SACRED SIGNS

Interpreting worship as part of the Church of Scotland's Catholic heritage - what was the Reformation really about?

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It is a risky thing to invite me to speak on the topic 'what was the Reformation really about?' Three years ago I gave a lecture at New College entitled 'The Scottish Reformation wasn't Protestant' and the esteemed organ of the Scottish Reformation Society, *The Bulwark*, said of me beforehand 'We do not know what Dr Holmes will say but we are certain that he will be wrong'. I may be wrong in my interpretation but it is at least based on a familiarity with the evidence and I offer this talk, not only as a new approach to the Scottish Reformation, but also as a way of understanding the Church in Scotland today and our mission in a country characterised by 'the rise of the nones'. Not nuns - that might be a good thing - but those whom the census reveals as having no religion, 'none of the above'. I will talk about worship and the Scottish Reformation but behind it is the question of how we can best share the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, with our fellow Scots, who are a diverse bunch - not the naturally Presbyterian Nation of recent myth. But we all live by myths. In the Scottish Episcopal Church we have our own myths with their Jacobite and Romantic flavouring. Later this year I will start teaching Episcopalian history and identity to our ordinands because there is a fear that a generation of clergy has grown up not knowing our story (perhaps more influenced by a Big Church south of the border). In our myths we also create myths about 'the other', other denominations, which can be less benign. We need to keep challenging our myths with the evidence - Ian Bradley's work on the Celtic Church is a good example of that.[1] What I say today will be rooted in the research behind my book *Sacred Signs in Reformation Scotland*.[2]

1. My first task here is to argue that what is commonly called 'the Scottish Reformation', associated with the year 1560, was basically an argument about worship. Yes, it was part of a series of theological arguments in Western

Europe; yes it was a political coup d'état; but at root it was a liturgical argument. The earliest Scottish Protestantism was not particularly concerned with worship, it is not prominent in their literature and Alec Ryrie has shown that before 1558 it was not prominent in their experience as there were hardly any 'privy kirks' outside Edinburgh. What changed this seems to have been a theological principle championed by John Knox. Despite Jane Dawson's magisterial life of Knox and Knox's own domination of the historiography of the Protestant Reformation via his *History*, it is important not to follow Thomas M'Crie in making the Protestant Reformation all about Knox – there were other important Reformers. Here, however, he was central for insisting that: 'All wirschipping, honoring, or service inventit by the braine of man in the religioun of God, without his own express commandment, is Idolatrie.'[3] In worship you do what God commands and nothing more, what later Reformed writers called 'the regulative principle of worship'. The first extant articulation of this 'exclusive Scriptural principle of worship' was by Knox's master, George Wishart at his trial in 1546 and in the following year Knox made it central to his debate at St Andrews with the Catholic Reformers Arbuckle and Winram. The source of this application of Sola Scriptura to worship was Calvin who taught that God 'disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by his word', but the sources suggest that in Scotland it comes from Wishart and Knox. It is found in the 1560 *Scots Confession*, the *First Book of Discipline* and the 1581 *Negative Confession*. This principle put clear blue water between Knoxian Protestantism and the reforming Catholicism of Cologne in the 1530s, Henrician England or Scotland in the 1550s. Knox pushed it zealously and exclusively, but in the foundational documents such as the 1560 *Confession, Book of Common Order, First Book of Discipline* and *Second Helvetic Confession* it is watered down as soon as it is articulated, with the allowance of a few pure and moderate rites composed by the church as long as they are not contrary to the Word of God. This is an 'inclusive Scriptural principle of worship', which is like that found in Cranmer's preface 'Of ceremonies' to his *Book of Common Prayer* – the Church may do things in worship as long as they are inspired by and not contrary to the Word of God. It may be that this ambiguity reflects the influence of other Reformers such as John Winram and John Douglas who came to Protestantism from the world-view of Catholic Reform. Scottish Protestant attitudes to worship revolved around three poles: an interplay between these two Scriptural principles (exclusive and inclusive) and a revulsion at Roman Catholic worship as of satanic origin, as seen in Knox's

