ClassNotes 1: The Changing Contexts for Christian Worship

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Thinking about Christian worship in a multicultural context is not a new approach. The Christian church has always been situated in multicultural circumstances and worshipped God in diverse ways by incorporating cultural elements. As Richard Niebuhr summarizes in *Christ and Culture*, the church has related to the surrounding culture in a variety of ways.[[1]](#footnote-1) Obviously, Christian worship is one of the best illustrations of cultural impacts on the church.

While it is a relatively recent concern for the Protestant church to think about worship from a cultural perspective, a number of Roman Catholic theologians and liturgics scholars have already researched in-depth on the relationship between liturgy and culture and published valuable resources for the study on that subject. Many of these resources, including those that were written by Protestant scholars, presuppose that a congregation is culturally homogeneous and that the cultural approach to worship has to do with the unique culture of the congregation. Mark R. Francis, C.S.V., however, pays special attention to the changing reality of churches in the United States. According to his acute observation, a growing number of the churches in the United States are becoming culturally and racially diverse and their liturgies need to be renewed, reflecting this cultural change.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In *Shape a Circle Ever Wide: Liturgical Inculturation in the United States*, Francis argues that Roman Catholic churches in the United States are no longer “national parishes” built by the immigrants of the same nationality, but are becoming multiracial and multicultural. This case also applies to Protestant churches in the United States. From the New England Colony period till now, Protestant immigrants brought with them strong connections to their homeland churches and worshipped following their unique liturgical patterns. Although their congregations are becoming multicultural as rapidly as the larger society they belong to, and many already have a great number of congregants of different races and ethnicities, they do not take seriously how to renew their worship to appeal to this changing demography.

A student in my worship class insisted that he was serving a mono-cultural congregation composed of only white European Americans so that he did not need to consider the issue of multiculturalism. When we look deeper, however, even his white European American congregation is not culturally homogenous. As Francis points out, churches built by the original national groups of the early settlers in the United States have largely disappeared into mainstream U.S. society, and nowadays they worship with people who are culturally different.[[3]](#footnote-3) Even among Asian and other non-European American communities that have relatively short histories of immigration, an increasing number of people, particularly second and third generations, actively interact with different cultural groups and search for a worship community where they can experience meaningful and memorable worship across racial and ethnic boundaries.

One of my colleagues asked me why I am interested in multicultural worship, since for her as a Jew the reason why she attends her religious services is to pray, sing, and listen to scriptures in her mother language with other people of her own race and ethnicity. As a first-generation Korean American, I understand what she means. I attended worship in Korean American churches for fifteen years, the first half of my life in the United States. Whenever I worshipped with other people of my own race and ethnicity in my native language following their unique liturgical tradition, I could immediately feel at home and reaffirm my identity as a Korean American Christian. Nonetheless, the more I attended these worship services, the more I felt that the mono-cultural worship was theologically exclusive and liturgically limited, due to its primary task of serving the interest of a particular racial and cultural group. This experience raises for me a theological and liturgical question that Francis phrases eloquently, “Is culturally exclusive worship ‘consistent with Christ’s challenge for us to look beyond our own cultural limitations and prejudices to the universality of the Kingdom of God?’”[[4]](#footnote-4) I think that this question is a challenge to all ethnic minority churches, as well as to European American congregations. Even though the congregants have the same racial and cultural backgrounds, their worship should not be limited to themselves. Instead, they should extend their theological concerns and liturgical experiences beyond their limited worldview and spiritual practices.

During the second half of my life in the United States, I have attended worship in a predominantly white European American church. At first, my family was one of a few ethnic minority people in the three-hundred membership church. Of course, we did not feel at home in spite of the hospitable atmosphere of the church. Worshiping in our second language with the “strangers” following a European American Presbyterian worship pattern was a sort of wilderness experience. Yet, this church has gradually changed, becoming more multicultural, and more than a decade later now, about twenty percent of the attendees at Sunday services are non-white, and the number is increasing every year. The worship leadership team seems to be aware of their presence and attempts to embrace them by occasionally requesting some of them to participate in the service. This changing situation makes me think seriously about how Sunday worship can be a genuine spiritual experience for all that attend the service beyond their racial and cultural differences.

It is a reality that the context for Christian worship is becoming more and more pluralistic. We experience in our daily lives that our twenty-first-century world is becoming more global than ever before in human history. Particularly, North American society and other immigrant countries are growing quickly in racial and ethnic diversities. For example, based on the 2000 Census data, it is predicted that by 2050 the United States will have no single majority race and ethnicity. In line with this, the 2010 Census data also shows that, over the past decade, while the “White alone” population experienced a decrease in its proportion of the total population from seventy-five percent to seventy-two percent, other racial and ethnic populations increased, and more than half of the growth in the total population of the United States was due to the increase in the Hispanic population.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The increase in racial and ethnic diversity in American society has brought forth complex social issues on race, culture, religion, and the economy, locally and globally, and demands the church reconsider its identity and role in relation to these social problems. Most Christian communities, however, do not take these public issues seriously in their worship life. Or, since they do not know how to reflect these issues theologically in their worship services, they tend to try to remain racially and culturally segregated groups. Considering these situations, it is crucial to question how Christian worship can be more faithful to the Christian gospel and more meaningful and memorable to the multicultural congregation. Half a century ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. said that the Sunday morning worship time is the most racially segregated hour in the United States. Congregations now are no longer sharply divided by race and ethnicity, but their liturgies still are. Then, is it possible for them to renew their worship experience to be inclusive in the multicultural context? This course aims to explore this liturgical question in depth by inviting students to think together, share their experiences, and develop creative theories and practices of worship in multicultural contexts.

1. Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark R. Francis, C.S.V., *Shape a Circle Ever Wide: Liturgical Inculturation in the United States* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2000); *Liturgy in a Culturally Diverse Community: A Guide Towards Understanding* (Washington, D.C.: Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) (viewed on November 10, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)