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Psychosemiotic Cycles and the Liturgical Year

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A Case Study and Framework for Research

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Introduction

Although recent years have seen an apparent decline in traditional religious belief and observance, there seems to have been a corresponding increase in the number of people seeking "spiritual experience" (cf. Heelas & Woodhead, 2005).[1] The cultural resonance of this contemporary search for spirituality has been demonstrated, for example, by three prime-time series of BBC "reality television" documentaries (*The Monastery* [2005], *The Convent* [2006], and *The*

1 Attempting to define "spiritual experience" and "spirituality" is fraught with difficulty, and many competing definitions have been proposed (for overviews, see, e.g., Dyson, Cobb & Forman, 1997, and Gray, 2006). Exploratory qualitative research by McSherry, Cash and Ross (2004) confirms that "spirituality" means different things to different people, and seems to be closely linked to their more conventionally defined religious beliefs. A more promising approach is the phenomenological one, i.e., to study what is common to what people report as "spiritual experiences". Wardell and Engebretson (2006) provide a useful and extensive taxonomy for future research. However, owing to its specific focus on altered states of consciousness, the present work draws on the narrower sets of criteria for mystical experience proposed by Prince and Savage (1966) and d'Aquili and Newberg (2000).

Retreat [2007]), in which members of the public – many of them not conventionally religious and some openly atheistic – volunteered to spend some time on retreat in a Roman Catholic or Muslim religious community. At the heart of these retreats was always a programme of daily worship (or "liturgy"), during which some of the participants underwent profound spiritual experiences.

The focus of this book is precisely on the relationship between liturgy and spiritual experience. However, this relationship will be explored from two quite different psychosemiotic perspectives.[2] First, Chapter 2 will seek to suggest how diverse semiotic elements within a liturgical performance might help to induce such experiences and how liturgical texts might influence participants' emotional states in these contexts. In doing this, it will also provide essential theoretical background for the second part of the book (Chapters 3-7). These later chapters will investigate, by means of an empirical case study, how far annual cycles of liturgical texts can be seen to mirror culturally conventionalized patterns of *narrating* spiritual experiences.

The book starts out from the position that profound spiritual experiences are, in fact, altered states of consciousness, which – although they may vary considerably in intensity – almost always have their psychological foundation in an aesthetic response to perceived beauty.[3] Since spiritual experiences are normally interpreted in theology as revelations of God, placing a response to beauty at their core may, at first, strike some readers as a surprising

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2 The term psychosemiotics in this book is understood to refer both to non-verbal codes and to verbal codes (i.e. what is often called psycholinguistics).

3 For this reason, the book will refer to "aesthetic-religious experiences" rather than simply "religious experiences" or "spiritual experiences". See further below (pp. 14-20).

and indeed misguided suggestion; however, it is actually not so radical a notion as it may seem. For instance, beauty is considered by many (neo)scholastic[4] philosophers and theologians to be one of four so-called "transcendentals", which means – in effect – that it is seen to stand in a direct relationship to God: indeed, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote explicitly that God *is* goodness and beauty itself (*"Deus est ipsa bonitas et pulchritudo" – Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 34, a. 1, arg. 1).[5] Furthermore, from a purely empirical perspective, d'Aquili and Newberg (2000) have proposed that there exists a single phenomenological continuum which involves both prototypically aesthetic and prototypically religious experiences.

The position of this book goes slightly further than d'Aquili and Newberg in suggesting that these types of experience – aesthetic and spiritual/religious – are not merely related but are ultimately one and the same, and that any difference consists in their contextualization or "discernment" in relation to a body of doctrine, rather than in the phenomenology and psychology of the experiences themselves. Doctrine provides an explanatory framework for what is experienced: as Vergote (1988, p. 167) said, when writing about mystical visionaries, "religious faith ... provides

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4 In the course of this book, the forms *(neo)scholastic* and *(neo)-Thomistic* are used when reference is being made to ideas drawn from both medieval scholasticism/Thomism and C19th/C20th neoscholasticism/neo-Thomism; when only one of these is meant, the forms *scholastic/Thomistic* or *neoscholastic/neo-Thomistic* are used respectively. On neoscholasticism and neo-Thomism in general, see, e.g., Habsburg-Lothringen (2007).