anti-Nicodemite insistence that one must never attend it and in the 1564 poem 'On the superstitious stupidities of the Papists' by Patrick Adamson, later Archbishop of St Andrews. This constellation of principles resulted in a form of worship far removed from traditional Latin Catholic models. I have read through all the Scottish polemical literature from the 1540s to the 1580s and noticed that worship was central to controversy from the late 1550s to before 1570, whereas literature published around 1580 shows little interest in it. The religious crisis in Scotland around 1560 was thus largely an argument about worship, but don't listen to me, listen to one of the protagonists. In his 1569 oration at the purging of the Catholic faculty from the University of Aberdeen, George Hay described the period thus: 'In the present age a great debate is taking place concerning a very important subject, I mean the true worship of God'.[4]

2. My second point is about how worship was understood and interpreted in this period. The main interest of my book *Sacred Signs* is what I call 'liturgical interpretation'. The great 20th century liturgist Cyprian Vagaggini defined liturgy as, 'a complex of verbal and physical signs ordered to the worship of God and the sanctification of humanity'.[5] Liturgical interpretation is simply the interpretation or explanation of the liturgy using the methods of Scriptural exegesis developed by the early Fathers, with its spiritual and literal senses. Understanding liturgy in the same way as you understand the Bible – thus implying that Christian liturgy, like the Bible, is a site of revelation. There is a vast and under-explored literature of liturgical interpretation in the East and West from the millennium prior to 1500. In *Sacred Signs* I show that it is found in sermons, catechetical materials, liturgical texts and great liturgical commentaries such as the thirteenth-century *Rationale* of William Durandus to which I will return. At its heart, however, liturgical interpretation is a Scriptural activity, rooted in Biblical teaching: Jesus took and shared bread and wine but he didn't do so silently. He explained what they are: 'this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Luke 22:19). Likewise Paul explained baptism, 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?' (Romans 6:3). Liturgical interpretation is rooted in the heart of the gospel, which is incarnational and sacramental. Just as the humanity of Jesus shows forth God, so the outward form of the sacraments (and liturgy in general) reveals an inner and spiritual grace. But because the sacraments are signs, *signa data* or 'given signs' in Augustine's formulation, they need to

be interpreted as well as experienced, just as God's revelation in Jesus Christ is interpreted in a multitude of sermons and lives. Liturgical interpretation is this explanation, but it is more a method of formation than a constant commentary. A formation that helps one benefit from the experience. Our experience of liturgy often speaks for itself, at St John's on Palm Sunday our choir sung the passion gospel to a recent setting by Matthew Owens which made a massive impact on the congregation, including a non-Christian who had joined us. It spoke for itself. In the medieval and early modern Christian West liturgical interpretation was taught to ordinands, novices and parishioners, to help and encourage this experience, to enable them to participate more fully in worship. The work of Eamon Duffy and others has shown it is false to say that medieval Catholics did not participate in the Latin liturgy, and there was much teaching then on what the signs and symbols mean. There is something about the liturgical complexus of signs that speaks to the human person more profoundly than words alone – Augustine made a similar point in his *De doctrina Christiana*. Calvin recognises this in his *Institutes*, 'because we have souls engrafted in bodies [God] imparts spiritual things under visible ones', but for him this was a weakness, not an essential part of the divine economy. We are getting into the territory of Edwin Muir's poem 'The Incarnate One' with its powerful critique of Scottish Calvinism:

> The windless northern surge, the sea-gull's scream,
> And Calvin's kirk crowning the barren brae.
> I think of Giotto the Tuscan shepherd's dream,
> Christ, man and creature in their inner day.
> How could our race betray
> The Image, and the Incarnate One unmake
> Who chose this form and fashion for our sake?
>
> The Word made flesh here is made word again
> A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook.
> See there King Calvin with his iron pen,
> And God three angry letters in a book,
> And there the logical hook
> On which the Mystery is impaled and bent
> Into an ideological argument.

