The Everyday Power of Liturgy: On the Significance of the Transcendental for a Phenomenology of Liturgy

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Abstract: The task of this article is to articulate the everyday power of liturgy by clarifying the transcendental significance of ritual action. The paper makes three major claims: first, that liturgical practices function transcendentally, and therefore alter how we experience the world; second, that liturgical practices therefore exercise an immense formative power in our everyday living, including the power to open up or close down the possibility of encountering the sacred in our everyday lives; third, that this power of liturgy can be articulated theoretically through a transcendental phenomenological approach, thereby suggesting that a rigorous phenomenology of liturgy must necessarily include a transcendental element.

Keywords: transcendental phenomenology; liturgy; religion; interdisciplinary; ritual; spirituality

1. Introduction

To articulate the everyday power of liturgy, this article begins by explaining how the transcendental functions in phenomenology and suggesting that this transcendental function might be the main difference between philosophical phenomenology and the phenomenology of religion carried out in religious studies (Section 2). Then, it will clarify its use of the term “liturgy” and explain why liturgies, so understood, necessarily have a transcendental function (Section 3). Because of the “religious” function of liturgy, its transcendental power is such that it opens the possibility of seeing anything as spiritually significant, and therefore enables religiosity to play a role in everyday life (Section 4). This then suggests that a rigorous “phenomenology of liturgy” must have a transcendental element if it is to fully capture the force and function of liturgy (Section 5).

2. Phenomenology and the Transcendental

My focus in this article, then, is the transcendental function within phenomenology. This must be separated from the “transcendent” function that is operative within many religious discourses. By the “transcendental”, phenomenology refers to those processes that produce our experience of any phenomena whatsoever. This is one of the four distinct levels of phenomenological analysis that help us elucidate what is at work in our experience: the empirical (the phenomena we experience), the transcendental empirical (the processes that produce these phenomena), the transcendental (the processes that produce our experience of any phenomena), and the ultra-transcendental (the processes or conditions that produce the transcendental processes that produce phenomena). These levels are distinct as explanatory levels of the constitution of our experience, but not as distinct phenomena or experiences in their own right. That is, we do not have distinct experiences that are empirical, transcendental, etc. Rather, within our experience, phenomenological reflection enables us to differentiate these four dimensions that combine to give us the experience we have of the world.

Perhaps an example will help clarify this point. You are reading this article: let that be the phenomenon under consideration. The empirical dimension of your experience of that phenomenon is the particular, concrete details of your reading of it: you read it on
this particular computer screen, viewed from a particular angle, in some particular place (perhaps your office), with certain prior knowledge that informs your reading (perhaps of phenomenology, or of ritual studies), etc. These empirical factors all take place within particular Stiftungen (institutions or traditions that are historical realities in the world and that help give sense to your experience) that occupy the “transcendental empirical” dimension of your experience of reading the article. These would include factors such as the tradition/institution of contemporary business architecture that gives particular form to the physical space of your office (as the place where you read this article), the tradition/institution of academic employment practices that necessitate research takes certain forms (such as reading and writing peer-reviewed articles for specialists), and the tradition/institution of academic English that gives particular linguistic form to this article (which is different from the form it would take if this article were written in academic German or for a colloquial North American audience). These Stiftungen are necessary in producing the type of sense found in the phenomenon of your reading this article. However, one could also look at what would enable one to have any experiences of a broadly similar kind at all. This would be the transcendental level of analysis, and here you would speak of concepts such as space or spatiality (rather than the particular form given to space by contemporary business architecture), sociality (rather than the particular form given to our social relations by the employment practices of the contemporary academy), and language or “linguisticality” (rather than the particular form given to language in academic English). This level distinguishes between the quasi-transcendental factors that determine your particular experience of the phenomena and the fact that any phenomena of reading an article would have to take place in some form of spatiality, some form of sociality, and some form of language. Finally, there is the ultra-transcendental dimension, which seeks to explain how the transcendental processes (spatiality, sociality, linguisticality, etc.) themselves are brought about: for example, through the will of the transcendental subject (as the early Husserl suggests), or through the differential spacing of (arche-)language (as Derrida suggests), or through the differentiating processes of flesh (as Merleau-Ponty suggests).

To speak of the “transcendental” in phenomenology, therefore, is to speak of that which is not itself directly experienced in an experience, but which makes that experience possible: you do not directly experience “academic English” or “linguisticality”, but you would not be able to experience reading this article the way you do without those factors significantly informing your experience of reading the article. Hence, the “transcendental” is not itself a distinct experience, but a dimension of experiencing that shapes or forms (transforms, reforms, informs, etc.) every experience we have. Recognizing and articulating this transcendental dimension is the purpose of (transcendental) phenomenology, which is interested not just in explaining our experience of any particular phenomenon, but also in seeing and articulating the conditions or processes that enable us to have that experience of that phenomenon. There is, then, an important distinction between transcendental reflections on the conditions or processes that enable us to have an this experience of a particular phenomenon, and other phenomenological reflections that are focused on articulating as clearly as possible one’s (empirical) experience of the phenomenon.

