

Make a Joyful Noise

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My particular contribution to this **Illf Review**, which honors Walter Williams' twenty-five years of service as a professor at The Illf School of Theology, is intended to emphasize one facet of Dr. Williams' interest and contribution to the study of religion: his work in the field of worship. I was honored to assist him in compiling **A Handbook of Worship** for Ministers back in 1944, and I mark the beginning of my own interest in worship forms from that experience. So, I am truly delighted and honored to submit some of my thoughts concerning modern worship for publication here, and to extend my warmest congratulations to Professor Williams, and my thanks to him as one of his students who (like all his other students) hold him in warmest affection for what he gave to me as teacher and friend, and what he has contributed to my school as scholar and Christian in these last twenty-five years.

SOREN KIERKEGAARD held that it was better to worship a false god truly than a true god falsely.¹ It was the attitude that counted. Jesus seemed to be of a similar opinion when he instructed the wor-

¹ "If one who lives in the midst of Christendom goes up to the house of God, the house of the true God . . . and prays, but prays in a false spirit; and one who lives in an idolatrous community prays with the entire passion of the infinite, although his eyes rests upon the image of an idol: where is there most truth? The one prays in truth to God though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol . . . From *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, reprinted in *Readings in The Philosophy of Religion*, John A. Mourant, (Crowell, 1954), p. 307.

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shipper to lay aside enmity² and be in humility,³ and then worship.

We shall acknowledge these insights, and endorse them, but the main thrust of this paper will be elsewhere: not in the psychology of worship, but in the structure of public worship—in its purposes and forms. We shall assume that our worshippers have the proper attitudes and then ask: (1) What are these "true worshippers" trying to accomplish through worship? and (2) How can they best structure the elements of worship to accomplish the values sought in public worship, especially in modern times?

I

THE TARGETS OF WORSHIP

Apparently not all worship is aimed at the same target. At least three targets of worship are discernible in the religious practices of mankind. First, worship may have a metatechnological function.⁴ Second, it may have a sacramental function. And, third, it may have an experiential function.

The Metatechnological Function. In both ancient and modern times worship has been used to introduce supernatural or extranatural power into natural processes. In other words, it has functioned as magic. For example, the Sun Dance of the Indians of the North American plains was performed to assure the return of the buffalo for the Fall hunt, or to protect the tribe from its enemies. The worship involved long

² " . . . First go and make your peace with your brother, and only then come back and offer your gift." Matthew 5:24b.

³ "It was this man, I tell you, and not the other, who went home acquitted of his sins." Luke 18:14.

⁴ Metatechnology (a term by William Henry Bernhardt) designates all attempts to introduce extranatural or supernatural power into natural processes.

fastings, self-torture, sun gazing, dancing, singing, praying, and the entire tribe participated in the service. Its aim was to bring supernatural force to the assistance of the Indians in situations where they felt they were unable to cope. In matters of life and death primitive and ancient men sought the god's help. They needed something beyond their own technological skills. They needed metatechnology. William Bernhardt, in his **The Analysis of Religion**, researched this sort of thing among the natives of the Trobriand Islands and the Romans of the Augustan Age and found that in each case metatechnology was used extensively to "assure" an adequate food supply and to ward off or cure human diseases. In those areas of human living where technological skills were inadequate, elaborate religious services were performed to get the god to do for man what man could not do for himself.

With the advance of modern scientific technology in agriculture and medicine this type of worship has been generally discarded, but, of course, not completely so. It is still extensively practiced in contemporary primitive cultures and in other places where modern technologies are still in short supply. Also, there are vestiges of it in technological advanced cultures. There are "faith healers" in America, and numerous people who both believe and advertise that "prayer changes things." To the degree that the worshippers of such persuasions engage in worship services intended to infuse divine power into natural processes, worship with a metatechnological function still survives.