There is truth here, but in looking at liturgical interpretation in Scotland in the sixteenth century I discovered that not only was it central to Scottish Catholic culture (one might expect this but it has never been noticed before) but it was also, more surprisingly, an important part of Scottish Reformed culture and theology. This has implications for the mission and identity of the church today.

3. First I want to look at the Scottish Catholics. In seeking evidence of liturgical interpretation in Scotland before 1560 I found that the extant commentaries were mostly owned by Catholic Reformers and the pre-1560 Scottish Church, far from being corrupt and decayed, included a number of flourishing movements of Catholic Reform in close contact with the continent. Inscriptions in liturgical books revealed interlocked networks of Catholic Reformers in Aberdeen, St Andrews and Edinburgh which John Durkan had hinted at fifty years ago. There was thus a link between interest in liturgical, often shown by marginal notes in the commentaries, and commitment to Catholic Reform. An interesting insight into conditions in the North East is shown in a commentary owned by William Hay of Turriff who made vigorous marks by a section on what to do if the communion wine freezes. Marginal notes in a commentary chained in 1488 in the choir of St Machar's cathedral, Aberdeen suggest it was used to teach about the liturgy to choristers, for example explaining why the communion bread is round like a penny and why there are two signs of the cross at the consecration. In my chapter in the *Edinburgh History of Education in Scotland* I bring together recent research to show that the Scottish education system encouraged by the Protestant Reformers was not a new idea (another denominational myth articulated at the opening of this General Assembly), but was simply building on what the Catholic Reformers had been doing.[6] Surviving school books from Scotland show that Latin was taught from hymns and psalms and that allegorical explanations were given of church ceremonies. They also show that this way of understanding the liturgy was taught in elementary and grammar schools, was taught to trainee clergy and also formed part of the theology curriculum in the universities. The method used here first gave a literal and historical analysis of the liturgy, and then used an allegorical interpretation of the liturgy as a way of teaching and remembering the faith. For example a circle symbolises completeness and a kiss unity; individual items could bear more than one interpretation, as the chalice at Mass signified both the tomb of Christ and the joys of heaven symbolised by wine. It is quite a playful and

free method, largely rooted in comparisons within the thought world of the faith, for example because of the parable of the sheep and the goats the left side symbolised infidelity and the right faith, as the right hand side of the altar symbolises the Jews and the left the gentiles. At the medieval mass the priest usually put on his vestments by the altar in view of the congregation and we find an emphasis on the meaning of the vestments in commentaries for the laity as well as the clergy. Various schemes were used associating each vestment with either the virtues the priest would need, the life of Christ or the passion of Christ. The church and all that went on in it served as a reminder for priests and laity of the mysteries of the faith. Even the church building was interpreted, and churches acted as a sort of memory palace of the faith to one who was instructed. One pleasurable part of the research behind *Sacred Signs* was using medieval manuscripts to prove that Rosslyn Chapel was indeed based on the plan of Solomon's Temple, as Dan Brown said in *The Da Vinci Code* to the distain of serious academic historians.

The twelfth-century theologian Hugh of St Victor said, 'It is impossible to represent things invisible except by means of things visible; all theology necessarily must therefore make use of visible representations in the showing forth of the invisible.'[7] Behind liturgical interpretation is thus a coherent Christian philosophy rooted in the Incarnation, a development of that Augustinian theology which sees sacraments as visible words and signs of something sacred. The hermeneutic of liturgical interpretation extends this sacramental and incarnational principle from the sacrament in itself to the actions, things and words of which its rite is made.