This distinction is relevant to the field of religious studies (and through that, to the question of liturgy, as we will see in Section 2) insofar as phenomenology is and has been a significant method in and for the study of religion. Yet the type of work done in the “phenomenology of religion” of people such as Otto, Eliade, and van der Leeuw is thoroughly different from the “philosophical” phenomenology of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida. This could cause some people to wonder whether “phenomenology of religion” is, perhaps, not phenomenology at all. While that seems to be going too far, I do think it is legitimate to notice that the work of Otto, Eliade et al., differs from that of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty et al., not just in terms of its subject matter, but also in terms of the way that it is trying to describe the experiences in question. That is, “phenomenology of religion” is not different from “philosophical” phenomenology simply because the former happens to study religion, but also because the latter is explicitly concerned with articulating the
conditions of experiencing itself, while “phenomenology of religion” seeks to describe—rigorously and carefully—what is going on in empirical experiences that enable us to label some of them as “religious”. Missing in the phenomenology of religion is any account of how—if at all—religion might operate transcendentally, shaping our experiencing itself, rather than simply being one type of experience I can have. As such, phenomenology of religion is interested only in religion as a phenomenon, and is not interested in providing any account of phenomenality as the transcendental processes whereby phenomena are constituted as phenomena.

3. The Transcendental Function of Liturgy

This lack of a transcendental dimension has a direct impact on our ability to properly understand the role that liturgy plays, not simply in religious life (as a particular set of practices and institutions that a person can engage in), but in the lives of religious people. That is, as I hope to argue in this section, one of the functions that liturgy performs is altering the entire way we see and experience the world. However, this element of liturgy’s work is hard to account for if we do not account for the transcendental dimension of our experiencing.

Before I can make that case, I must clarify what I mean by “liturgy”. When I use the term liturgy in this paper, I mean to refer to ritualized practices enacted within a religious framework. By “ritualized practice” I mean those practices which are carried out in regular and repeatable ways because they are “directed, oriented, and deliberately organized, thus framing the experience of consciousness in particular ways” (Gschwandtner 2019a, p. 59). It is the purposive character of the ritual—“framing the experience of consciousness in particular ways”—that distinguishes ritual from mere habitual action. Every morning, for example, I wake up in my bed. I reach out to my bedside table, grab my phone, and scroll through the weather, sports news, and my email before getting up, going to the washroom (and closing the door so there are no “sneak attacks” from my dog!), taking my medication, putting on deodorant, and getting clothes on. I then open the door of my bedroom, go to the side door, get on my boots and jacket, put the leash and harness on the dog, and take the dog for a walk. We walk down the street to the same house, then turn around and come back. Insofar as I perform these actions every day in a consistent, repeatable way, they are habitual. Additionally, while they are “deliberately organized” (so as to give me some time to wake up and remember what my day looks like before I take the dog out to go to the bathroom), it is not obvious that they are organized so as to frame my experience in particular ways. It is possible that they do: I do these actions, in part, to give myself the best chance at having a good day by ensuring a consistent start to my day, no matter how I am feeling—and, in that regard, I suppose, they may be “framing my experience”. If one finds that compelling, then one could characterize them as “ritual”, I suppose; however, it would be a personal ritual, or at most a psychological ritual, undertaken to frame experience in certain psychological ways.

Such habits or rituals are not yet “liturgies”, however. To be liturgical, most people would contend, the ritual practices must be enacted within a religious framework. The nature of this “framework” is ambiguous: is it the physical “place” where the ritual takes place that must be “religious”, as some ritual scholars contend (see, for example, Gschwandtner 2019a, n. 32, pp. 54–55)? Is it the language used (if language is used)? Or is it the purpose intended (liturgies are those ritual practices that seek to “frame the experience of consciousness in particular religious ways”)? For the purposes of this paper, I will adopt the latter understanding of the religious framework, defining liturgy as regular and repeatable practices that are directed, oriented, and deliberately organized to frame our experience in particular religious ways.

Two quick notes on this definition: first, I have clearly removed the reference to consciousness from this definition of liturgy. This is mainly because consciousness carries overtones of purposeful and voluntary attention or “conscious” awareness, and phenomenology has done a lot of work to show that this type of “purposeful” attention
and awareness is only a small part of what goes in in any given experience. To limit the framing effects of liturgy strictly to consciousness (especially if that word carries this more narrow connotation) seems to unduly limit the possible effects of liturgy, potentially ruling out some of the affective and embodied elements that some scholars turn to liturgy precisely to recover. And for the purposes of this paper, requiring a “conscious” frame for the work of liturgy may prohibit us from acknowledging any transcendental function to liturgy out of hand, given that the transcendental is not encountered as a distinct and purposeful experience. That is, it is possible (perhaps even likely) that transcendental effects are not primarily conscious, insofar as we are not, in our “normal” experiencing of the world, purposively aware of the various frames (spatial, social, linguistic, etc.) constituting our experiencing; rather, those frames enable our conscious awareness in particular ways. As such, limiting the effects of liturgy to “consciousness” may inhibit our ability to recognize and appreciate this transcendental dimension.