The Sacramental Function. As the metatechnological function of worship aims to bring divine power into the natural environment, the sacramental function of worship aims to bring divine power into the inner life of man—into his soul. In an act of worship the worshipper receives divine "grace"—purity, perhaps, or integrity, or merit,

and especially immortality. He gets what god has: a life beyond death. This kind of religion and worship was common in the Greek Mystery Religions, e.g., the Eleusian, Dionysian and Orphic cults. An initiate to such a cult underwent a preparatory purification, an introduction to the mystic secrets, a beholding of the sacred objects, an enactment of the divine story performed as a ritual drama with mythical narration; then he was initiated into full membership and privileged to become like the god. This great power came to him (in most cults) by drinking the sacred wine (in the Dionysian cult intoxication was the very essence of the God) and/or by eating the flesh of the divine animal (a kid or a bull) which was ritualistically identified as being the god. Rome also had its Mystery Religions: the Cybele Cult from Phrygia, and the Bacchus (Dionysian) Cult from Greece, and the Ma Cult from Cappadocia, and the Adonis Cult from Syria, and the Mithras Cult from Persia. All of these cults offered the adherents a sacramental infusion of divine power, especially the power of immortal life.

This sort of thing existed at the time of the rise of Christianity and greatly influenced sacramental worship in that new cult. The Gentiles were accustomed to religions which satisfied the yearning for immortality and provided a worship form which effected a union with a resurrected savior-god, and thereby assured immortality. The great evangelist to the Gentiles was not to be out-done by pagan Mysteries. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul presented a rich and dramatic account of how Christian regeneration and immortality was to be achieved.

... through baptism we have been buried with (Christ) in death, so that, just as he was raised from the dead through the Father's glory, we too may live a new life ... you must think of yourselves as dead to sin

but alive to God, through union with Christ Jesus.⁵

This type of worship became the major form of Christian worship, and remains so in the Roman Catholic Church even to today. The Roman Catholic Church is basically a treasury of seven sacraments, and Catholic worship is predominantly a participation in these grace infusing rituals of worship.

The Experiential Function. Often the aim of worship is to establish a vivid awareness of the presence of God. The worshipper seeks to "experience" God as if they were face to face. He is searching for Tennyson's nearness: "Speak to him thou for he hears, and Spirit with Spirit can meet—Closer is he than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet."⁶

This desire to "know God intimately" was apparently what motivated John Wesley to join the Holy Club at Oxford, make an ill-starred excursion to the Colony of Georgia, concern himself with the Moravian Brethren, and be at a meeting in Aldersgate Street, May 24, 1739. In his Journal he described that experience.

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.⁷

Reading it as he wrote it, it seems such a simple experience: "About a quarter to nine . . . I felt my heart strangely warmed . . ." but simple or not it was an experience big enough to release the powers of a man to the establish-

ment of an "experience concerned" people called Methodists.

Wesley, of course, did not invent this kind of concern. It predated him probably as far back as Adam. Apparently some men seek God for no other purpose than to know Him intimately, even as one wants to know intimately a friend or lover. Indeed, this kind of thing has been a central dynamic in all Jewish history. Quite as characteristic as their ethical-montheism has been the Jewish awareness of God in their lives, speaking to them out of a burning bush, the smoke of Mt. Sinai, the voices of the Prophets, the ceremonies of the Temple, the prayers of the Synagogue, the lighting of Sabbath Candles. To know that God is with them, and that God has a burden and a mission for them is to summarize three thousand years of Jewish life and worship.

Worship as experiential seeks to establish a confrontation with God. In its extremest form this kind of worship effects an overwhelming sense of oneness with God. This is called mysticism. In mysticism the worshipper is mystically united with God, and even more—with all reality. Professor Walter Stace defines mysticism as "the apprehension of an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things."⁸ The person loses his self-identity in an overwhelming experience of cosmic identity.⁹

This, however, is an extreme form of experiential worship. More often experiential worship seeks to establish an experience of awesome, glorious, cleansing encounter with the **More** of William James' adventuresome expectations. It is worship as an I to Thou encounter between a man and his God. In this experience there is a fading of self-centeredness and self-identity, but

⁵ Romans 6:4-11.

⁶ Alfred Tennyson, "The Higher Pantheism".

⁷ *The Journal of John Wesley*, Volume 1, pp. 475-476.

⁸ Walter T. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics*, p. 14.

