

Worship and Culture

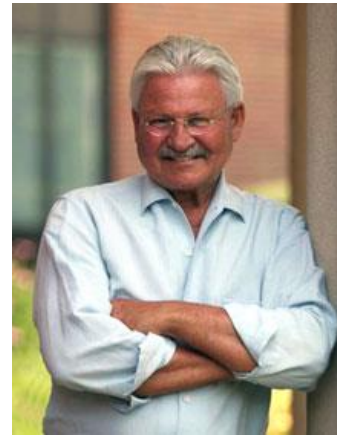
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This brief article is a somewhat condensed version of my presidential address from the January 2017 session of IWS. The purpose of the presidential address is to keep before the IWS community our God-given mission, and to explore various aspects of it. This session I explored some aspects of cultural reflections relative to the social teachings of the Church.

I am sometimes asked, “Why does IWS focus its studies on just worship?” Answer: a primary key to reading the entire biblical narrative is this—God is calling his creation to right worship. God ultimately wants his people to worship him aright. Because he needs our praise? No! He has no need of our praise. But, WE need to worship because in that great act we become aligned and reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, the primary worshipper. Right worship leads to the rightly ordered or integrated life, the rightly ordered family, church, city, culture, even cosmos.

Bob Webber said, “Worship is the key to the renewal of the Church.” I have written this before, but it is worth repeating: In worship we have the great privilege of telling the world its true story, and bringing it to the right worship of the only God who is ultimately true, good and beautiful, reconciling us to him and each other. This is what IWS is about, and this is why the focus of IWS on right worship is at the very core of the Christian faith!



Worship (more specifically, the Eucharist) is famously referred to as the “source and summit (fount and apex) of the [entire] Christian life” (Lumen Gentium 11).¹ The divine life originates in it and conduces to it. The Gospel finds its most definitive and explicit expression there. The Church is most vividly and visibly manifested there as the gathered people of God embody Christ himself.

What are some areas of the Christian life in which worship is implicated? Right worship involves a fully orb ed ecclesiology, powerful kerygmatic preaching, an immersion in God’s Word, the experience of God’s manifested presence in the power of the Holy Spirit, and a robust, Christ-centered humanism. It inspires reconciliation, missions, evangelism, heroic moral effort, sacrificial ethical behavior, and a deep, active concern for the disenfranchised across the earth. It calls us to care profoundly for, and even love, the entire created order, everywhere and at all times. It causes us to long for our final home, the heavenly city yet to come. It is the very source and the summit of the entire Christian life.

Let us consider just one aspect of the intersection of worship and the Christian life: how the global church incarnates God's desire to reconcile all things to himself through the primary means of worship and mission. I will focus on a few ways in which worship intersects with the Church's social teachings, particularly related to militating against contemporary trends toward cultural accommodation and what I call cultural parochialism.

Let's consider some basic cultural reflection. We have heard the call from numerous places, for a dialogue between the church and the wider culture. Often this call is couched in terms of a strategy for evangelism. To evangelize the culture, we need to be seen as having significant points of cultural recognition in our worship and in various aspects of church life.² Sometimes these "points of cultural recognition" may look like these examples:

- Fellowship that imitates the local coffee shop.
- Sermons that imitate Ted talk teaching styles.
- Prayers that are limited to being casual and conversational.
- Architecture that privileges function over beauty.
- Western musical styles that merely imitate the regnant cultural proclivities of the world.
- Performative/theatrical/concert sensibilities in the arts rather than participative.
- An elevation of comfort and a diminishment of demand.

We could go on and on. We see this vividly in the seeker orientation adopted by many fellowships in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. I'm not necessarily decrying this orientation so much as I am addressing its posture—one seeking dialogue with culture. Raising the profile of the church/culture dialogue has been a high value for the contemporary church.³ The problem is that it is a one-way dialogue (which, I guess, makes it a monologue). Culture shows no reciprocating interest whatsoever. The church, and the worship of the church, tries to make itself intelligible by utilizing the language and conceptual forms of the secular world. Rarely have the avatars of secular culture returned the favor. This one way nature of the conversation is problematic.⁴

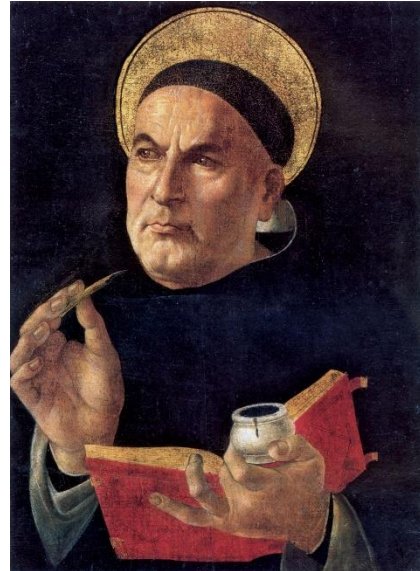
John Milbank, one of the most articulate contemporary critics of modernity, writes: "The pathos of modern theology is its false humility." He is referring here to the tendency of modern theology, and I would say even worship expression, to "seek the favor of its cultured despisers by aping their style of thought and expression. This positions theology and faith to be determined by culture and not vice versa."⁵ That's a problem!

