

Series Preface

The topic of this volume is endlessly interesting, profoundly instructive, and unmanageably large. The scope is nothing short of the worship practices of the world's two billion Christians.

In that single sentence description, there are two boundlessly expansive terms. First, there is “worship.” For our purposes, we will focus on one sense of this term, worship as a public ritual event, an assembly usually conceived as an occasion for a kind of divine-human gift exchange of sung and spoken prayers, scriptural preaching, and sacraments or other ceremonies.¹

The topic of public worship includes a dizzying array of subjects. There are the various elements of worship that may be a part of the liturgy in a given congregation: scripture readings, prayers, preaching, baptisms, the Lord's Supper, exorcisms, healing, testimonies, blessings, offerings, and more. There are varied art forms through which each of these actions is expressed, including (at least) congregational singing, instrumental or vocal music, visual art, architecture, oral and written rhetoric, drama, dance, gesture, and posture. There are also varied occasions for worship and types of services: regular weekly services, occasional evangelistic services, festivals to celebrate or observe events in the ecclesiastical or cultural calendar, revivals, healing or memorial services, informal prayer gatherings, as well as personal and family worship practices. Each of these elements, art forms, and types of services features complex patterns of leadership, community interaction, historical roots and precedents, embodied ritual, and sensibilities about time and space. Public worship is a complex interdisciplinary topic that eludes exhaustive analysis.

The second impossibly large reality to comprehend is the stunning fact that there are two billion people on the planet who worship in the name of Jesus. These Christians represent Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal traditions and hail from over 200 countries and hundreds of cultural and ethnic groups, each of whom has unique patterns of dress, speech, aesthetic sensibilities, and interpersonal communication habits (to say nothing of their unique understandings of when exactly a worship service has gotten to be a bit long!).

Suppose we were to distinguish the world's 200 largest countries or regions, the largest twenty Christian traditions or denominations, and the five most prominent recent impulses or movements for change, as three ways of limiting the scope of a series of case studies, so that studies were produced, for example, on “The Charismatic Movement Among Methodists in Bali.” This strategy would suggest over 20,000 combinations to discuss – each with a window into one of the myriad ways the world's two billion Christians offer worship. Focus more narrowly on just one of the elements of worship mentioned above, and our math suggests enough interesting and significant research topics to keep busy an army of researchers that could fill a dozen of the largest football stadiums on the planet.

Such a wide-angled vision places before us a dazzling variety of ritual practices: everything from elaborate Byzantine vigils to exuberant Methodist frontier camp meetings, from the Dionysian ecstasy of Pentecostal singing in Brazil to the Apollonian reserve of a Presbyterian sermon preached in the Kirk of Scotland, from the trancelike worship of Asian monks to the precise rhetorical patterns of *The Book of Common Prayer*; from the visual brilliance of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel to homey folk art on burlap banners, from the serene beauty of a Palestrina motet to the rugged earthiness of an Appalachian gospel quartet, from the sophisticated majesty of York Minster to the folk art that adorns a thatched-roof sanctuary in New Guinea, from the enforced silence of Quaker corporate mysticism to the sustained exuberance of an African-American ring-shout sermon.

¹ Note that the term “worship” also has an important broader meaning (all of life is an act of devotion to God), and a narrower one (an act of praise or adoration, often expressed in music, by which we extol the virtues of God, either as one element in a public worship service or in private devotion). Several of the essays in this volume allude to these other meanings of the term. But the focus of this book is on the public assembly of the church.

The topic is happily but stubbornly broad. And we must not narrow it too quickly. Narrowing the topic too quickly risks losing the opportunity to reconsider our understanding of the church as a whole and the very nature of Christian worship.

Whether we are journalists asked to cover Christianity, missionaries called to promote it, anthropologists mandated to study it, teachers called to explain it, or ordinary Christians invited to describe it in an over-the-backyard fence interfaith conversation, all of us need a fair and balanced understanding of the Christian faith as a whole. Though we can qualify our answers endlessly, we cannot avoid general descriptions, especially in a religiously pluralistic age. We must work to speak about the Christian church on the basis of attempts to understand as much of the church's life as possible and to avoid generalizations that are simply false. If we were to say, "No Christian believes in nature miracles anymore" or "Christians are, on average, quite wealthy," we would, as Philip Jenkins points out, be neglecting the existence of several hundred million Christians.² A worldwide purview serves to discipline and chasten us when we make assertions about "what Christians believe" or "how the church is changing." So there is great value in lingering inside a topic that is admittedly too large to fully comprehend.