4. This makes perfect sense to the Catholic mind. But, given the radical and exclusive principle used by Knox and his allies in producing a new liturgy, one might expect this method, rooted in Christian Platonism, to be anathema to early Scottish Protestants. They do, indeed, enjoy mocking it. In his 1562 disputation with Abbot Quintin Kennedy, Knox does just that. George Hay's 1563 attack on Kennedy's teaching says of the Abbot's liturgical interpretation that it was 'partly manifestly fals, partly wicked, impius, unlearned and blasphemus'. But elsewhere in his book Hay allows a moderate allegorisation and that some ceremonies ordained by God may be changed if necessary by the church, for example moving the Lord's Supper from the Biblical evening time to the traditional morning, which he justifies by an allegorical interpretation also found in the *Rationale* of

Durandus: the morning with the rising sun recalls the Resurrection of our Saviour. He also notes that the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper recall nourishment and strengthening of the human body and are 'a figure' of the Christian's nourishment from the body blood of Christ; they also, with a reference to Aristotle, signify friendship. Reformed liturgical interpretation thus has a two-fold pattern that is often repeated - an 'anti-commentary' on Latin Catholic liturgy and a liturgical commentary on the two Reformed sacraments. Patrick Adamson's poem 'On the superstitious stupidities of the Papists' ruthlessly mocks Catholic liturgical interpretation, even giving the references to Durandus's *Rationale*, but he also gives a liturgical commentary on Reformed worship. David Fergusson of Dunfermline does the same in a 1563 polemical book as does the 1565 translation of a French work, *Ane Breif Gathering of the Halie Signes, Sacrifices and Sacramentis Institutit of God*. This positive Reformed liturgical commentary is also found in the Scottish Reformed catechisms of the sixteenth century – liturgical interpretation is primarily a method of formation. Calvin's catechism says that the Lord represents his body and blood to us by bread and wine "to signifie unto us that what propertie the bread hath towards our bodies, that is to fead and susteine them in this transitorie life, the self same propertie his body hathe touching oure souls, that is, to nourishe them spiritually. And in like manner, as the wine doeth strengthen, comfort and rejoyce man, even so his blood is our ful joye, our comfort and spiritual strength." Again on the Lord's Supper John Craig's catechism repeats this interpretation of the bread and wine and goes on to interpret the sacramental action: "What signifieth that breaking of that bread? The breaking and suffering of Christis bodie upon the cross. What meaneth the powring out of the wyne? The shedding of his blood even to the death… What meaneth the giving of that bread and wyne? The giving of Christis bodie and bloode to our soules... What signifyeth the taking of that breade and wyne? The spirituall receaving of Christis bodie in our soules". The key word here is 'to signify'. When found in medieval works on the liturgy it is a sure sign that liturgical interpretation is present. This is also true in Reformed works read and used in Scotland which interpret not only the physical elements of the liturgy but also the actions. It is found in its fullest extent in the sermons on the Lord's Supper of Robert Bruce, published in Edinburgh in 1590. Bruce said that 'Every signe and ceremonie hes the awin spirituall signification, sa that there is not a ceremonie in this haill action that wants the awin spirituall signification.' William Durandus in the thirteenth century would have said exactly the same thing.

What I discovered here was that the attack on liturgical interpretation by the Scottish Protestant Reformers was not an attack on the method but an attack on the Latin liturgy it described; at the same time Protestant Reformers used exactly the same methods to interpret their liturgy created according to variations on the exclusive Scriptural principle. These Protestant liturgical interpreters were not irenical Catholic sympathisers, like Bishop William Forbes of Edinburgh and the English Divines who wrote commentaries on the *Book of Common Prayer* in the next century, but men at the heart of the radical wing Scottish Protestant Reformation. Calvin's catechism shows that this Reformed liturgical interpretation had continental Reformed sources, but with many of the Scottish Protestants having previously been educated or involved in the flourishing Scottish Catholic Reform movements where, as the example of John Winram shows, liturgical interpretation was central, they may also have brought this method over on their conversion.