An excessively culturally accommodating church will try to look so much like the secular world that its participation in and witness to the life of God, the true life that gives life to the world, is diminished or even nullified. I want to suggest that our

basic posture in embracing multiculturalism should take into account two polemics, or binaries: assimilation and resistance, and global solidarity and contextualization.

First, **assimilation and resistance**. The Christian Church has always tried to find the balance of cultural assimilation and resistance. Assimilation is grounded in the theological conviction that God created the world out of nothing. Everything that is, therefore, is created and sustained by God. He is insinuated through all created beings, animate and inanimate, although He is also Other than all things. (St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that God is the “Ipsum esse subsistens”—the sheer [subsistent] act of “to be” itself.) God is NOT a being, but all things find their beingness, their existence, in Him.

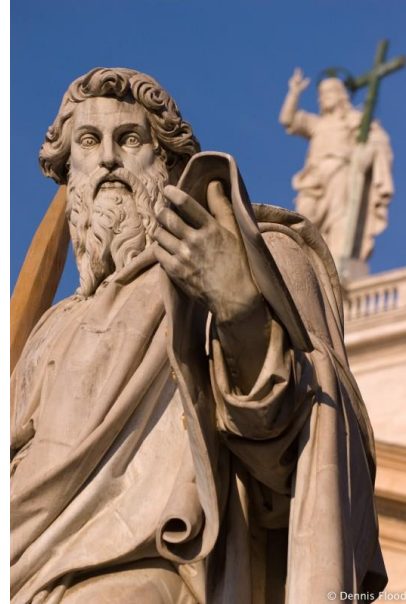
Additionally, all things reveal in some way the truth of God. All things that are true, good and objectively beautiful in culture, can find a connection to Christ and reveal aspects of God that can be embraced.⁶ All things that are true, good and objectively beautiful in culture, can even be drawn to Christ and elevated for the glory of God.⁷ The Church assimilates the best of culture to itself, but then elevates those aspects to a greater use, in fact, the highest use—Gospel use. That’s assimilation. Assimilation has been used by the Church since the beginning. Read the works of Origen, Augustine, Ambrose, Aquinas, John Henry Newman and others.⁸ The Church at its best, through the ages, has drawn all that is true, good and objectively beautiful into itself, elevating those elements into the life of Christ.



To a degree. There is also the need to resist those evil aspects of culture and life that do not resonate with the life of God. And they are there. We live in a world that is beset by dysfunction, oppression, addictions to power, money, pleasure and fame, and a general culture of death. Cultural “accommodation” does not rigorously or carefully resist these negative dimensions.⁹ The Church should reach out to the cultures of the world, but the world should not set the agenda for the Church or for the worship of the Church.¹⁰ Worship can and should assimilate what is true, good and beautiful in culture, but resist what may be alien to the life of God, using scripture and its interpretation through the Church as the organizing structure, guide and norm. Joseph Ratzinger commented that our missional purpose should not be to make the Church more like the world, but to make the world more like the Church¹¹—the transformation of culture. Assimilation, not accommodation.

The Christian Church’s willingness to engage the secular culture finds its origins in Paul’s address to Greek intellectuals on the Areopagus in Athens sometime in the early 50’s of the first century.

This story is in Acts 17:22-33. Paul was speaking to the Athenians about the significance of their altar to the unknown god. He declared in verse 28 that this unknown God, the transcendent creator and Lord of all, has drawn close, *for “In him we live and move and have our being;” as even some of your own poets have said, “For we are indeed his offspring”* (ESV).



Notice that Paul connects with the Athenians by quoting two of their own poets: Epimenides of Crete and the stoic poet Aratus. He makes a heart connection. Many of the church fathers and doctors, most notably St. Thomas Aquinas, used philosophical truths and language to evangelical purposes.

At best the Church has vigorously entered into the cultural conversation while yet resisting evil. So, in worship, the Christian church must be in conversation with the culture, but must not allow the concerns and demands of the culture to position the Christian faith or its primary expression in worship.¹² This brings me to the next polemic.

We must strive for a balance of our **global Christian identity (solidarity) and our local cultural worship expressions (contextualization)**. In the Body of Christ, we stand in solidarity with those universal aspects of life, faith, beingness, the common good, etc. that are shared across the globe, binding us together in mutuality and responsibility toward all other beings. The Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture (see below) refers to these ideas or universals as “transcultural” elements. What do we all have in common? More to it, what should we understand to be held in common? Gospel, creed, worship structure of word and table, the moral life, doctrine, discipline—these are universals and must be embraced universally. Other aspects would include maintaining the integrity of the family, protecting human rights, caring for the poor, advocating for meaningful work and livable wages, caring for widows and the marginalized, caring for the created order, generally valuing life itself over death, etc. These are universally recognized aspects of human thriving, aspects that we share in solidarity with all creation.

