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Worship: A Modal Analysis

Introduction

“At this morning’s worship service we read Psalm 95: ‘O come, let us worship and bow down.’” As Christians, we use the word “worship” in various ways. In the opening sentence, worship is a kind of service in which God’s Word is read, and that Word, in turn, associates worship with bowing down, something the ancient Israelites presumably did regularly but we twenty-first-century Protestants do not so much.

What exactly is worship? Is reading the Bible worship? Even when an atheist professor is reading it to her ancient literature class at the state university? Is bowing down worship? Even when that professor is doing “Downward Facing Dog” in her evening yoga class? Clearly there is an element of intent, attitude, motivation.

We speak of “praise and worship,” but if praising God *is* worshipping God, then isn’t that phrase redundant, like saying “worship and worship” or “praise and praise”? Perhaps worship is a *category* of human actions, like play. “The kids went outside to play” becomes more descriptive when the ludic category is exemplified by “throw the frisbee” or “shoot hoops.” “The teenagers went to the beach to worship” might mean “to sing praise songs, share a meal, and have a Bible study while the sun sets.” But if singing praises is a *kind* (type, form) of worship, then why say “praise *and* worship”? Why not “worship by praising”? Why “worship *and* bow down” instead of “worship by bowing down”? After all, it makes less sense to say “play and shoot hoops” than “play by shooting hoops.”

To better understand the term “worship,” we need to sort out bodily action (e.g., bowing) from attitude, category from instantiation, and, ultimately, normative from antinormative. To do that, we will begin by examining several sources of how people use the term (common usage

survey, dictionaries, the Bible, and various theologians), then dissect it using a modal analysis, and conclude by putting the pieces back together into a tentative conceptual definition. As D. F. M. Strauss says about concept formation, it is “aimed at discerning the multiplicity of universal traits of that which is conceptualized”¹ and synthesizing that multiplicity into the unity of a concept.² By way of testing my concept/definition of worship, I then offer three reflections as *post scripta*.

How We Talk About Worship

In an attempt to see how others define worship I conducted an informal survey of 25 people in my community. By self-identification these included one Wiccan, one Native American, one Jehovah’s Witness, one atheist, one Jew, one lapsed Catholic, one who is “not a churchgoer,” another who practices “earth-based spirituality,” and the rest (17) split between active Protestant and Catholic Christians. I asked the same question to everyone (“How would you define worship?”) and received from one to eleven key terms from each person (avg. 3.5). This made for a total of 56 key terms which were, in turn, condensed to 25 by grouping synonyms together (e.g., combining glorify, exalt, adore, pay homage to, honor, reverence, respect into one group). The two outliers were, perhaps predictably, the atheist and the Wiccan. The atheist did not define worship but rather responded that it was a “waste of time,” “infantile,” and had “no tangible outcome.” The Wiccan was the only one to define worship in negative terms: “begging” and “groveling.” Knowing this individual well, I asked a follow-up question: “Then how would you describe what you do during a Wiccan service?” He responded with “celebrate creation,” “share joy,” and “no fear (in the Christian sense of being afraid of God).” It seems to me that “celebrate,” “joy,” and “no fear” might also well represent a kind of worship.

In a further step of bringing the multiplicity of traits into the unity of a concept, I looked for natural divisions and found four: human acts of worship, human attitudes of/toward worship, (nonhuman) things involved in worship, and (other) properties of worship. These are of course merely heuristic categories serving the purpose of simplification; the lines between them are blurry. The 25 key terms and term groups are listed below under the headings of the four

¹ D. F. M. Strauss, *Philosophy: Discipline of the Disciplines* (Grand Rapids, MI: Paideia Press, 2009), 148.

² *Ibid.*, 174.

divisions. The numbers represent how many people mentioned that term, or one or more terms in that group.

Human Acts of Worship

- 10 singing, songs, hymns, psalms, music, cymbals
- 7 prayer
- 7 praise
- 4 come together as one, community
- 4 giving thanks
- 3 serve
- 2 outward expression
- 2 gaining understanding, knowledge
- 2 sacrifice, offering
- 2 sacraments of Eucharist, baptism

Human Attitudes of/toward Worship

- 4 sublimating oneself, humble submission, groveling
- 2 seeking fulfillment, completion
- 2 excitement, celebration
- 2 silence, tranquility
- 1 purposeful, committed
- 1 whole being (words, thoughts, etc.)

Things Involved in Worship

- 1 Word of God
- 1 liturgy
- 1 morning
- 1 everlasting life

Properties of Worship

- 7 glorify, exalt, adore, pay homage to, honor, revere, respect
- 6 merciful, holy, graceful, love, joy, peace, hope
- 4 connection to God, intimacy
- 1 pleasing to God
- 1 mystery, unexplainable yet real

A few observations might be helpful at this point. First, the four divisions, as mentioned above, are somewhat porous. For example, singing is a human action but songs are things involved in worship. Nonetheless, I combined them in such a way that emphasizes the human act over the human artifact. Other possible crossovers include excitement and celebration (attitudes or properties?), silence and tranquility (attitudes or properties?), sacraments of Eucharist and baptism (acts or things?), liturgy (thing or act?). At this point, though, we should be less concerned with exact groupings and more interested in identifying the broader elements at hand.

Second, the mentioning of human acts and attitudes and nonhuman things begs the question, What about God? How about God's acts and attitudes? Should they be a part of the concept of worship? "Pleasing to God" might fit here, yet how do we know when God is pleased?