⁹ For a more extended consideration of mysticism see Tremmel's article, "A Footnote To The Aesthetic Transaction," in the *Iliff Review*, Spring, 1966.

seldom (as in mysticism) a loss of self-awareness. Jones is still Jones, and God is God. There is no suspension of the ego, and a sense of separate realities remains. Things do not become one, but they may become intimately, even exquisitely related in meaningful community. In this form of worship the target aimed at is an experience of the intimate presence of God in the life of the "true believer," and a sense of personal "conversion," "forgiveness," "renewal," because of this experience. It is worship that reveals and transforms.

II

THE ELEMENTS OF WORSHIP

Worship is a participation drama in which religious meanings are preserved and communicated. As drama, worship has acting and speaking (narration). As religious drama, it conveys religious attitudes and ideas—it is aestho-noetic.¹⁰ The acting we shall call ritual; the speaking we shall call myth; the conveying of religious meanings we shall call symbolism. These designations are not arbitrary with us, but simply analytic. These are the structural elements of worship. Lewis Spense states that "ritual, in the most primitive sense, is an act by which man seeks to imitate a ceremony performed by a god or gods in the past for some reason advantageous to humanity," and that "myth is, in its earliest form, the description of such rites, the story of them, 'the book of words' which accompanies the dramatic representation of ritual."¹¹ We shall contend that these "primitive" elements are not only primitive, but basic. Worship is a drama, and drama is structured with action, narration, and meaning. This is true even when the worship is not an elaborate service, but a simple prayer. In prayer there is acting (or more often posturing): one

sits, or stands, or kneels, usually with a bowed head. And there is narration; the words of the prayer, or even its silences. And there is symbolic meaning: the prayer means that one believes or hopes some account (some mythology) of God's reality and character is true.

The dramatic character or worship can be seen readily in the ritual/myth structure of the Christmas Story dramas enacted in Christian churches and Sunday Schools each year at Christmas time. While a narrator reads the Nativity accounts from Matthew and Luke, the scenes of the Nativity (what God did for man) are performed with ritualistic, if sometimes awkward, actions and postures, by selected members from the congregation. Here we have a classic example of folk-worship. The myth (the dramatic narration of a divine-human encounter) and the ritual (the stylized actions of that encounter) are combined to effect an experience of wonder and joy in all who "behold and believe".

Two important observations should be made at this point. First, the enactment of the Christmas Story is not simply a drama, but a folk-drama. It is drama of participation. The actors, the narrator, and the auditors are all caught up in the movement and life and spirit of the event. Which is to say that although the worship forms are often spectacular, they are not intended to be spectacles. They are vehicles of involvement in which the whole folk—the community of worshippers—are all communicants. They are all partakers because they all participate.

In much different setting this participation aspect of worship is exemplified in the Jewish celebration of Passover. The Jewish family gathers at the festive table. One of the children, well coached in his part, asks the exciting question of the meaning of the drama: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" Then, the equally well coached head of the family makes the

¹⁰ It is a perceptive, emotive, intellectual involvement. Its short: it is existential.

¹¹ *The Outlines of Mythology*, p. 23.

answer: "We were slaves unto Pharoah in Egypt and the eternal our God led us from there with a mighty hand." So begins the participation drama of Passover in which ritual (acting) and myth (narration) combine to recreate the sense of God's presence and God's support of Jewish life, the symbolic meaning) both ancient and modern.

First, then, worship is participation drama; and, second, it is a preservation and communication of religious meanings. It is a religious symbol. Paul Tillich has made some interesting observations about the nature of symbols. He has asserted that "symbol and sign are different; . . . while the sign bears no necessary relation to that to which it points, the symbol participates in the reality for which it stands."¹² Elsewhere he states:

The denotative power of language is its ability to grasp and communicate general meaning. The expressive power of language is its ability to disclose and communicate personal states . . . Most speaking moves between these two poles: the more scientific and technical, the nearer the denotative pole; the more poetic and communal, the nearer the expressive pole.