In another study I found a similar pattern of liturgical interests in early seventeenth-century Scottish Protestantism. Opponents of the liturgical reforms of James VI and Charles I, such as David Calderwood, used the *Rationale* of Durandus as a reliable source of liturgical information while attacking liturgical interpretation when applied to Catholic rites. On the other side of the liturgical battles, William Birnie's 1606 *The Blame of Kirk Burial* explicitly uses Durandus to interpret the Reformed church building and oppose its use for burial. Liturgical interpretation is thus central to Scottish Reformed religion and it shares a method with medieval Catholicism. This surprised me as much as did the discovery that the title of one of the thirty-nine articles of the Church of England was taken by Thomas Cranmer from his copy of Durandus's commentary on the Latin liturgy. In her magisterial study, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (Yale University Press, 2002), Margo Todd showed how the change 'from sensual to logocentric religion' effected by the Scottish Protestant Reformation was accompanied by a less-noticed continuity in worship where Communion in particular 'remained a seasonal event with characteristic material symbols and experiences, antecedent fasting, ritual use of physical movement and space, and a perceived spiritual significance'. Given the centrality of worship for the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers, if this is true and spiritual significance was given to material symbols, ritual movement and use of space, it is not surprising that we find a Protestant version of Catholic liturgical interpretation.

5. All this brings me to my last questions: what was the Reformation all about and what does this mean for us in the Church today? Here I would first propose a radical change in how we think and talk about 'the Scottish Reformation' which should change the way we, in our separate denominations, find resources for mission in 21st century Scotland. At the opening of the General Assembly the Lord High Commissioner and others spoke of 'the Scottish Reformation' and the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. One Minister friend complained that the German event was of little relevance as the Church of Scotland is Reformed not Lutheran. I would also object to the term 'The Scottish Reformation' being used of the coup d'état of 1559-60. The reason the Scottish Reformation Society don't like my writing is an article I published in the *International journal for the Study of the Christian Church* entitled 'The Scottish Reformation was not Protestant'.[8] Based on my work on liturgical interpretation, my argument is basically that there was a strong series of Scottish Catholic Reform movements who used the language of 'reformation' and, in some ways, effected a reformation in the Scottish Church. These Catholic movements, associated with Bishop Elphinstone in Aberdeen and Archbishop Hamilton at St Andrews, involved the Universities and religious orders and were closely linked with reform movements on the continent where many of the leading figures studied and had friends. Protestant reform movements were also of continental inspiration and involved some of the same people. Thus 'The Scottish Reformation' should be used of the entirety of these different movements in the sixteenth century, the 'Long Reformation', and the events of 1559-60 should be called 'the Scottish Protestant Reformation'. For a historian to use 'The Scottish Reformation' of 1559-60 alone is to take a sectarian position, the historiographical equivalent of singing 'The Sash', because this use is a contemporary Protestant one. The late Jenny Wormald noted a distinctive Scottish use of 'reformation' for a particular event whereas English protestant use tended to describe a process. Catholic Scots such as Ninian Winzet and Nicol Burne preferred to call it the 'pretendit reformation' or simply the 'deformation'. A historian shouldn't take sides.

A second argument from my research is that we have taken the polemics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries too literally. While the protagonists spoke of each other as the spawn of Satan, a detached observer might see that they both used the same Scriptural and patristic authorities and, as we have seen in the liturgy, the same intellectual methods. If we step out of