One promising way to begin to handle such a broad topic is to begin inductively by analyzing illustrative examples of worship practices that will take us to places many of us have never been: Peru, Zimbabwe, India, Samoa, Indonesia, Korea, and lots of places in between. We will also attempt to be clear about the limitations of our work. We will not be able to come to anything that approximates exhaustive knowledge of worship practices worldwide. We aspire instead to paint a few strokes in this broad mosaic, to merely begin to better understand the large scope of the topic and to gain some sense of its complexity.³

Why Study Worship?

Still, one important question must be addressed. Given the significance of worldwide Christianity, why study *worship*? Indeed, many studies of Christianity worldwide seem to ignore worship altogether, focusing instead on how Christians participate in culture, what theological work they produce, or some other dimensions of Christian thought and practice.

The importance of worship is initially established by the obvious fact that "going to church" in many languages often means, "to go to worship," to go to a public event or ritual of some kind. The writer of Hebrews mandates that we "not neglect meeting together as is the habit of some" (Hebrews 13:15). And Christians ever since have maintained public events for prayer, proclamation, and sacramental participation as central dimensions of the Christian life. There may be scattered examples of Christian life in some cultures that has thrived without a public event of some kind, or without emphasizing it much, but that would be a rare exception. Worship is a central Christian practice, no matter what tradition or country we are in.

More deeply, as cultural anthropologists tell us, worship is an occasion when the instinctive beliefs, dispositions, and values of a given community are on full display. Anthropologists have helped us see that

² Philip Jenkins. *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). 3.

For efforts to expand international awareness and accuracy in teaching and writing about Christianity, see Wilbert Shenk, ed. • *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002).

³ For other books that help paint this picture with international awareness, see Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen Westerfield Tucker, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Thomas Best and Dagmar Heller, eds., *Worship Today: Understanding, Practice, Ecumenical Implications* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004); Thomas Best and Dagmar Heller, eds., *So We Believe, So We Pray: Towards Koinonia in Worship* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995); Lukas Vischer, ed., *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past and Present (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003)*; Philip Tovey, *Inculturation of Christian Worship: Exploring the Eucharist (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2004)*; F. Kabasele Lumbala, *Celebrating Jesus Christ in Africa: Liturgy and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998); S. Anita Stauffer, ed., *Worship and Culture in Dialogue* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1994); Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language: Introduction to Christian Worship: An African Orientation* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1997); and Mark MacDonald, *The Chant of Life: Inculturation and the People of the Land* (New York: Church Publishing, 2003).

worship is actually much more than just ideas acted out. As a fully embodied activity, worship expresses through cultural forms both explicit truth claims and basic intuitions about God's presence and the meaning of humanity, salvation, virtue, and time. As Frank Senn argues, liturgy is “nothing less than a way of doing the world.”⁴ It is no surprise, then, that the human sciences – psychology, sociology, and anthropology among them – have much to teach us about the inner dynamics and the external patterns of liturgical action. It is also no surprise that in the past generation, students of Christian liturgy have embraced these disciplines and begun a variety of conversations with social scientists that share a great deal of promise for generating insight into the dynamics of Christian communities at worship.⁵

Theologically, worship is perceived by most Christian traditions as an essential arena of divine activity. For Roman Catholics, according to Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, liturgy is the “source and summit” of the Christian faith. For confessional Protestants, the “means of grace” and the “marks of the church” – two of the key defining categories in historic Protestant confessions – each have to do with enacted liturgy (typically focusing on preaching and the sacraments). For traditions as disparate as the Orthodox and Pentecostals, the distinguishing feature of each tradition is the way that public worship is understood to be a primary vehicle of divine presence and action. Across the spectrum of Christian traditions, distinctive worship practices are crucial for revealing the basic impulses of faith. We simply cannot comprehend Puritans without looking at meetinghouses, Pentecostals without considering tongue-speaking, the Orthodox without icons, or Catholics without the Mass.