This is to say that denotation is the central function of signs, while connotation is the central function of symbols. A sign is arbitrarily assigned to convey a meaning. A flashing red light at a street corner means "stop". A green light could be used equally well. The sign "3" designates a precise mathematical concept. It is arbitrary. The sign "2" could just as easily be used, if everyone understood that "2" was to stand for what "3" formerly stood for. But symbols are not so, for the function of symbols is not to denote precise meanings, but to transport aestho-noetic experiences. They are not arbitrary—not once they have arrived at full symbolic status. They cannot

be substituted simply through common cognitive agreement. For example, although the American flag does have a kind of denotative function in that it points at this country instead of that one, it is not simply a sign of this country, for it represents, depicts, excites, participates in the whole spectrum of the history and life of this nation; and it is received by the beholder as a communal yet unique experience. He sees what others see; yet he sees also only what he alone sees. The symbol speaks to him about the total reality (facts and spirit) of America, of which the symbol is itself a part. It is both a piece of gaudy cloth and a nation.

The ritual/myth drama of worship is symbolic not signary. The Christmas Story and Passover are symbols because, although they do point at something (events in a history), their main function is to carry with them (make conscious and vivid) the import of precious events and religious convictions.

Theology and philosophy of religion may deal in signs (analyzing, criticizing, systematizing concepts), but worship is an art form. It speaks to the heart to elicit those reasons that "reason does not know".¹⁴ Saying this we do not mean that worship is irrational, or even unrational, or that theology and philosophy are inimical of worship. Worship need not outrage reason, and probably should not. But it speaks differently from theology and philosophy. It uses its own logic, which is the logic of evocation and nuance, as does any art form. And, there certainly ought to be a theology of worship with the responsibility of interpreting religious symbols according to theological principles and methods, and especially to reinterpret them (and perhaps even effect new ones) when the ancient symbols lose their power to convey the message of the faith into the current

¹² *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1, p. 239.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁴ Pascal, *Pensées*.

life and world of the communicant. It is to this subject we must now attend.

III

THE THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP

The purpose of a theology of worship is to make explicit and relevant the meanings intended by the ritual/myth drama being enacted. Such theology has a conservative and critical responsibility.

First, theology should respect the aesthetic power of old ritual/myth forms and the symbolic meanings they convey. Such forms enjoy the strength of familiarity and hoary acceptance. They should not be despised simply because they are old, or dismissed cavalierly simply because they are "mythological"; i.e., pre-scientific and superstitious. The responsibility of the theologian of worship is not to reduce religious rituals, myths, and symbols, but to refurbish them.

However, the problem is that old forms do often lose their symbolic significance. This happens sometimes because they are endlessly repeated and become boring; but more often it happens because they are no longer relevant. They no longer fit. They no longer speak any significant message to the worshipper. This occurs when the elements of the worship form become intellectually or emotionally anachronistic. For example, to say, "He ascended into Heaven": (which is an important statement in both the Apostles and Nicene creeds), makes little sense to a modern man. When cosmology was conceived as a simple three-storied affair, ascending into heaven and descending into hell might grip the auditor with cognitive meaning. But today when there is no up or down to the universe, an up-to-heaven-down-to-hell symbol is vague at best, and often annoying, if not embarrassing. In other words, the narration does not narrate. If, however, theology explains that such speaking, no matter what it once

denoted, always connoted "to be infinitely with God," or "infinitely separated from God," such phrases may once again carry the authority of religious significance and acceptance. Another example of an anachronism in worship might be the ritual (posture) of kneeling. To kneel before an emperor or a king was a meaningful gesture when such potentates ruled in majestic and fearsome authority. But today in those places where kings are few, kneeling is deprived of its pristine charge of emotional significance. In our part of the world, at least, one does not kneel to show respect. He stands. The point is that rituals, myths, and symbolic meanings may lose their power to grasp and convey. It is then important that the rituals be restructured, the myths be remythologized, and the symbols be retheologized. In this responsibility theologians of worship should be conservative and artistically creative, for if this refurbishing is reductionist in character,¹⁵ the repertory of worship is by so much impoverished. Or, on the other hand, if the refurbishing is "popular" in character,¹⁶ the repertory is by so much cheapened. The theology of worship must be one of aestho-noetic reconstruction, neither mind nor heart should be deprived.