Second, we must be careful to qualify what is meant by the “deliberate” organization in our definition of liturgy. For the reasons outlined in the previous paragraph, the “deliberate” organization of liturgy need not mean that liturgy only functions when the person performing the ritual action is consciously and purposively doing it for a particular reason. If liturgy is teleological (i.e., driven by a particular purpose), it is possible (perhaps even likely) that this telos is inscribed in the ritual practices themselves and not in the consciousness of the one performing it. For our purposes here, we take “deliberately organized” to refer to the intended outcome of the liturgical practice (to “frame experience in particular ways”), and leave open the question of whether this telos (if that is the best word for it here) needs be inscribed or acknowledged by some conscious purpose or willful volition. Insofar as the “purpose” of liturgy is to shape our experience—and, since phenomenology defines the “transcendental” as that which constitutes or forms our experiencing of experience—there seems to be a necessarily transcendental nature to liturgical action. However, there is a distinction between “shaping experience” and “shaping our experiencing of experience”. That is to say, something can shape our experience without it doing so transcendentally: being in a windowless room when the lights are suddenly turned off would have the same empirical effect as if I had lost my eyesight entirely, in that I would, in both cases, not be able to see anything; yet, being in a dark room does not have the same transcendental effect as would losing my eyesight, since being in a room with no light simply alters one act of vision in a particular way, while the latter alters my entire relationship to visibility or seeing as a transcendental mode of sensing the world (Merleau-Ponty 1968). There is a decisive difference here, that (philosophical and/or transcendental) phenomenology is at pains to articulate (see Husserl [1950] 1999, § 14; Derrida 2010, p. 11).

The religious significance of this difference emerges only if we pay strict attention to the transcendental dimension of religion itself. Hence, properly understanding the “transcendental” effect of liturgy can only occur if we can carefully articulate the difference between the empirical and transcendental ways that liturgy affects our (religious) experience. Insofar as others in the “phenomenology of religion” have tried to articulate the empirical effects that liturgy has on experience, I turn now explicitly to an explanation of the transcendental effects of liturgy on (religious) experience.

4. The “Religious” Character of Liturgy and Its Everyday Power

Offering such an explanation is simply to articulate more clearly the “religious ways” that liturgy shapes experience. We have said already that the “religious” character of liturgy refers to the framework of experience it intends to alter. As my habitual/ritual morning routine is (perhaps) meant to put me into a particular psychological frame of mind, liturgical practices are liturgical, we have said, insofar as they intend to frame experience in particular religious ways. This need not, however, mean that they are intended to inscribe in consciousness some particular religious meaning (in the linguistic or epistemic sense of that term, e.g., a belief in the existence of God), code of conduct (in an ethical or social sense
of that term, e.g., Sharia law), or group identity (in the sociological sense, e.g., as being a Protestant Christian). That is, I am not claiming that liturgy functions to have people understand, act, or think of themselves as representatives of, some particular religion or other. It may also perform these functions, perhaps even as an important part of its purpose. However, this is not the transcendental effect that I am claiming liturgy has.

Rather, the “religious ways” that liturgy shapes experience pertain to religiosity as a dimension of experiencing, rather than to particular religious traditions or concrete religious phenomena. These distinctions follow from a phenomenological analysis of religious experience, which distinguishes between spirituality (as a culturally situated, ultra-transcendental dimension of experiencing itself; see Husserl 1970, pp. 269–99; DeRoo 2020b), religiosity (as one particular transcendental way that spirit is expressed, alongside aesthetic, ethical, and other modes of spiritual expression; see Henry 2013, p. 47), religious traditions (as historically generated and generative modes in which religiosity is expressed), and religious phenomena (as the most concrete ways in which traditions are expressed: beliefs, practices, objects, etc.). This set of distinctions mirrors the four-fold distinction between levels of transcendental and empirical analysis mentioned in Section 1. In this regard, to seek a “transcendental” effect for liturgy is to look for how liturgy impacts religiosity, and not merely religious traditions or religious phenomena. Religiosity can be defined as an expression of spirituality that makes that spirituality the focus of our experience (though not necessarily consciously or purposively). In religiosity, our connectedness to reality is brought to the forefront as we experience ourselves as connected to (or bound with—*religare*) reality itself in ways that shape the whole of our experiencing.