This solidarity is most vividly displayed in the passion of Jesus. In Colossians 1 St. Paul writes, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:19, 20). Through the self-sacrifice and glorification of the Incarnate Son of God, all creation has been reconciled to the Creator, and we are called to participate in the full manifestation of this reconciliation. We are one Body across the globe. Acknowledge that, celebrate that and proclaim that.

But, we minister in local contexts with local cultural expressions, relating to the individuality of the local community. We support the local expression of the Church and help it to thrive as a part of the larger Body of Christ. This can relate to particular cultural expressions, languages, and symbols, relating to the ways in which we love our neighbors, care about our communities, and embrace the particularities of our separate cultures. The Nairobi Statement refers to these ideas or universals as “contextual” elements. What distinguishes our community from others? What expressions of beauty, art and liturgy make our hearts sing with joy? These comprise individual aspects of human thriving, aspects that we share with our immediate surrounding culture.

I think it is helpful to think in these terms. What can or should we do in worship that relates to the solidarity we have with other Christians across the globe, and in fact, with all of creation? What can or should we do in worship that relates to the contextualization principle, the needs and wants of the local community?

This brings me to the Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture from the Lutheran World Federation.¹³ The Nairobi Statement describes how Christian worship relates dynamically to culture in at least four ways.

First, worship is *transcultural*, the same substance for everyone everywhere, beyond culture (e.g., Gospel, Biblical narrative, doctrines, creeds, baptism, Eucharist, church year, weekly assembly, mission, etc.).

Second, worship is *contextual*, varying according to the local situation (both nature and culture) (e.g., language, artistic styles, cultural and pastoral values and patterns consistent with Biblical values, non-Eucharistic worship gatherings, patterns of dress, vestments, accoutrements, etc.).

Third, worship is *counter-cultural*, challenging what is contrary to the Gospel in a given culture (e.g., resisting oppression, injustice, imperialism, idolatry, dehumanization, culture of death, etc.).

Fourth, worship is *cross-cultural*, making possible sharing between different local cultures (e.g., diverse in ethnicity, the call to hospitality to all, welcoming the “stranger,” having a global perspective, prophetic of what is coming or has come in North America and across the globe, etc.)

In all four dynamics, there are helpful principles which can be identified. I commend this document to you if you aren’t familiar with it!

We need to be proclaiming and celebrating the Gospel of God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ through multiple cultural expressions that nurture devotion and participation in the fullness of the life of God. We must also know the heart sounds of our congregations, and the heart sounds of our cultures.

And we must be prophetic, aware of cultures yet to come. Our countries are increasingly multicultural. For those of us from the U.S., America is becoming a minority nation with no single prominent majority ethnicity. This is likely also the case in most other countries around the globe. While the Gospel is transcultural, our worship expressions proclaiming the Gospel should be more and more multicultural, showing the vast diversity of the Body of Christ. We must touch the hearts of our congregations with the story of God wrapped in the stylistic language of the people who are there and the people yet to come.

Here is one practical example of a way in which the profile of the global nature of the Body of Christ can be raised. In my church we recently sang Audrey Assad’s song, “Even Unto Death,”¹⁴ while showing the icon of the 21 Coptic Martyrs, in whose honor and memory the song was written. This served to raise the profile of the global persecution of Christians and the call to hold them in prayer.



CONCLUSION:

When leading in worship, we need to be adopting a posture of assimilation and resistance, solidarity and contextualization. We are called as leaders of Christian worship to lead others into a transcultural, intense devotional commitment to sing and enact the Good News, to follow Christ and with him be poured out for the life of the world.

All of this, the entirety of worship, conduces to one thing only: love God and love your neighbor. “But that’s two things,” you say. No, it’s not.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

¹ Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium,” Vatican, 1964, accessed Fall of 2016, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

² I am indebted to Bp. Robert Barron for his perspectives on these issues as expressed in his lecture at the American Enterprise Institute. American Enterprise Institute, “Catholic Thought and Human Flourishing: Culture and Policy,” Washington, D.C., June 23, 2016, accessed Fall, 2016, <https://youtu.be/Ky2MAfifahA>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture,” Lutheran World Federation, Nairobi, Kenya, January 1996, accessed Fall 2016, <http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/nairobi-statement-on-worship-and-culture-full-text>.

¹⁴ Audrey Assad, “Even Unto Death,” January 26, 2016, accessed Fall, 2016 <https://youtu.be/uAfp8vg4Jz8>.

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