Despite its rather obvious importance, worship only recently has become a topic of widespread study. Until the 1960s, no one taught worship full-time at any seminary in North America - Protestant, Orthodox, or Catholic. And though this is changing, relative blindness to liturgical practice can still be seen across the theological disciplines. Far more attention has been given to what the sixteenth-century Reformers thought happened in the Lord's Supper than to how they actually celebrated it. With some notable exceptions, missiology has generally been concerned more with cross-cultural apologetics than with common prayer, more with a theology of the purpose of mission than with theological guidelines to inform how to celebrate the sacraments. Further, cultural anthropological studies of worship practices are relatively rare. As Nathan Mitchell, one of many Catholic scholars with great interest in ritual theory, has often quipped, we have better “thick descriptions” of cockfights in Bali than we do of any celebration of the Catholic Mass.

That means that we have before us a lot of uncharted territory. We have a myriad of truly fascinating and instructive examples to learn from.

Worldwide Learning, Probing Questions, and the Practice of Faith

Of the many goals that we could advance with a study of this topic, one significant goal for this volume is to work toward connecting learning about Christianity worldwide with Christians in North America in ways that will energize and deepen faith and common worship.

While recent academic exploration about Christianity worldwide is (arguably) more sophisticated and balanced than ever, many ordinary North American Christians often remain indifferent to both world events in general and the worldwide family of Christ.⁶ As many international guests in North America notice, the world news sections of our newspapers and television newscasts keep shrinking. The same may be true of church

⁴ Frank C. Senn, *New Creation: A Liturgical Worldview* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), p. 8.

⁵ See Nathan Mitchell, *Liturgy and the Social Sciences* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999); Martin D. Stringer, “Liturgy and Anthropology: The History of a Relationship,” *Worship* 63, no. 6 (November 1989): 503-21; and John D. Witvliet, “For Our Own Purposes: The Appropriation of Social Sciences by Pastoral Liturgists,” *Liturgy Digest* 2 (1995): 6-35.

⁶ Note significant works that explore the worldwide scope of Christianity. See, for example, Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), and *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996); and Dana Robert, “Shifting Southward: Global Christianity Since 1945,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24, no. 2 (2000): 50-54, 56-58.

publications in their reporting on the church worldwide. And yet it is precisely the practice of Christianity in other times and places that offers so much that can deepen our faith, create opportunities for service, and teach us about the deepest meaning of the gospel.

To that end, we hope that this volume both reflects and generates many constructive questions. How can missiologists, anthropologists, pastors, theologians, musicians, and artists best learn from each other? What particular examples of Christian worship practices are especially challenging and enriching? What are the most instructive examples of worship worldwide for North American Christians (or any other group) to learn about? How will the study of Christian worship worldwide challenge the methods we use to study and learn from practices in our communities? How will this wide-angle vision change the way we pray?

Consider some of the kinds of questions we might ask ourselves:

1. What do we make of John Stott's first visit to West Africa where he "saw Gothic spires rising incongruously above the coconut palms," "African bishops sweating profusely in medieval European ecclesiastical robes," and African worshipers speaking Elizabethan English?⁷ Likewise, what are we to make of the fact that Warner Sallman's famous painting "Head of Christ" has been regularly used in Korean Methodist churches?⁸ Or that Western boom boxes can now be found in the middle of worshipping communities in most continents?
2. How might we rethink our implicit assumptions about so-called "high" and "low" (or "classical" and "popular") art given the absence of folk music in many standard histories of liturgy in the West, and the absence of so-called "classical" music in treatments of Christianity worldwide, despite interest in such in Japan, Kenya, Singapore, and the Philippines? What are we to make, for example, of the Reformed Church of Japan's disciplined attention in the past decade to translating all 150 Genevan Psalms into Japanese?
3. A remarkable number of the studies we have about worship worldwide over the past thirty years speak consistently of the influence of both the charismatic movement and the liturgical movement. Is this historical interpretation accurate? What do these broad themes – accurate as they may be – obscure?
4. As legend would have it, in 987, Prince Vladimir of Kiev sent a delegation to Hagia Sophia in Constantinople to examine the Greek faith. After encountering the celebration of the Byzantine rite, the delegation reported, "we knew not if we were in heaven or on earth." In 1854, Thomas Birch Freeman, noted British Methodist missionary to Ghana, reported to his Missionary Society: "If our Public worship in Cape Coast is not heaven come down to earth, it is pretty nearly that of England come to Africa."⁹ How are those narratives of cross-cultural description alike? How are they different?
5. How might statistical summaries challenge our way of thinking about our way of assessing the spectrum of Christian worship practices? The Christian Reformed Church in North America, of which this author is a member, is a denomination of roughly 300,000 members with a history of fairly low-church, simple, sermon-focused liturgy, but a recent interest in forms of worship that originated in charismatic congregations has led some CRCNA members to think (ironically) that the more traditional approach to worship was "high-church." For members in this tradition, how would it change our thinking about our place in the worldwide spectrum if we realized that half a billion people worship with more charismatic forms of worship than our own, but also that 1.3 billion Christians worship with a liturgy more formal than our own? What would similar reassessments look like for others?
6. What does it mean to identify the marks or traits of worship in a given tradition? Given an international rather than a local or even national perspective, what is "Methodist" worship or "Reformed" worship? Here