The claim concerning liturgy, then, is that liturgy functions to shape how we bring spirituality to the forefront of our experience, and so shapes how we see ourselves as connected with the world. This is not necessarily a conscious or purposive “bringing to the forefront”, as James K.A. Smith points out (Smith 2009); rather, liturgy functions on the levels of fundamental desire (see Augustine 2008, and Smith 2016), of imagination (Smith 2013), and of the deeper stories that we see ourselves as part of. In this way, liturgy is formative of our identity (Smith 2009, p. 93). It shapes who we are by affecting how we situate ourselves in the world, and the nature of the connections we form with the world: are we connected to the world as pilgrims, just a-passing through (Brumley 1965) as some elements of Protestant Christianity might suggest? Are we connected to the world as strictly empirical operations, acting out the unique collaboration of genetics and social conditioning that each of us is, as some elements of secularism might suggest? Are we connected to the world as particular manifestations of Brahm, as some elements in Hinduism might suggest? These questions are neither merely rhetorical, nor merely theological. Rather, they are questions or assumptions that are deeply embedded in shaping the spirituality, the Geist, that shapes our very intuitions of the world (see Husserl 1970, p. 270), and hence influences everything about our engagements with the world. They are matters of “ultimate concern” (Tillich 1957, pp. 4–10; Smith 2009, p. 93), not because they are other-worldly or transcendent, but because they function transcendentally to constitute the nature of our experiencing of the world as such. In this regard, the function of liturgy would be primarily to affirm in us a transcendental (and perhaps also transcendent) power that exceeds us, while nevertheless playing a crucial role in our experiencing of the world. It is this element of religious experiencing that Kearney highlights with his notion of “epiphanies of the everyday” and the “micro-eschatological” nature of experience (Kearney 2006). The point of liturgical action, on such arguments, is not simply to have an experience in which one encounters God as a “shout in the street”, but to have the spirituality by which one intuits the world in such a way that it is possible to encounter the divine/sacred in any moment, in the face of the neighbor or in the “pots and pans” (Teresa of Avila 1985, Section 5.8; see also Kearney 2006, p. 13). That is, the point of liturgy is not necessarily to lead one to a mystical experience that would take one out of the normal, everyday world, but rather
to bring our attention to the sacred at work within everyday existence. This can lead to unique experiences we might label “mystical” experiences (e.g., of oneness with all things), but it can just as easily lead to a reorientation of our experience as such, enabling us to see the banality of the sacred in the world, showing up in every other person we see (“tout autre est tout autre”, as Derrida reminds us in Derrida 1995).

Yet, if everything in our everyday experience becomes a possible epiphany of the sacred, this seems to render our everyday experience as a fundamentally religious context, in which case we would seem to have to concluded that every ritual practice carried out in our lives is necessarily liturgical. However, this conclusion is only apparent: it relies on an ambiguity in the sense of “religion” that we are talking about. For we have said that the “religious context” that renders a ritual practice liturgical is a transcendental context (on the level of religiosity), and not simply a transcendental empirical context (such as a religious tradition or Stiftung) or an empirical religious context (like some particular religious phenomenon: say, an act performed in a temple, or done as part of a particular religious rite). In that regard, what matters is whether a ritual functions to frame our experiencing in a religious way, and not simply whether it is performed in an empirical context or via various phenomena that we recognize as “religious”.

To highlight this, it may be helpful to speak of a “liturgical function” that some particular rituals perform (i.e., the formation or generation of some form of religiosity within us, drawing the spirituality at work in our experiencing to the forefront of our experience in some way), rather than simply to speak of “liturgies” as distinct (religious) phenomena. I do not want to overemphasize this distinction: as mentioned earlier, the “meaning” of liturgy may be infused within the ritual itself, and is not simply ascribed to it by a later act of consciousness. In that regard, it is not my personal will or volition that makes something liturgical or not, and so the “liturgical function” is not dependent on my purposiveness in undertaking the ritual, or my volition or will in doing so. As such, something can function liturgically, whether or not we consciously realize or decide that it is doing so. What makes something liturgical, on this understanding, is the function it performs, and not simply the empirical or transcendental–empirical context in which it occurs.

However, it must also be said that not everything that frames our experience within (a) religiosity is therefore a liturgy. To be liturgical, the action that frames our experience within (a) religiosity must itself be a ritual practice, something that is both “regular and repeatable” and “directed, oriented, and deliberately organized” to achieve its purpose. For this reason, while I can encounter God in the “pots and pans”, this does not mean, on Kearney or Smith’s account, that every time I wash the dishes I am performing a liturgical action. Rather, the liturgy would be those ritual practices that shape my experiencing so as to make me encounter the pots and pans as expressions of the sacred or not. The shift to the “transcendental” nature of liturgy therefore shifts our focus, as phenomenologists of liturgy, toward the question of what makes it possible for people to experience actions as either sacred or mundane. The transcendental liturgical question becomes: what ritual practices enable people to experience (what) actions as sacred or as mundane? Washing the dishes could function liturgically in this regard—as certain ceremonies of “foot washing” in some Christian traditions make plain—but it is not necessary that it is doing so.