5 St. Bonaventure, amongst other scholastic philosophers, held the same view (Spargo, 1953, p. 41). Note also that Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II) considered art to be "a kind of bridge to religious experience" (Wojtyła, 1999, quoted in McNerney, 2003, p. 119). On the link between aesthetics and theology, see further pp. 17-20 below.

them [i.e. the experiencing persons] with the signifiers that permit them to situate these psychological issues within a symbolic universe in which divine good will ultimately prevail over evil and suffering".

The primary factor underlying an aesthetic-religious experience, it will be suggested, is the individualized element of affective meaning that can become attached to an almost infinite range of potential signifiers in the world, especially non-verbal ones. The more personally meaningful the resulting sign is in affective terms, the more likely it is to trigger a profound experience. Since liturgical situations are especially rich in non-verbal sign systems (including, *inter alia*, music, costume, art, movement, voice quality, and smell), they seem particularly likely locations for these profound experiences to occur.[6]

In the course of these liturgically centred experiences, just as in other altered states of consciousness (e.g. hypnosis), it is further proposed that suggestibility to verbal cues is heightened, such that the liturgical texts may exert a greater effect on participants' moods and thoughts than they would if they were read outside the context of a liturgical performance. The influence of such texts may, in turn, prove to be an important contributory factor to an individual's interpretation of an overall experience, because – as has just been noted – the difference between what is considered to be a "religious" experience and what is considered to be a purely aesthetic experience depends almost exclusively on its doctrinal contextualization.

As was stated earlier, the larger portion of this book – the case study – focusses on cycles of liturgical texts and their relationship to

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6 Note, however, that the profundity of an aesthetic-religious experience can vary greatly – see p. 14 below.

established patterns of narrating aesthetic-religious experiences in the Christian tradition. Since the focus is on the cyclical nature of the texts, the book will approach the data using the method which Martindale (1987) calls "narrative pattern analysis". This is a combination of what Martindale has elsewhere (1975b, p. 331) called "a grammar of associative or regressed speech" – or, we might say more accurately, of associative or regressed *language* – and statistical methods for the study of sequential data, known technically as "time series". The grammar of associative or regressed language is, in turn, fundamentally "a semiotic reinterpretation of psychoanalytic theory" (Martindale, 1975b, p. 331) in relation to altered states of consciousness.[7]

More generally, the book situates its psychosemiotic subject matter within the parameters of a (neo)-Thomistically grounded depth psychology that takes its inspiration especially from the works of Plé (1952; 1980/1987), Nolan (1962), O'Doherty (1962b), Terruwe and Baars (1981), MacCormack (1991), and Oomen (2003).[8]

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7 Martindale (1975b) differs from Freud by rejecting the notion of a continuous flow of unconscious thought running in parallel with the flow of conscious thought. He instead posits a continuum of discretely asynchronous states of consciousness, each with its own language system: "syntax, semantic base, and realization rules" (Martindale, 1975b, p. 331). This is the "semiotic reinterpretation" to which he refers. Note that, although Martindale uses the term "grammar" here, his operationalization of regressed language for the purposes of computer-assisted empirical research is purely on the lexical level (see section 5.2 below).

8 It is important to note that, although most (neo)-Thomists were Roman Catholic clergymen or religious, this is emphatically not a work of dogmatic theology, Catholic or otherwise. Neo-Thomism was, in fact, at considerable pains to keep philosophy (including both psychology and aesthetics) separate from theology (Kugelmann, 2005, p. 161). Indeed, Neo-Thomistic theories of psychology and aesthetics have their ultimate roots in

