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CULT AND CULTURE

What Does Christian Worship Owe its Setting?

- 1 I'm prompted to begin a dialogue, with this Essay, by my own remarks in Essay 189: "Worship for Grownups". There are some assumptions in that posting that need further explication; this present posting represents an attempt to address some of those assumptions. Hence I ask here: Does worship owe anything to the society that surrounds it? If so, what might that responsibility include?
- 2 One of my assumptions in Essay 189 was that Christians, today as always, do indeed owe a responsibility to their setting, to their society, to their particular culture. To argue, as I did in Essay 189, that Christian worship is for grownups, is to make some assumptions about what grownups look like today and what non-grownups look like: today's cultural indicators of maturity versus non-maturity.
- 3 It's no accident that the words "cult" and "culture" are related. Cult -- or sometimes, cultus -- is a twenty-five dollar word for ritual, ceremony, the kind of thing I've argued simply belongs to our humanum. Every human being, even an atheist, "worships" in some kind of cult, or cultic form. You're simply not human without ritualizing some aspects of your life, what you hold dear, the values you cherish, the principles that drive you. I've argued that point in many previous Essays in this space.
- 4 If worship and culture are related, then, we can legitimately ask, What is this or that specific worship form "cultivating"? Are there forms or experiences or feelings or assumptions or enthusiasms in our present cultural setting that our Christian worship might worthily celebrate? And the opposite: Are there forms or experiences or perceptions in our present society that our Christian worship ought to ignore, or actively to resist? It's a matter of "testing the spirits" -- 1 John 4:2 -- among other considerations.
- 5 The Lutheran World Federation some years ago proposed a splendid scheme by which Christians might judge or "test the spirits" in Christian worship. In a far-reaching series of essays, widely embraced ecumenically, the LWF proposed that Christian worship must be a) en-culturated, but also b) counter-cultural, c) trans-cultural, and d) cross-cultural. I have unpacked each of these standards in previous postings in this space.

6 What concerns me here are chiefly standards a) and b) above. How can we discern what in our worship represents a) legitimate en-culturation? And how can we decide when we must be ruthlessly b) counter-cultural? In a word, when is our worship properly “grownup”, and when is it infantilizing: “...for 13 year olds”, where you must “leave your brains at the door when you enter”? (Essay 190)

7 Let me propose four standards by which we may decide what our cultus owes its culture. What we are “cultivating”.

8 First and foremost, our Christian worship owes its culture a clear and persuasive presentation of the Christian Gospel. That's the Church's unambiguous vocation. Nobody else – no other institution in any cultural setting -- has that responsibility. The Church through the Church's worship is custodian of a treasure handed down to us from the Apostles to keep, to share, to shape its life, to shape its culture's life.

9 We are to exemplify what's best in the coming of the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom is already among us, in proleptic previews, where the deaf can hear, the blind can see, the lame can dance, and the poor have Good News announced among them.

10 Christian worship is to be a working model of that Gospel. Sunday after Sunday, week after week, year after year.

11 Second, Christian worship owes its culture intelligibility. Our worship ought to be intelligible within our contemporary setting. That's one good reason for worship in the people's local vernacular.

12 Conversely, there's a good case to be made for universality, the Mass in Latin, always and everywhere. You travel to Spain, the Mass is in Latin; you travel to Finland, the Mass is in Latin there also. But I'll argue – recent Christian history has followed this precept, for example in the splendid reforms of Vatican 2 – intelligibility trumps universality. Luther and the 16th Century Reformers came to the same conclusion.

13 Worship education – mystogogy – will still be necessary, to point out why we do what we do in worship, even to old-timers. The whys and wherefores of Christian worship will never be self-evident.

14 Related to 12 & 13 above is my third point: Enculturation. Our worship needs to use and to exhibit contemporary forms: contemporary language, contemporary music, contemporary architecture, contemporary art forms.