Within this framework for liturgical thinking, we could then distinguish certain forms that such ritual practices could take to better achieve the liturgical function. A good part of Smith’s work on “cultural liturgies” (in Smith 2009, 2013, 2017, for example), for example, is bent on arguing that episteme do not function as effectively on the transcendental level as do habits or the imagination. Due to the kind of being that we are, Smith claims, cognitive claims will never have the same transcendental effect upon our experience as will embodied and repetitive actions (Smith 2009, pp. 23–25). Insofar as visual and literary arts work on more elements of our embodied existence than do mere philosophical or theological claims, liturgies that incorporate visual and literary or poetic elements are likely to be more transcendently effective than simple philosophical or theological statements (see, for
example, Smith 2013, pp. 13–14, 174–80). However, this does not make every embodied and repetitive action a “liturgy” any more than every artwork or poem is a “liturgy”. It simply makes claims about how to increase the likelihood of transcendental effects from some particular action or other.31

In that regard, not every artistic or literary element carried out within the context of worship rites performed within a particular religious tradition is therefore a “liturgy”, just as not every experience I have that opens me to a deeper connection with the world (e.g., seeing a particularly beautiful sunset) is therefore a “liturgy”. My point in this section is not to suggest that every action we undertake in our lives is necessarily liturgical; rather, my point is to suggest that the “liturgical” function that partially defines liturgy has effects on one’s everyday experiences of the world. Indeed, I might even go so far as to claim that the transcendental effects of liturgy are observable primarily by the way they affect our intuitions of the world, and hence how they affect our everyday actions in the world. Liturgy is therefore about the formation, transformation, and re-formation of experiencing, and it thereby affects all our experiences. A phenomenology of liturgy that focuses only on certain experiences is likely to miss what I am calling the “liturgical function” of shaping the nature of our experiencing to encounter (particular) phenomena as religious (or not).

5. The Necessity of a Transcendental Element for a Rigorous Phenomenology of Liturgy

However, we must be clear about this last point: while I am saying that liturgy has transcendental effects that shape all of our experiences, I am not saying that this is all that liturgy does, or even that it is what should most interest us—as religious scholars or as phenomenologists—in regard to liturgy. That liturgy has transcendental religious effects does not mean that it does not have empirical religious effects or transcendental–empirical religious effects any more than the fact that liturgy has religious effects means that it does not have aesthetic, psychological, or sociological effects. As a phenomenon, it functions in various modes and on various levels of experience at once. Additionally, a robust phenomenology of liturgy must account for as many of those modes and as many of those levels of experience as possible. What I have tried to highlight so far in this paper, and what I hope to bring to further clarity in this section, is simply that one of the levels of experience that liturgy operates on is the transcendental level, and failing to account for that transcendental level would be to fail to adequately account for the full breadth of liturgy as a phenomenon.

This, then, is one implication that my argument has for performing a phenomenology of liturgy more broadly: a robust and rigorous phenomenology of liturgy should also account for the transcendental affects liturgy brings about, and therefore should include a transcendental component. That phenomenology requires a transcendental component is contentious within the broader phenomenological discourse (see Zahavi 2021), and so I want to clarify what I am and am not saying when I say that a rigorous and robust phenomenology of liturgy should include a transcendental component.

First, when I speak of a “robust” phenomenology of liturgy, I mean one that covers, as best as possible, the full breadth of the phenomenon of liturgy. Qua phenomenon, it will have various effects on each of the various levels of phenomenological analysis (empirical, transcendental–empirical, transcendental, and ultra-transcendental). To adequately cover that breadth of effects, a phenomenology of liturgy will have to describe those effects and the processes that produce them on each of those levels. For example, to properly understand the Eucharist, we must account for the religious phenomena that make it up (the bread, the wine, the words ritually spoken or recited alongside it, the theological claims that accompany and justify it, etc.), but we must also account for the Catholic religious traditions in which the Eucharist is expressed, and how that differentiates it from the Protestant “Lord’s Supper” or the Orthodox “Holy Communion”—not just “theologically” but also “materially”. We must also then account for the transcendental effects it has on how people experience the world (e.g., the more material and “this-worldly” account of divine presence
at work in much of the Catholic church vis-à-vis the more supernatural and otherworldly focus of Christian living in most Protestant traditions, or the salvific effect of taking the Eucharist—as receiving the body and blood of Christ—in most Catholic traditions vis-à-vis the greater urgency for personal piety and the necessity of a “personal commitment to Christ” in most Protestant traditions), and even, perhaps, ultra-transcendental processes implied by the eucharist (e.g., the notion of “flesh” as divinely infused materiality\(^{32}\)). Doing a robust “phenomenology of the Eucharist” requires looking at all those elements (and more), and therefore accounting for empirical effects and transcendental–empirical effects that are necessary elements of a phenomenology of liturgy. However, only accounting for effects on those levels—and not accounting for the material elements, the theology, the words used in ritual and other concrete phenomena of the liturgical practice—would obviously also miss something in the wide spread of the phenomena of liturgy. While there may be times when limiting the scope of a phenomenology of liturgy in a way that does not look at its transcendental effects is helpful, or even necessary (since every article or analysis cannot do everything), it is nevertheless necessary to also look at the transcendental effects to get the biggest possible picture of the phenomena of liturgy.