As Wodak (1981, Chapter 1) has admirably demonstrated, issues of language structure and language use are central to most depth psychological theories, including both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and a (neo)-Thomistically grounded psychology is no exception to this: indeed, a (neo)-Thomistic depth psychology is able to incorporate quite unproblematically the relevant Freudian-inspired psychosemiotic constructs from Martindale (1975b). In this respect, therefore, the current work continues, in a very practical and applied way, the existing creative dialogue between the medieval scholastic tradition and modern psychoanalysis.[9] However, it is also able to avoid a number of problems inherent in Freud's own psychoanalytic framework.[10] It parts company from the classical Freudian tradition particularly by recognizing that symbolic meaning is by no means always of a sexual-developmental nature but is more commonly rooted in a wider set of issues that can reflect the whole range of individual lived experience (cf. Nuttin, 1949/1962, pp. 42-46; Laing, 1982, pp. 50-53). The writings of the

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the pre-Christian thought of Aristotle and, to a certain extent, Plato.

9 Plé (1952; 1980/1987) and O'Doherty (1962b) have explicitly sought out many of the key points of contact and agreement between (neo)-Thomistic psychology and Freudian psychoanalysis. On some of the links between scholasticism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, especially in relation to language, see Glejzer (1997). More generally, Labbie (2006) explores the relationship between Lacan's thought and the literature of the medieval period. Interestingly, Vitz (1988, p. 54) has hinted that Freud may have been directly influenced by some elements of (neo)-Thomistic psychology.

10 Most notably, Freud's notion of the Oedipus complex does not hold water when set against empirical findings (Bower, 1991). His metapsychology more generally is problematic if taken literally rather than metaphorically (Reisner, 1991; Reisner, 1992). Metaphorical readings are typically preferred nowadays; however, it seems preferable to incorporate what is of value in Freud into an overall framework that is less problematic.

Canadian Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan are used to provide some of the necessary semiotic background.[11] Some brief references will also be made to the works of the Franciscan scholastics Alexander of Hales (ca. 1183-1245) and St. Bonaventure (1221-1274), whose aesthetic theories differ on some key points from that of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Working within this broad framework, the case study examines a series of liturgical texts, namely the collects of the "proper of the seasons" as contained in the 1846 French translation of the United States Episcopal Church's 1789 *Book of Common Prayer* (hereinafter referred to simply as the 1846 *Livre des prières publiques*). In addition to their religious speech-act function as a petitions to God, it will be suggested that these collects play two additional roles within the liturgy: (1) relating a part of the Christian narrative of salvation, and (2) inducing a mood in participants which is

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11 Although Lonergan incorporated a lot of depth psychological material into his writings, he never developed a *complete* systematic psychology of his own: in (neo)-Thomistic terms, the core of his work dealt with the operation of the rational faculties, whereas he wrote less about the sensitive faculties, which are more strongly implicated in aesthetic-religious experiences. In an important major work, Doran (1990) has attempted a synthesis between Lonergan's thought and Jungian psychology, with a view partly towards bridging this gap. However, Jungian psychology is not without its problems (O'Doherty, 1962a; Vergote, 1988) and a (neo)-Thomistically grounded psychology seems more in keeping with Lonergan's own (neo)-Thomist roots (cf. Lonergan, 1967/1997; Lonergan, 1974/2000; Liddy, 1993). To the extent that it combines psychodynamics and semiotics, the model of the mind employed in this book is not too unlike that outlined by Olds (2000). However, it cannot be considered identical, as it was arrived at independently of Olds's account and is based on quite different sources, in particular with regard to its (neo)-Thomistic basis.

appropriate to the liturgical day being celebrated. It will be hypothesized that the liturgical year is so structured that verbal content relating to both of these roles will show a clear pattern of evolution over the course of the year. In relation to the narrative of salvation, it will be proposed that the collect cycle for the liturgical year will show evidence of what West (1991) has called "the five stages of Christian mysticism", which is a temporal pattern of regressed/associative language that has been found to underlie other accounts of the history of salvation (West & Martindale, 2002).[12] In relation to mood induction, it will be suggested that the emotional tone of the collects will follow a coherent pattern over the course of the liturgical year, which can be linked to affective elements of both religious and natural time.

12 See pp. 57-60 below. The five-stage model of mysticism relates prototypically to narratives of individual mystical experiences. However, it seems that it also applies to many salvation-themed texts, such as the biblical canon, which do not reflect the narration of an individual experience (West, 1991).