ClassNotes4: Theologies of Worship from Multicultural Perspectives

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Ronald Thiemann’s book, *Constructing a Public Theology*, includes an intriguing essay, “Worship and Public Responsibility.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In this writing, he lays out Christian worship in the public square by reclaiming the role of Christian worship beyond the walls of the Christian church. While a variety of definitions of Christian worship explicitly describe its nature and function within the church in relation to its unique identity rooted in traditional Christian theology,[[2]](#footnote-2) Thiemann reconsiders Christian worship within the public realm from the ethical point of view. For him, “the church and its worship life are profoundly linked to matters of public responsibility,”[[3]](#footnote-3) and the goal of Christian worship should be the “accomplishment of justice in the world.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Thiemann posits his ethical concern of Christian worship in the reality of pluralism in American society and underscores “the virtue of hope”[[5]](#footnote-5) for the fulfillment of common human good in the midst of diversity. Considering that the liturgy is one of the significant teaching tools of the church, he believes that, through appropriate worship life, churches can be models for the community of “pluralistic citizenship,”[[6]](#footnote-6) in which diversity and differences are valued with respect, rather than being suspected or feared. He convinces us that, through worship, the church can communicate and shape the virtue of hope and foster a sense of public responsibility most needed in American public life.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In addition to Thiemann’s essay focusing on the ethical concern with Christian worship in our pluralistic society, there are at least two books that are invaluably helpful to understand Christian worship from multicultural perspectives. One is Mark Francis, C.S.V.’s *Liturgy in a Multicultural Community,* written from a Roman Catholic point of view, and the other is an edited volume written by Protestant theologians, *Making Room at the Table: Invitation to Multicultural Worship*.[[8]](#footnote-8) While the former provides historical and cultural knowledge for understanding multicultural worship, the latter develops insights into multicultural worship through biblical, theological, and practical analyses. Based on these major resources, multicultural worship can be explained in three aspects: God’s invitation to liminality, the human response to the invitation by praying and doing justice, and the eschatological celebration of the divine and the human.

1. The Divine Invitation. In his monograph, Francis proposes some ideas for multicultural worship based on his own experience of teaching and celebrating worship in multicultural contexts. In relation to liturgy, he understands culture as “a lens through which we look at the world and interpret reality” and express our faith.[[9]](#footnote-9) He critically evaluates the modern view of culture that was the conceptual guideline of Vatican II documents on worship.[[10]](#footnote-10) According to Francis, while the modern conception of culture helps the church acknowledge the plurality and relativity of liturgy, it endangers liturgy to be a simple act of translation of the essence of the Christian message into the symbolic language of the congregation—verbal and non-verbal—by ignoring “the present movement of God’s spirit.”[[11]](#footnote-11) He urges that multicultural worship should be “much more than translation” and involve “more than bilingualism[[12]](#footnote-12) and defines it as “a conscious attempt at helping all members of the assembly, regardless of their culture and language, feel ‘at home’ at worship.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

The challenge of Francis’ statement of multicultural worship is crucial, for making people who are genuinely different in ways of living feel at home is realistically a daunting task for the church. Donald H. Juel, a New Testament scholar, uses the image of a stranger in describing how difficult it is to feel at home with different people:

Strangers pose a challenge not only in terms of physical violence. Encountering a stranger is genuinely unsettling. . . . It is remarkably difficult, because significant opinions about life’s major questions are presupposed by the culture and taken to be common sense. As “common sense,” they are never subjected to scrutiny. Those opinions, in turn, provide the very conditions for perceptions and judgments. Those raised in another culture—“strangers”—can raise questions that constitute a deep challenge to notions that we take to be foundational to everything we think and do.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In spite of the genuine threat and fear experienced from strangers, Juel sees the possibility of “real friendship” with them in “a growing recognition of and respect for remarkably different ways of viewing and experiencing the world.”[[15]](#footnote-15) He rightly points out that all of us are strangers—a genuine threat—to one another in certain ways and that God, as the host, is willing to extend hospitality to all of us—strangers. To put it another way, God is the initiator who forms a “community of strangers” in which differences are recognized as “a great gift.”[[16]](#footnote-16) For Juel, Christian worship is “a primary locus for this welcoming of strangers.”[[17]](#footnote-17) It is initiated by God’s invitation to the community of strangers, which is fundamentally multicultural. At this point, multicultural worship is not a matter of our choice but of our faithful response to God’s hospitality. As Juel reminds us, what makes multicultural worship possible is the “God who claims us and promises that ‘neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom. 8:38-39).”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Asian American theologian Sang Hyun Lee explains the experience of multicultural worship as that of “liminality.”[[19]](#footnote-19) By critically reflecting on worship in Korean immigrant churches, he explains that worship is “a ritual process that can be truly communal and transforming only when the participants are led to experience a structural ambiguity or openness by being liberated for a moment from social roles, status, and hierarchy.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This ritual process, says Lee, is called an “in-between” or “liminal” state, in anthropologist Victor Turner’s term, in which “one has left behind the ‘culturally defined encumbrances of role, status, reputation, class, caste, sex or other structural niche’” and is “freed up temporarily from all that binds [one] in society.”[[21]](#footnote-21) For Lee, the “egalitarian relationship among persons” in the liminal state is powerful enough to lead worshippers to feel free to “reflect on their lives or society, envision new ideas and ways of doing things and dream new dreams.”[[22]](#footnote-22) He identifies this “creative state”[[23]](#footnote-23) with the experience of “leaving home, a pilgrimage,”[[24]](#footnote-24) in which transformative change can happen in the community as well as in the individual person and defines multicultural worship as the ritual experience of this liminal state.

As Francis notes, it is important that people of different racial and cultural backgrounds feel at home in multicultural worship. As Lee and Juel indicate, however, it is often a wild experience because multicultural worship is God’s invitation to the experience of the community of strangers or “a pilgrimage,” unfamiliar to our traditional practice of worship. In multicultural worship, we encounter the living God in creative ways beyond our conventional expectations.

1. Praying and Doing Justice. Francis understands that the theological task of multicultural worship is to help the community of faith be liberated from the burdens of unjust acts. He quotes Robert W. Hovda’s perception of the burdens of injustice within and beyond the church:

We cannot do anything right in our ministries if we are still carrying around the burdens of sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and other manifestations of the tendency to make one’s self, one’s group one’s culture the “norm” the “standard” that measures all others. While it is true that life has laid these burdens on every single one of us (none has escaped), it is also true that God can and does liberate us.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Francis sees the potential for liberation from the burdens of injustice in the setting of multicultural worship. He explains its unique capacity by quoting Thea Bowman’s profound words:

The question for justice demands that I walk in ways that I never walked before, that I talk and think and pray and learn and grow in ways that are new to me. If I’m going to share faith with my brothers and sisters who are Chinese or Jamaican or South African or Winnebago Indian, I’ve got to learn new ways, new means, new languages, new rituals, new procedures, new understandings, so I can read my brother’s heart, so I can hear my sister’s call, and I can live justly.[[26]](#footnote-26)

This theological insight leads us to understand that multicultural worship should involve both praying and doing justice at the same time. It is to be not merely culturally balanced liturgical expressions, but a sharing of faith with those who are different from us. Sharing faith includes the serious exchange of ethical concerns through the channels of both prayers and acts of solidarity. By doing so, multicultural worship participates in the realization of justice, first, within the church, and then in the larger society.