our denominational shoes we can see that the labels, Papist and Protestant, Presbyterian and Episcopalian, mask the fact that a detached observer would see this as primarily an, admittedly heated, intra-Christian debate. Alan MacDonald's work showing that the early seventeenth century church was not divided into two rigidly defined parties, Presbyterian and Episcopalian, is helpful here. Both of these arguments, on terminology and understanding have important ecumenical repercussions for today. This is a challenge to the sectarianism of the football terraces, the anti-ecumenism of the Presbyterian underworld found in the smaller denominations and Catholic smugness in its Roman and Episcopalian varieties. The pre-1560 church is the common inheritance of all Scottish churches. We might say that looking at the church today, the Roman Catholics have its communion with Rome, the Church of Scotland its parishes and the Episcopalians its Bishoprics. We can see a practical liturgical result of this in the work of this Society in bringing the surviving riches of medieval Scottish liturgy into modern use in a Reformed Church. Just one example on my own shelves is James Cooper's *Reliques of Ancient Scottish Devotion* (1934) which prints liturgy from the book of Deer, the Dunkeld Litany, David de Bernham's Pontifical and the Rathen Manual. Cooper writes from within his own tradition of the 'rank corruption' of the medieval church but praises its 'full and glorious' worship and offers these liturgical texts clearly for use, as with the influential *Euchologion* produced by the society in 1867. My own Scottish Episcopal Church has inherited a fine liturgy but, like other churches, has benefitted from the ressourcement by which the twentieth century liturgical movement has rediscovered riches from the past.

I would suggest that the symbolic understanding of life and liturgy in liturgical interpretation has much to offer the church today, both Catholic and Reformed (and as we all know those two terms naturally go together). In *Sacred Signs* I note that while liturgical interpretation was a central genre in the church up to the seventeenth century it has been neglected in the modern church and modern scholarship. It would take another talk to examine this, but I put the blame on post-Tridentine Roman Catholicism which, using Augustinian terms, emphasised the reality (*res*) of the sacrament to the neglect of the sign (*sacramentum*), and on the mechanistic world-view of modernity which Denys Turner says 'supplanted the [pre-modern] view of the world as a web of symbolic representations'. The dominance of historical-critical exegesis and neo-scholasticism in the church can be seen as symptoms of

this narrowing. Scholars such as Turner have suggested that 'postmodernity', whatever that may be, has subverted this narrowness for the contemporary mind and we now find observers of contemporary culture talking about re-enchantment, re-sacralisation and an openness to symbolism. Linda Woodhead is interesting here. The church needs to engage with this. As I was preparing this paper I watched Doug Gay's recent Chalmers Lectures at St Giles: a compelling and controversial commentary on the Church of Scotland today, and indeed all churches in Scotland. One thing that struck me was his observation that we need to move away from a 'late-Christendom ecumenism', as in Sheila Kesting's criticism of 'yesterday's top-down model of ecumenism', towards 'the imperatives of a post-Christendom missiology'. The failure of big projects like the Scottish Church Initiative For Union (SCIFU) just over a decade ago seems largely an irrelevance. What I would suggest as well is that we also need a 'deep ecumenism', a common return to the sources of our common tradition and a sharing of the riches we have discovered in our own communities. The symbolic world of liturgical interpretation is part of this; how it can be used today is another question.

(Endnotes)

1 Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

2 Stephen Mark Holmes, *Sacred Signs in Reformation Scotland: Interpreting Worship, 1488-1590* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

3 From *A Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry*, Knox, Works, iii, 34. This and all references are found in *Sacred Signs*.

4 *'Magna hoc seculo controversia est eaque de re maxima:nimirum de vero cultu dei'*, W.S. Watt, 'George Hay's Oration at the Purging of King's College, Aberdeen in 1569: Translation', *Northern Scotland* 6 (1985), 91-96, at 94.

5 Cyprian Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1976), 19-32

6 Stephen Mark Holmes, 'Education in the Century of Reformation', *The Edinburgh History of Education in Scotland*, eds Robert Anderson, Mark Freeman and Lindsay Paterson (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 57-78.

7 Hugh of St Victor, *In Hierarchiam Coelestem S. Dionysii Areopagitae*, 1.1. (PL 175.926D).

8 Stephen Mark Holmes, 'The Scottish Reformation was not Protestant', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 14.2 (2014), pp. 115-127.