One of the better illustrations of reconstruction in worship is the new vernacular Mass of the Roman Catholic Church. The Mass still means what it meant before. It is the drama of Christ's death—his sacrificial offering of himself for men—but it is now performed with a narration the communicants can understand. Furthermore, the ritual has been reconstructed. Instead of kneeling before the king, the worshippers stand to praise and pray. They fall on their

¹⁵ If with a Bishop Pike we simply dismiss the anachronistic forms.

¹⁶ If with the Methodists we drop hymn number 132 of the 1935 *Methodist Hymnal*, ("Into The Woods My Master Went"), and replace it with hymn number 17 in the new 1966 *Methodist Hymnal*, ("How Great Thou Art").

knees only before the dread wonder of Christ's sacrifice and gift. Indeed, the entire mood of the drama has changed. It is no longer secretive, but open. The priest does not hide what he is doing at the altar. Instead, Catholics, in newly constructed churches, worship in-the-round, and elsewhere they at least see what is going on because the priest is now facing them.

Other modern refurbishings are not so aestho-noetically commendable. If, for example, Methodism is still, as it was in the past, a church concerned with the Bible and preaching, both directed to the conversion and commitment to Christian discipleship and discipline of the worshippers, one might wonder why so many new Methodist churches have split chancels, with the Bible and preacher pushed to either side, and altars (not even communion tables) conspicuously at the center of things. Could it be that Methodism is becoming sacramental rather than experiential, or is it that we are just somewhat befuddled—warm in heart, thick in head?

As Jesus once warned, it is wise to be cautious of putting new wine into old wineskins, but the reordering of rituals, the reinterpreting of myths, and the retheologizing of symbols has been tried successfully before. In fact, a new interpretation of Jesus' simplistic neo-Jewish Way was initiated as early as Saint Paul. When he confronted the non-Jews (especially the God-fearers) outside of Palestine, he found it convenient to reinterpret Christian forms and meanings. Indeed, before the challenge of the Mysteries, he made Christianity the greatest mystery religion of them all. It worked for him. It worked after him, again and again throughout Christian history. It is necessary to make it work once more: to refurbish in relevance the forms and meanings of the Hebrew-Christian heritage, either that or go down before a humanistic-secularism, with the rituals, myths, and symbols of that enterprise.

IV

CONSERVATION RENOVATION

It is not within the scope of this article, nor the ability of the author, to present an extensive renovation of Christian rituals, myths, and symbols. But it is appropriate to suggest some guidelines to be followed when such renovations take place.

First, it is important to remember that it is Christian worship we are concerned with. We are not inventing a new faith, but reinterpreting an old one in light of modern knowledge, modern culture, and modern expectations. This means the worship must continue to convey—make aestho-noetically vivid: (1) God and the demands of God, especially as Jesus expressed those demands in his endorsement of the two great commandments of the Hebrew tradition; (2) the drama of Israel, at least in its struggle to know God and God's demands from Abraham to Moses to the Prophets (from El-Shaddai to the All-God Y.H.V.H.); and, in some traditions, from the Prophet's monotheism to the God/Satan dualism of post-exilic times; and (3) Christ. Christian worship must continue to hold to the centrality of Jesus Christ. Christ is, and has been from the very beginning, the critical symbol of Christian worship. Jesus was not simply a peasant-type religious genius who once lived in Palestine, but the center of an event, the symbol of a happening, which transformed the world. Christ represents what God would be if God were a man. In this he is the symbol which overcomes Tillich's paradox of ultimate concern.¹⁷ The symbol Christ makes

¹⁷ " . . . it is impossible to be concerned about something which cannot be encountered concretely . . . The completely concrete being, the individual person, is the object of the most radical concern—the concern of love . . . [but] ultimate concern must transcend every preliminary finite and concrete concern . . . [in doing this it] loses the concreteness of being-to-being relationship." *Systematic Theology*, volume 1, p. 211.

the infinite concrete in a person, and points persons to infinity. It is the symbol *par excellence*.