Second, when I speak of a “rigorous” phenomenology of liturgy, I mean one that describes, as accurately as possible, the phenomenon in question. One could perform a phenomenological analysis that is (purposefully) not robust without that entailing that one’s analysis is therefore not rigorous. Rather, rigor comes with the clarity and accuracy with which one describes the element of the phenomenon that one sets out to describe. Therefore, at least in principle, one can perform a rigorous phenomenology of liturgy that entirely ignores the transcendental realm, as long as one lays out clearly what one is attempting to describe (e.g., the empirical effects of liturgy on one’s affections, one’s relation to the divine, or one’s sense of communal involvement), and how one wants to describe it, and then performs those functions well. For example, a phenomenology of lay Catholic experiences of taking the Eucharist could ignore the experiences of those from other religious traditions and the ultra-transcendental conceptions of materiality implicit in the Eucharist and still provide a rigorous account of how lay Catholics experience the Eucharist.

However, in practice, the relationship between the different levels of analysis complicates this picture, since the levels are “parallel”, differing in how they effect our experiencing but not differing in content (Husserl [1950] 1999, § 14). Recall, for example, that the transcendental is defined as those processes that produce our experience of particular phenomena. As such, transcendental effects—alterations to the transcendental processes—necessarily affect the empirical, insofar as they shape how we experience phenomena: the devout Catholic not only interacts with highly different material phenomena than the pious Protestant does (wafers v. bread, wine v. grape juice, a shared ritual goblet v. individual, one-use disposal plastic cups, etc.), but is also likely to be more worried about missing the Eucharist for several weeks in a row than her Protestant neighbour. These empirical differences (different foods to eat, higher levels of anxiety) are the result of the differing transcendental–empirical contexts (Catholic v. Protestant) and the transcendental effects growing up in those contexts have on individual’s self-understanding of their faith and its role in their lives. However, these transcendental effects are themselves also produced by (ultra-transcendental) processes that necessarily take on particular (empirical or transcendental–empirical) expressions: because of differing implicit understandings of the relationship between God/divinity and materiality (which the average lay person is likely unable even to clearly articulate) arising from the different ways they have experienced the Eucharist/Lord’s Supper, the Catholic and the Protestant may live with extremely different accounts of how to be devout/pious, what they need to do to be “saved”, the spiritual significance of church participation vis-à-vis individual “devotions”, the necessity of regularly taking the Eucharist/Lord’s Supper, etc. In this way, the transcendental processes are necessarily impacted also by the empirical (and transcendental–empirical) context of their generation.
For the purposes of a phenomenology of liturgy, this means that the transcendental effects (how our experience of a particular phenomenon is constituted) of liturgy necessarily impact the empirical effects (the phenomena we experience), and vice versa. Therefore, a narrower phenomenology of liturgy that seeks to account only for empirical effects (how does this experience of the liturgy impact other experiences I have?) could safely “bracket” (i.e., purposefully seek not to account for, as a matter of method) transcendental considerations only to the extent that it is seeking to explain broad similarities or claims about particular experiences and is not at all interested in accounting for how those experiences came to work that way. Such an investigation can be helpful in determining what makes a phenomenon “liturgical”, for example (what is its “essence”, its particular “thisness” as a distinctly liturgical phenomenon), but it fails to account for how that phenomenon comes about or takes on its liturgical character, either in the individual life of the subject or in the broader historical and cultural milieu. Purely empirical phenomenologies of liturgy can therefore tell us a great deal about liturgy in terms of what it is (e.g., how is the Eucharist a fundamental liturgical element of life in the Catholic church) and what kinds of effects it may have on other phenomena we experience (e.g., suggesting that Catholics who regularly take the Eucharist feel more connected to God and report greater feelings of religious devotion than Catholics who do not regularly take the Eucharist), but any attempt to articulate how it does this or how it comes to function liturgically (e.g., why or how receiving the Eucharist opens someone to feeling God’s presence) would need to open on to transcendental questions, even to rigorously account for the “how” of empirical effect.

I point this out here to highlight several methodological concerns for a phenomenology of liturgy that I take to be immensely important. First, a robust and rigorous phenomenology of liturgy requires phenomenological investigations carried out across all the modes and dimensions of experiencing. In turn, this entails that phenomenological insights must be gained from various fields and disciplines, including psychology, sociology, health sciences, architecture, religious studies, philosophy, and more, for a truly robust and rigorous phenomenology of liturgy.

Second, because they function as transcendental–empiricals, the various traditions we inhabit impact our analyses on both the transcendental and the empirical levels. As such, a rigorous and robust phenomenology of liturgy must include research carried out by people within various traditions, which, for the topic of liturgy, includes people working in different religious, linguistic, professional (e.g., academic or clergy or lay person), and other traditions. 33

Third, anyone attempting to offer an account of how a phenomenon (or how phenomena) comes to function liturgically must account for how transcendental and ultra-transcendental processes have themselves been generated within particular empirical circumstances. As such, any scholars working on that element of a phenomenology of liturgy (for example, anyone trying to answer questions such as “how did this particular phenomena gain a liturgical function in this tradition?” or “how does something come to function liturgically in general in this tradition?”) would need to be familiar not just with transcendental phenomenology, but also with the results of the phenomenological analyses of the various modes and levels of our experiencing of liturgy laid out by scholars working in a variety of fields, as outlined in our first point above. That is, the more transcendental the approach one takes to liturgy, the more one needs to engage with the results of empirical analyses done in sociology, religious studies, philosophy, etc.

