it questions the ways we celebrate liturgies and it challenges the ethical commitments that should flow out of our worship practices.

it, or lay a hand upon it; and at the words concerning the cup, to hold or place a hand upon the cup and any other vessel containing wine to be consecrated."

g) *Enhancing moral standards*

This leads us to the final strategy. Authority is granted to the forms of worship that build up moral character and inspire people to make a difference in the world. Enhancing moral standards as well as working for a more just society is considered to be the highest goal of liturgical practice according to this strategy. Hence, liturgists and communities of faith who work openly for peace, against racism and poverty are worthy of attention and respect.

The framework I have sketched here might serve as an analytical tool for understanding the dynamics emerging in the invention of authority in ritual. Some of the strategies that I have named complement or exclude others. Only within the concrete context of a worshipping community is it possible to describe adequately how these strategies are related. Nonetheless, this framework may make it possible to enter into a dialogue about ritual analysis and liturgical theology across the lines of denominations.

Clarifying the dimensions, the value systems, and the strategies in the invention of authority may make it possible to initiate a self-critical process of reflection about how we invent authority and thus to ascertain whether our arguments, our hidden assumptions, and our ritual practices are still valid for us.

Dieser Essay skizziert Wege und Möglichkeiten, über die Erfindung von Autorität in liturgischem Diskurs und liturgischer Praxis nachzudenken. Wer sich mit Liturgie befasst, hat es nicht nur mit geschriebenen Texten, sondern auch mit performativen Akten zu tun und damit, wie Autorität durch Handlungen und Interaktionen in Körper eingezeichnet wird. Der Beitrag geht von folgender Definition aus: *Die Erfindung von Autorität ist ein dialogisches Geschehen, in dem der Anspruch, dass ein bestimmter Text oder eine rituelle Handlung von besonderer Bedeutung für die Bildung religiöser Identität ist, von Individuen und/oder Gruppen akzeptiert wird, die die selbe rituelle Praxis ausüben.* Der Artikel untersucht die privaten, offiziellen, öffentlichen und normativen *Dimensionen*, die *Wertesysteme* ebenso wie die *Strategien*, die für die Behauptung von Autorität für bestimmte rituelle Handlungen und Texte angewandt werden. Jene Strategien reichen vom klassischen *actor*-Argument bis zu metaphysischen Anstrengungen, die Worten und heiligen Gegenständen, die göttliche Gegenwart vermitteln, spezielle Autorität verleihen. Die Forderung nach Authentizität in Bezug auf die eigenen moralischen Standards ist Teil dieser Strategien.

Cet essai esquisse les voies et les possibilités de réflexion sur l'invention de l'autorité dans le discours et la pratique liturgiques. Traiter de la liturgie, c'est avoir affaire non seulement à des textes écrits mais aussi à des actes performatifs et donc à l'inscription de l'autorité dans des corps à travers des actions et des interactions.

Cette réflexion procède de la définition suivante: *l'invention de l'autorité est un événement dialogique dans lequel l'exigence qu'un texte spécifique ou une action rituelle soit d'une importance particulière pour la formation d'une identité religieuse, est acceptée par des individus et/ou des groupes qui s'adonnent à la même pratique rituelle.* L'article examine les *dimensions* personnelles, officielles, publiques et normatives, les *systèmes de valeur* et les *stratégies* utilisés pour faire valoir l'autorité dans certaines actions rituelles et certains textes. Ces stratégies vont de l'argument classique de l'*auteur (auctor)* aux efforts métaphysiques qui confèrent une autorité spécifique aux mots et aux choses sacrées transmettant la présence divine. L'exigence d'authenticité quant aux propres normes morales est part de ces stratégies.

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