ClassNotes 2: Culture and Liturgy

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Worship as “ritual communication”[[1]](#footnote-1) is inextricably associated with culture. Through culture, we not only express our faith, we also interpret liturgical acts. For the appropriate understanding of multicultural worship, it is necessary to review various conceptions of culture that have influenced Christian worship. Among a variety of resources available to study culture, Kathryn Tanner’s book, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*,[[2]](#footnote-2) contains critical theological reflection on various approaches to culture. According to her, the concept of culture can be explained in three different views in chronological order—the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern. These three views can be used as frames for understanding the relation between culture and Christian worship:

1. The Premodern View. In this view, the term culture is often used as a synonym of

cultivation or civilization. Just as people “cultivate crops or animals in order to better them,” so humans can cultivate their capacities or faculties through intellectual and aesthetic training.[[3]](#footnote-3) In this sense, culture refers to “a process of individual education and refinement, and by extension, to the products of such processes (works of art and literature).”[[4]](#footnote-4) Culture as cultivation or civilization means “the high culture achievements promoted and sustained by discrete social institutions” without associating it with “organic holism.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This conception of culture creates a hierarchy by dividing people into elite high culture and popular low culture groups, each of which has a unified singular form of culture.

The premodern conception of culture has influenced Christian worship since Christianity became the state religion in Europe. Although biblical texts and early church history evidence that Christian worship was egalitarian and participatory regardless of class at the fledging stage of the church, throughout the medieval period, Christian worship was divided into high class liturgy and low class devotional practices. Liturgical components including sacraments, preaching, songs, prayers, etc. were formalized based on medieval doctrines; the primary agent of worship was not the assembled community but specially trained “cultured” clergy. Peasants and illiterate commoners had to remain passive onlookers in the liturgy and be content with their popular devotional practices.

This monocultural elite liturgy has been transmitted to many contemporary churches with a high church tradition, and their theological schools and seminaries are still training worship leaders with a clergy-oriented liturgy. As cultural elites trained with the unified knowledge of the liturgy, clergy are supposed to perform the liturgy while congregations are treated as passive audiences. Considering that multicultural worship is, in principle, concerned with responding to issues emerging from the public, the understanding of liturgy as a unified elite culture is far from the fundamental concept of multicultural worship.

1. The Modern View. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the premodern conception of culture as individual maturity gained by intellectual and aesthetic training was challenged by such emerging social sciences as anthropology, ethnology, and sociology. They are in common in understanding culture not at an individual level but at a communal level. The modern view based on these socio-anthropological studies understands culture as “traditional behavior which has been developed by the human race and is successfully learned by each generation.”[[6]](#footnote-6) In other words, culture is the attribute of a particular social group, i.e., “social consensus . . . what every member of the group more or less shares” in the entire way of life, including “social habits and institutions, rituals, artifacts, categorical schemes, beliefs and values.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In this view, each social group has its own distinctive corporate culture that has been historically transmitted to the community. Thus, human culture is neither singular nor unified, but is as plural and diverse as human communities are.

The modern conception of culture has contributed a great deal to contemporary liturgical studies. For example, Vatican II documents on liturgy admit the “plurality of cultures” and acknowledge the “relativity of cultural expression” in worship.[[8]](#footnote-8) Moreover, in Protestant tradition, C. Michael Hawn’s book, *One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship,[[9]](#footnote-9)* and Charles E. Farhadian’s edited volume, *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices,[[10]](#footnote-10)* are valuable resources to learn about the diversity of worship in racially and ethnically different churches. Homiletician Leonora Tisdale also stresses in her book, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*,[[11]](#footnote-11) the significance of the cultural identity of a local congregation. According to her, each congregation has its own distinctive “subculture” expressed by an idiom or a unique web of signs and symbols; like an anthropologist, the preacher’s task is to identify and interpret the distinctiveness of a congregation’s “subcultural identity” with its particular “worldview, values, and ethos.”[[12]](#footnote-12) For the preacher as a worship leader, it is mandatory to know about her particular congregational culture in order to make worship engaging and appealing to the congregation.

It is epochal that the modern view has shifted the understanding of Christian worship from the unified expression of a clerically elite culture to diverse expressions of culturally different faith communities. The modern view, however, has some limits in comprehending the dynamics and diversity of cultures. First, by paying attention to the distinctive cultural phenomena of a geographically restricted space and synchronically limited time-frame, the modern view defines “a particular slice of the historical sweep of things as cultural consensus”[[13]](#footnote-13) and assumes that individual members of a society are born into a culture as its “passive porters”[[14]](#footnote-14) and are responsible to preserve and transmit it to next generations. This static understanding of culture leads local churches to consider their identities and cultural expressions in worship as fixed and encourages them to exclude other cultures in order to preserve their cultural homogeneity. As a result, the worship life of a particular congregation tends to be exclusive rather than inclusive, passive rather than active, and regressive rather than progressive.