Fourth, there is reason to believe that at least some phenomenological analyses of the empirical effects of liturgy would benefit from a better understanding of the various transcendental dimensions (transcendental–empirical, ultra-transcendental, etc.) that help to constitute or produce those empirical effects. In this regard, while it is not necessary for everyone engaged in the broader project of a “phenomenology of religion” in various fields to be familiar with the work and results of transcendental phenomenology (which tends to take place in philosophical phenomenology), I believe it would be beneficial for the field of “phenomenology of liturgy” if at least some people working in the more empirical
elements of the field were to be familiar with the transcendental elements of the field. This requires not just a willingness on their part to engage that material, but also the willingness of people in philosophical phenomenology to produce research results that are meaningful in a Stiftung other than that of academic philosophy. For philosophical phenomenologists of religion, this means producing results that are not just “readings” of Husserl, Heidegger, or Merleau-Ponty, but work that is itself informed by, and in dialogue with, the results of research in the more applied fields.34

It should be clear from these four points that no one person can conduct all of the work on all the levels required for a robust and rigorous phenomenology of liturgy. The single author monograph system of knowledge production that dominates in my field (philosophical philosophy of religion) may not be the best model moving forward for the phenomenology of liturgy. As a field or sub-discipline, the phenomenology of liturgy seems to require interdisciplinary research teams that can engage meaningfully with the work of religious studies, sociology, ritual studies, psychology, health studies, architecture, etc. My point in this section is merely to argue that such interdisciplinary research teams would be best served if they also included a transcendental phenomenologist.

6. Conclusions

Highlighting the role of the transcendental in liturgy has been the main focus of this paper. I have argued that the transcendental functions as the processes that constitute our experiences of phenomena, and that this transcendental component is missing from most analyses that call themselves phenomenology of religion. I then showed how paying attention to this transcendental function allows us to see the role that liturgy plays in the lives of (many) religious people: to shape their intuition of the world such that everything in life can be experienced as connected to religiosity. I ended by showing that a robust and rigorous phenomenology of liturgy should attempt to account for this transcendental dimension of liturgical functioning, thereby suggesting that the “phenomenology of liturgy” needs be an inter-disciplinary project carried out by people across various academic and religious traditions. While none of these claims have been definitively established, my hope is that the quick presentation of them offered in this paper is sufficient to justify further research into the transcendental significance of liturgy for our understanding of both liturgy and religion.

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Notes

1 I argue for this four-fold distinction within phenomenology at length in [citation removed for purposes of blind review]. Briefly, Husserl discusses the distinction between empirical and transcendental in (Husserl [1950] 1999, § 14), among other places. Derrida argues for the need for an “ultra-transcendental” dimension to phenomenology (Derrida 2010); note especially page 13. The “transcendental empirical” level then accounts for Merleau-Ponty’s use of Stiftung; cf., e.g., Renaud Barbaras’ claim about Stiftungen as the mode of being of sense (Barbaras 2004, p. 58). Michel Henry also discusses four distinct “transcendental relationships” (Henry 2002, p. 61)—though it would take some argumentation to determine whether his categories map on to the ones outlined here or not.

2 For a summary of this term and its significant for Merleau-Ponty, see (Vallier 2005).

3 Whether all phenomenology must operate on this transcendental level is a matter of great debate; see, for example, (Zahavi 2021).

4 While phenomenology seems to have fallen out of favor in much of contemporary religious studies (at least as an explicit method of inquiry), it has been argued that phenomenology is fundamental to the kind of examination of religion that happens in the field of “religious studies”; see, for example, (Livingston 1998); (Kristensen 1960); and (Jurij 1963).
I contend that this clarification of “religious framework” as that which is deliberately organized to frame our experience in particular religious ways is not circular insofar as it does not seek to define the “religious” element, but to clarify the religious framework in which a ritual action must take place for that action to be considered liturgical. In this sense, suggesting that the relevant framework is to be understood, not simply in light of particular institutions or practices that religious scholars consider “religious”, but rather in light of the entirety of one’s experiencing of the world is an interesting clarification of “liturgy”—though not, perhaps, a helpful clarification of “religion”. On the latter, see (DeRoo 2018).

This is especially true in philosophy of mind, it seems to me, but also in colloquial discourse, where doing something “consciously” simply means doing it purposively and with volition.

For Wolterstorff, this seems to be part of the value of liturgy—that it can help us “worship God” (which is the purpose he ascribes to Christian liturgy) in ways better than we may (consciously) know how to do ourselves (cf. Wolterstorff 2018, pp. 43, 107, and 118). Nicholas Wolterstorff contends that liturgies must follow a “script” (cf. Wolterstorff 2018, p. 43); however, if “script” means something that is linguistically codified (either in writing or in memorization), this seems potentially too restrictive, as it would rule out any non-linguistic rituals, and those learned through bodily repetition rather than linguistic communication. Hence, I am using the more broad “regular and repeatable action” in place of the notion of a “script”, given the latter’s linguistic connotations.