In this regard, cultural theologian Mark Taylor states that if “the radically inclusive Jesus”[[27]](#footnote-27) is remembered in multicultural worship through “an embodied, polyrhythmic sensibility,”[[28]](#footnote-28) that kind of worship has the revolutionary power to liberate people from political and social oppression. Taylor urges that Christian praise embodied in culture such as music and dance has to “move out of the church buildings, as Christians’ radically inclusive love always moves into the world,”[[29]](#footnote-29) as the transforming power of our public life. His notion reminds us of what Paul Lehmann stressed in his article, “Praying and Doing Justly”: the word liturgy (*leitourgia*) means, etymologically, “the discharge of a public office.” It is closely related to public responsibility, offering service to the state or public and so contributing to the well-being of the community.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Multicultural worship as an act of praying and doing justice provides the church with a new liturgical paradigm that is necessary for the transformation of our pluralistic society. It invites the congregation to think collectively about who they are and what they ought to do as Christian believers in order to participate in transforming our globalized, pluralistic society into a just, human community. It is, however, a challenge for the church because to “talk and think and pray and learn and grow in ways that are new” to us is neither easy nor comfortable. In other words, multicultural worship as the enactment of justice might be a place where worshipers feel unease and discomfort, for “a conscious attempt” to pray and do justice to others often leads both worship leaders and congregants to engage in conversation on their identity. Conflicting and controversial issues emerging from diversity in race, gender, sexuality, language, religion, class, and so forth, in our pluralistic public sphere make multicultural worship a serious challenge to our personal and communal identity.

1. Eschatological Celebration. New Testament scholar Brian K. Blount helps us explore the challenge of multicultural worship in relation to our identity at a deeper level from the biblical point of view. In his essay, “The Apocalypse of Worship,”[[31]](#footnote-31) he claims that “[i]n the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is a preacher of multicultural worship”[[32]](#footnote-32) and calls us into critical reflection on our worship life. By contrasting between the “fruitless” monocultural Temple worship of Jesus’ time and his multicultural table fellowship and between the purity codes and his act of cleansing the Temple (Mark 11:15-18), Blount underlines the significance of Isaiah’s prophecy that the Temple shall be “a house of prayer for *all* the nations,” (Isaiah 56:7; Mark 11:17).[[33]](#footnote-33) For Mark, says Blount, multicultural worship is actually an urgent demand for the promise of God’s kingdom because it is an apocalyptic reality that is not idle talk in his Gospel that should be demythologized or ignored but a critically realistic call, through which God’s promise of justice must be “immediately” fulfilled as a historical reality in our present lives.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Blount extends Jesus’ (and Isaiah’s) invitation to multicultural worship to us by insisting that Jesus call for “the apocalypse of worship, the realization of its end-time, multicultural reality”[[35]](#footnote-35) and that the creation of a new temple that houses multicultural worship be not only Jesus’ work but also “the work of the Jesus disciple.”[[36]](#footnote-36) While monocultural worship preserves the identity of the community of faith as racially and socially exclusive, the multicultural worship to which we are invited intends to include all the people of God, “even the foreigner,” (Isaiah 56:7) in its celebration.[[37]](#footnote-37) This kind of worship is only possible when the community of worship is open to reformulate its identity as the inclusive eschatological community of strangers.

Multicultural worship as an eschatological celebration requires the worshiping community to newly envision its identity in light of God’s promise for the world. It also implies that one of the goals of Christian worship should be to help the worshipping community reimagine its identity in the direction of God’s eschatological promise. Through interpreting the Bible from multicultural perspectives and reclaiming its new meaning in liturgy, Christian worship will eventually participate in reforming the church and its larger society.

1. Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 112-125. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf., Susan j. White, *Foundations of Christian Worship*, 2nd edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 2-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thiemann, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Brian K. Blount and Leonora T. Tisdale (eds.), *Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Francis, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Donald H. Juel, “Multicultural Worship: A Pauline Perspective,” in Blount and Tisdale, 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Sang Hyun Lee, “Worship on the Edge: Liminality and the Korean American Context, in Blount and Tisdale, 96-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Robert W. Hovda, “The Amen Corner,” *Worship* 63 (1989):462, cited in Francis, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Thea Bowman, “Justice, Power, and Praise,” *Liturgy and Social Justice*, ed. Edward M. Grosz (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 37, cited in Francis, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Mark Taylor, “Polyrhythm in Worship: Caribbean Keys to an Effective Word of God,” in Blount and Tisdale, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Paul Lehmann, “Praying and Doing Justly,” *Reformed Liturgy and Music*, XVX:2 (Spring 1985): 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Brian Blount, “The Apocalypse of Worship,” in Blount and Tisdale, 16-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 19-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)