The second limit of the modern conception of culture is that its approach is still monocultural. It does not pay attention to the complexity of cultural dynamics within a community. As Tisdale assumes, it looks, on the surface, that an individual church has its own unique subculture representing its communal ethos and worldview. No community, however, even if it is racially homogeneous, has one unified subculture. Instead, every community has a multi-layered culture or subculture*s* representing different subgroups in age, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. In the community of faith, the dominant group’s culture is usually considered the congregational culture while other groups’ cultures are often marginalized and suppressed. If the congregational culture is understood in this way, worship is understood as cultural expressions of the dominant group in the congregation and eventually participates in maintaining the status quo of the cultural hegemony within the church.

The third limit of the modern view is with the agents of the socio-anthropological studies. In the past century, they were people of Western colonialist nations. As outsiders, they defined the culture of the colonized by observing its surface level. Their space-oriented, atemporal approach increased the prejudice that non-Western cultures did not have a past, so they were inferior to historically civilized Western culture. This biased view contributed to promoting imperialism and colonialism in the West and reinforced Eurocentrism in Christian worship. Western missionaries and denomination leaders imposed their liturgical theology and practice on non-Western churches as the norm of Christian worship and forced them to change their identities and cultural expressions by adopting Western liturgy. Ethnic minority churches in North America and churches in once- and still-colonized countries are still under the influence of a Euro-centered liturgy, and many theological schools and seminaries still teach the tradition of Western liturgy as the generalized knowledge of Christian worship.

3. The Postmodern View. In the twenty-first-century, people live in a globalized pluralistic world, in which there are no sharp geographical boundaries between cultures which “protect a homogenous, stable, and unified whole from outside dissension and disruption.[[15]](#footnote-15) Although it is true that culture means the distinctive characteristics of a particular racial and ethnic community, people experience that their own ethnic culture is fluid and open to change and transformation through active social interaction and interconnectedness caused by internal and external factors.

This situation makes a primary difference between the modern and postmodern views on culture. While the postmodern view, like the modern view, understands that cultures may be formed “by stable configurations of cultural elements” to “be shared by all persons affiliated with a particular culture and thereby serve to solidify their social relations,”[[16]](#footnote-16) it no longer assumes that one community has one unified culture. Instead, the postmodern view takes into account diversity, complexity, and contradictions within a culture and makes cultural consensus “extremely minimalistic” because “it forms the basis for conflict as much as it forms the basis for shared beliefs and sentiments.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Therefore, the postmodern view disagrees on the understanding of cultural consensus as “a common focus of *agreement*” for shared beliefs and sentiments. If it is possible to consider cultural consensus in the postmodern view, it means “a common focus for *engagement*”[[18]](#footnote-18) in the process of cultural transformation through the “hybrid, relational affair, something that lives between as much as within cultures.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

The postmodern conception of culture convinces us that Christian worship conditioned by culture should no longer be monocultural, targeting one particular subculture of the congregation, but multicultural, interacting with diverse subculture*s* of the congregation and engaging in the process of transformation. The cultural identity expressed in the liturgy should be considered not absolute but relative, not fixed but fluid, open to change and transformation by crossing cultural boundaries within and beyond the church.

The insight into the plurality and relativity of Christian worship encourages us to consider the role of worship leaders in a new way. Rather than simply transmitting traditional liturgy to the congregation, their task is to help their congregants broaden and deepen their experience of God’s presence across cultural boundaries. This task is a big challenge to both worship leaders and congregations, for it requires them to be vulnerable by opening themselves to learning different cultures within and beyond their liturgical traditions and demands of them creativity in handling different cultural expressions appropriately in order to transform their worship lives to be more meaningful and memorable. This challenge is also serious for theological schools and seminaries, because they need to train students to be culturally competent and pastorally sensitive worship leaders.

1. Mark R. Francis, C.S.V., *Liturgy in a Multicultural Community* (Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1991), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Katherine Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Margaret Mead, *Cooperation and Competition among Primitive Peoples* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1937), 17, cited in Tanner, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Francis, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. C. Michael Hawn, *One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Charles E. Farhadian (ed.), *Christian Worship Worldwide: Exploring Horizons, Deepening Practices* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Leonora T. Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Tanner, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Tanner, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 57-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)