15 This is the principle by which we abandon the use of Tudor English, for example – thees and thous, beseeches and vouchsafes – in our prayers and other texts, and speak in a simple *koine*: the language of the marketplace, the language of the commons.

16 That does not mean our liturgical language today must be flat or banal or without majesty or indeed mystery. Isaac Watts is our model today as in his own times (the 18th Century). Strong nouns and verbs; few adjectives or adverbs.

17 It's also the principle by which we abandon patriarchal terms and masculine constructions, and speak inclusively, as much as possible. If we don't, we're losing one half the human race: women.

18 It's also this principle that gives us permission to use contemporary hymns and contemporary musical forms in our worship. And contemporary architectural forms in our building and remodeling.

19 But – this is fourth and last – we want to present what's best and highest in contemporary culture, not simply any catchy tune or any flashy new technology. This is the point of my rant in Essay 189: “Worship for Grownups”. Simply put, there are some so-called contemporary forms – chiefly musical forms and electronic forms -- that betray our Gospel. They infantilize. They do not promote “growing up into Christ.”

20 I was taught 65 years ago in Seminary, for example, that the best hymns and prayers do not dwell excessively on the first person singular. There's a kind of unbecoming narcissism in many so-called contemporary hymn texts; they fail this important test. So do many Victorian hymn texts: “He walks with me and he talks with me...”. (So unfortunately do some of my favourites, the German Chorales, alas! Well, nobody's perfect!)

21 I was taught further at Seminary that the best music for liturgical texts honours the words, and does not repeat portions of texts to fit the tune. “And heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing, and hea-ven, and he-eh-ven, and nat-ure sing...” is OK for George Frederick Handel, but not for liturgical texts.

22 And many so-called contemporary hymn tunes are simply soupy and sappy, without strength or substance. Here's where I make my case for the German Chorales. Their melodies are often magnificent: strong, vital witnesses that have inspired generations of musicians, from Bach to Brubeck. And what a debt we owe to Catherine Winkworth, who rescued these gems from oblivion by providing strong, elemental English translations of their classic German texts to accompany those stirring melodies. And if you're asking, I do not for a moment resent her texts being adapted, in the newest hymnals, to serve the contemporary need for more inclusive language.

23 As for architecture, there are some so-called contemporary buildings for Christian worship that are simple banal. A recent example in my own community is a new church that looks, inside and outside, like a warehouse. It lacks both majesty and mystery.

24 A new church building need not be big or triumphalist or even expensive. Corbousier's Pilgrimage Chapel at Ronchamp, France, is small but monumentally awe-inspiring. Contemporary without a doubt -- but spare, human-scaled, and supremely elegant in its simplicity. You're reduced to a hushed and reverent silence simply by entering. Or by viewing it from afar.

25 Contemporary vestments? I've celebrated here before the vestments my wife made for me years ago. On the principle that vestments are themselves symbols, she provided no further appliquéd symbols, not even a cross. Their functional beauty in worship derives solely from their fabric, their texture, their drape -- and not simply their colour. Magnificent by any standard. The most expensive fabric cost \$30. But with hours, of course, of loving needlework, chiefly in rolling hems! Conversely, many so-called contemporary vestments are simply tacky.

26 As for contemporary electronic devices, their chief virtue in worship might conceivably reside in helping worshippers to hear: a decent PA system for example. Best of all would be to teach speakers to project, surely a lost art. See Essay 191. Remember: Most contemporary electronic devices -- even the best PA systems -- do nothing but insulate people from what is real and authentic. Further, they encourage "continuous partial attention." Not good. See Essay 180.

26 Well. Why is it necessary for our worship to exhibit the highest and best in contemporary human culture? Because that is how human sensibilities are fed. Our Gospel is steadfastly humanist. God doesn't need our highest and best. People do.

27 Sure, let's sing a sappy, soupy new hymn every now and then. They're sometimes fun. (A sappy, soupy Victorian hymn is fun too, every now and then.) But I wouldn't want a steady diet of them.

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