⁷ John Stott. *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God's Word to Today's World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity. 1992). pp. 196-97.

⁸ Edward W. Poitras (Pak Tae In), "Ten Thousand Tongues Sing: Worship Among Methodists in Korea." in Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *The Sunday Service of the Methodists: Twentieth-Century Worship in Worldwide Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996), p. 207.

⁹ For the Orthodox example, see Robert Taft. *The Byzantine Rite: A Short History* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press. 1982), p. 1. For the African example, see Paul W. Chilcote, "A Singing and Dancing Church." in Karen Westerfield Tucker, *The Sunday Service of the Methodists*, p. 244.

I think of a recent collection of essays on Methodist worship that includes the comment of a Brazilian pastor – “I have not experienced any real Methodist worship since I have been in Germany” – and a fairly sanguine defense of set prayers used by Methodist worshipers in the Caribbean.¹⁰ Both experiences need to be embraced in nuanced understanding of what the Methodist tradition has come to be.

7. If Eastern Orthodoxy's worship became more ceremonial because of the collusion of the church and the imperial government in ancient Byzantium, how might we assess the collusion of American evangelicalism with the ritual impulses and preferences of Hollywood and Nashville? Is there a similar grafting of new ceremonial moves (such as Dove Awards for Christian music and publicity campaigns for Christian artist-worship leaders) into the church from its local cultural habitat? How are these examples of enculturation similar and how are they different?
8. Is North American imperialism over? Could part of the call for indigenous music in some parts of the world by North America leaders be just as imperialistic today as the efforts to prevent that indigenization a century ago? Could the influence of the Christian music industry, exporting North American boom boxes and iPods to remote villages be even more imperialistic? And if we decide that it is, is there anything to be done about it?

Once the questions start, they are hard to stop. And they begin to challenge us to rethink nearly every category that we (as both academic students of worship and local practitioners of worship) have used to comprehend the dynamics of our participation in the embodied living of the Christian faith. While the topic of this volume seems hopelessly large, we offer it with the modest hope that it will help us to ask better questions about the relationship of Christian faith and its cultural habitats.

But these questions are not ends in themselves. The point of them is to prod us to ponder all that is coming as part of God's coming kingdom. The point is to help us better understand what we mean when we pray “your kingdom come” – and then to live accordingly.

If there are 20,000 case studies that could have been included in this volume, suppose that in the new heavens and new earth we will have the luxury to hear all of them. Suppose in the fully embodied life we anticipate in heaven, we were to sign up for a “worship apprentice program” with opportunities to learn how to play gamelans and pipe organs, djembes and maracas, polyrhythmic drumming patterns, Bach chorale preludes, spirituals, work songs, and Anglican chant, to design cathedrals and store-front churches, to write hymn texts and improvise sermons, to craft processional crosses, and weave tapestries. Our first millennium there is bound to fly by!

In a sense, this volume is an exercise in eschatological imagination formation. Can we imagine ourselves at worship in heaven alongside the people we will encounter? Can we realize that we are already united with them in the Spirit-formed sinews of Christ's body? May God's Spirit grow in each of us a deeper, more vivid awareness of the sheer breadth of the church, the privilege of worship, and overwhelming scope of the gospel.

JOHN D. WITVLIET

¹⁰ Walter C. Klaiber, “Building Up the House of God: Sunday Worship in German Methodism:” in Karen Westerfield Tucker, *The Sunday Service of the Methodists*, p. 283.