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premised on an ambiguity in use of the term “liturgy”: I am here trying to define liturgy according to a certain role or function that it plays in shaping our experiencing of the world. Let us call this a “phenomenological” definition of liturgy. On such a definition, something that does not have this effect would cease to be a liturgy. This may seem problematic, insofar as various actions that religious scholars would deem “liturgies” may not be seen as having such an effect, and hence would cease to be “liturgies”. However, this is because they are working with a substantive definition of “liturgy”, in which liturgy refers primarily to a kind of thing, and not to the function such a thing plays. The objection, then, would be that my definition of liturgical functioning does not seem to fit the actions that religious scholars are inclined to call “liturgies”. However, this is only problematic, for my definition, if liturgies do not, in fact, perform this function, and it is far from obvious to me that this is the case: while it is clear that not all participants, or even scholars studying liturgy, are consciously aware that this is happening in a particular action, this is not sufficient, on its own, to say that it is not, in fact, happening, as I have already suggested above. Moreover, it strikes me as plausible that something that used to perform a “liturgical” function (in this sense) could cease to perform that function, and therefore cease to be a “liturgy” in the strict sense outlined here. In such a case, my definition here would simply say that we are technically incorrect to say that those actions still function “liturgically”, and therefore it may be technically inappropriate to continue to call them “liturgies”. Granted, if much of what we take to be “liturgies” do not fit a proposed definition of “liturgical”, this seems to suggest the definition may be a bad one—but, as I said, I do not think that is necessarily the case here: I think most people performing a “liturgical” action, in the traditional understanding of that term (e.g., a communal prayer), are having their spirituality foregrounded, if for no other reason than that they are performing them explicitly in the context of a religious worship service, which thereby is bringing their “spirituality” to the forefront of their experience, even if they are not consciously aware that it is doing so. Perhaps this problem could be ameliorated with further clarification of the notion of non-consciously bringing something to the forefront of my experience, though I do not have the space to do so here. Such a clarification may also end up opening new possible avenues of “religiosity” and new “religious” Stiftungen, which strikes me as potentially fruitful, provided it does not reduce everything to religion. For the problems with the latter move, see (Schilbrick 2013).

23 Cf. Augustine’s famous claim in Confessions that “Our heart is restless until it rests in [God]” (I.i.1), and see (Smith 2016).
24 See (Cuneo 2016, pp. 66–87), and (Flood 1999, p. 47). For a broader account of the fundamental nature of narratives for human living, see (Kearney 2019, “Narrative Matters”).
25 See the traditional American hymn, “The World is not my Home” the first line of which reads: “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through” see (Brumley 1965).
26 See Barbarism (Henry 2013) for one argument (albeit a critical one) to this effect.
27 Originally from James Joyce’s Ulysses, Kearney uses this quote as the epigram for “Epiphanies of the Everyday” (Kearney 2006, p. 3).
28 For more on this alteration of the notion of “religion”, see (De Roo 2018).
29 I refer here to “my experiencing” as the singular first person in the preferred mode of phenomenological discourse. However, I do not mean to thereby discount the communal nature of liturgy, insofar as the individual is always shaped (in their subjectivity) by communal forces, as Husserl’s discourse on spirituality or Merleau-Ponty’s discourses on “institution” make clear. For more on this, see [citation removed for purposes of blind review].
30 While I do not have time to argue it here, the “or not” is crucial here, for if some (liturgical) practices are performed that enable me to see a possible sacrality to the pots and pans, it is also and equally the case that some (liturgical?) practices have been performed that would enable me to see the pots and pans as simply mundane, as not sacred at all. Since, humans can, and have, experienced both the sacrality and the mundaneity of everyday phenomena in various cultures at various times in human history, we know both are possible ways of experiencing the world. What is of interest to the transcendental phenomenologist of liturgy, then, is what actions shape our experiencing such that we can experience X religiously or such that we do not experience X religiously. Both outcomes are the result of “liturgical” formation.
31 Though I have serious reservations about whether the transcendental effects of our actions can ever be controlled or predicted in advance; cf. [citation removes for purposes of blind review], especially chapters four and six.
32 For one recent example of Catholic phenomenologists exploring the ultra-transcendental conditions of the Eucharist, see (Falque 2016).
33 The phenomenon of prayer would perhaps drive this point home even better than the phenomenon of the Eucharist, insofar as Yogic or Zen Buddhist prayer practices differ greatly from Protestant Christian prayer practices, and open not just new understandings of how to perform prayer, but of its effects (e.g., regulated breathing, lowering anxiety, clearing the mind of one’s own concerns so as to re-connect with a higher power).
34 Christina Gschwandtner and J. Aaron Simmons are two philosophical phenomenologists who I believe are doing this type of work already; see (Simmons 2021) and (Gschwandtner 2019b, Welcoming Finitude: Toward a Phenomenology of the Orthodox Liturgy).
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