Second, it is important to recognize that Christian worship is pluralistic. Christian communities have different aestho-noetic sets. They conceive the purpose of worship differently. Among these sets there are, at least, the sacramentally oriented traditions (Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran), the confessionally oriented traditions (Calvinistic), and the experientially oriented traditions (Anabaptist, Arminian). Each orientation stipulates a worship form, and the placing of symbolic items within that form. Of course, no community is restricted to a given set (a single purpose and way to worship), but in general the communities emphasize one set rather than another.¹⁸ And this emphasis is important. What one's religion means is wrapped up in what he anticipates as the end of worship.¹⁹

Third, as already suggested, rituals may need changes to make them more meaningful to a new age. Perhaps, as the Catholics seem to realize, one ought to stand for praise and prayer, sit for instruction, and kneel when he seems stricken and overwhelmed by some tremendous emotion. It might also be appropriate, in a world of endless noise, hurry and harassment to incorporate large chunks of Quakerish silence into religious ritual—a kind of non-ritual, a space of time for whatever still small voice yet remains in us, or might be discovered in us if other distractions, including the organist's so-called meditation music, were systematically suspended for awhile.

Fourth, in the remythologizing and retheologizing of myths and creedal

formulas, theologians should attend to the basic preachments (the kerygma) being sought and articulated by the ancient writers. The question to be asked is not are these stories and creedal formulas pre-scientific or anachronistic, but do they still portray in some dramatic fashion what men still seek and try to articulate as they reach out beyond sight "For the ends of Being and ideal Grace."²⁰ Professor Lindsay B. Longacre, one of Iliff's greats of the past,²¹ used to tell us that we must go behind the biblical words to the men who wrote the words, and to what they meant by the words. That imperative still stands. The question is: Do these myths and creedal formulations dramatize what is religiously significant and true? For example, behind the untruth of six days of creation, does not the religious truth remain that the Sabbath (a time for worshipping) is sacred to God and necessary to man? and behind the delightful but untrue account of Eve from Adam's rib, is not mating still something sacred and of God? and if we do not know much about angels, are we not still convinced that they **should have** sung the night that Christ was born, and therefore, did? and if we can no longer abide the Trinity as an absurd compromise from the Council of Nicea, or yet reduce it to a "divine committee," from Bishop Pike (Episcopalian) of California, are we still not excited and "grabbed" dramatically by the idea and truth of "persona"? If the myths and formulas do not dramatize anymore, it may be the fault of an antiquated thology, rather than an ancient art form.

Fifth, there are powerful new media where the old forms may acquire new skins. The use of movie films and television offer tremendous opportunities for experimentation in worship. The

¹⁸ This is what makes an altar-centered church architecture questionable for Methodists.

¹⁹ This sort of difference (the aesthetic difference) is probably a greater stumbling block to ecumenicity between sets than such intellectual items as the authenticity of the Virginity of Mary or the miracles of Jesus.

²⁰ Elizabeth Browning, "Sonnets From The Portuguese," No. 42.

²¹ Longacre was Walter Williams' predecessor as the Iliff Old Testament scholar.

possibility for worship through modern electronic media are "space-age astronomical," and thus far largely unexplored. It may well be that the star leading to Bethlehem is today none other than Telstar.

We could use dramatists, theologians of worship, writers, actors, artists of every sort creating new worship forms for camera and projector. However, one condition should rule in all such endeavors. What is being sought is not an advertising of God's wares, or a slick way to entertain, but a participation drama in which men try (and sometimes succeed) to effect an I-to-Thou relationship between their own lives and the Living God. Worship is

an experience, not a show. One other thing that Professor Longacre was fond of saying to us "budding young prophets" as we took off for our student charges each Friday afternoon was: "Remember, gentlemen, you are not just preaching a sermon Sunday morning: you are participating in an event."

If Christian worship is to survive as a religio-aesthetic dynamic and a treasure worth having we must work to effect an inspired re-creation of actions, narrations, and symbols which make the face of God and the meaning of human life exciting dramas in which modern man (as men before him) can participate, surrender, and be reborn.

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