Third, I find it interesting that although Divinity was referred to with three names (God, Lord, and Great Spirit), the name of Jesus was never mentioned.

This tiny survey is not intended to be representative of any larger population but is useful as an entry point into how we talk (and think) about worship. It is useful because concepts and definitions do not drop out of the sky, as it were, but are formed in communities and, in this case (if not always), with God (*coram Deo*). It seemed natural to turn to my community to see how they/we use the term "worship."

At this point I believe we can draw several tentative conclusions as we head toward a descriptive definition of worship. First, the breadth of responses from this small sample—from the obvious ("praise") to the obscure ("everlasting life"), and from one attitude ("excitement") to its opposite ("tranquility")—demonstrates that a fairly common word/concept is neither simple nor easy to define. Due to the ubiquity of the phrase "praise and worship" in Christian circles today, I had expected the vast majority of respondents to include the word "praise." Seven people (28%) said "praise" and 10 people (40%) said "singing, etc." Since 3 of them said both, that means that 14 people (56%) said one or both related terms. Not a *vast* majority, only a slight one. I find this diversity of responses encouraging (even if more difficult to work with).

Second, no one mentioned a specific place of worship (church, synagogue, etc.). Although a church setting is surely implied in many of the responses (e.g., "liturgy"), the physical location seems less important than the human acts and attitudes.

Third, the divisions into which the original 56 key terms fell "naturally" are based on three dualities: human acts and attitudes are representative of outer and inner experiences, respectively; setting those acts and attitudes against the artifacts (nonhuman things) creates a questionable boundary between two types of creational entities; and identifying such things as love, intimacy, and mystery as properties of worship divorced from human or divine actions potentially makes them metaphysical. This is not a direction I am comfortable with (in an integral Christian cosmology) but I am willing to let it lie for the moment.

Finally, despite the fact that only one person mentioned something that might be considered God's attitude ("pleased"), it seems to me that worship is viewed (experienced) as a

(striving for a) connection, or at least a plea for a connection, to the divine. I was struck by the response of one person: “intimate communion with the Lord.” My experience tells me this idea is critical to our concept of worship. It forces me to ask: what might happen when I am intimate with my Creator?

Dictionaria: Webster et alia

Reference books are useful in offering us a more widely accepted and therefore socially authoritative list of words to aid us in our articulation of a concept of worship. We shall briefly consider three: a Webster’s dictionary, a Roget’s thesaurus, and a Bible dictionary.

*Webster’s Third International Dictionary*³ reminds us that worship is both a noun (the love accorded a deity) and a verb (to love devotedly). Whether we say *the* love (noun) or *to* love (verb), or *the* honor or *to* honor is less important than getting a “feel” for the kind of things related to worship. Part of speech is less critical than the bundle of words, expressions, ideas that point us toward this thing/action/experience we call worship. Etymology is little more than a historical curiosity when the modern usage has drifted far from its origin, but in the case of worship it points to being *worthy*, to something that deserves our attention. Webster also points us to honor, reverence, respect, veneration, and deference, all of which suggest an object of good reputation, drawing our affection and devotion.

Roget,⁴ also breaking worship into its noun and verb forms, gives us a similar bundle of words (honor, reverence, etc.), several of which match our informal survey: celebrate, pay homage to, sing praises to, prayer, and offering. We also find words particular to religious ceremonies (rite, ritual, vespers, beatification, etc.), but these seem to be situations that *include* worship rather than are synonymous with worship. Even so, worship is not a Platonic Form but knowable only in the variety of real-world contexts in which we experience it.

Youngblood, Bruce, and Harrison’s *Compact Bible Dictionary*⁵ offers a succinct definition that is summed up as “Reverent devotion and allegiance pledged to God; the rituals or ceremonies by which this reverence is expressed.” Here again: reverence and devotion as well as

³ *Webster’s Third International Dictionary*, s.v. “worship” (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2002).

⁴ *Roget’s 21st Century Thesaurus in Dictionary Form*, 3rd ed., s.v. “worship” (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005).

⁵ Ronald F. Youngblood, F. F. Bruce, and R. K. Harrison, *Compact Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “worship” (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004).

“expressed” which is reminiscent of the survey response “outward expression.” (As for pledging allegiance, I will leave it aside; it echoes American nationalism too much for my taste.)

Youngblood et al. also provide us with several relevant biblical passages, some of which will be explored below.

Worship in the Bible

“At that time people began to invoke the name of YHWH.”

—Gen. 4:26b

Commentaries tell us that invoking God’s name is a euphemism for worship and that this reference in Genesis is the first time worship is mentioned (albeit allusively) in Scripture. Yet some might consider walking with God in the garden a form of worship. Either way, what exactly does this tell us about the concept of worship? Perhaps it describes not only a calling out to God but a calling *in* (invoking), i.e., an invitation, a welcoming, the creation of an expectant opening.

One might assume that a Christian conception of worship would begin with the Bible, but I have purposely delayed its use until this point for three reasons. First, it is a temptation to view Scripture with such reverence as to eclipse other avenues of inquiry such as common usage (survey) and dictionary definitions. Second, concepts can change over time. As history unfolds, our ways of being human can deepen (or become superficial or trite), our concepts hopefully becoming more closely allied to creational reality. Although we confess that the Bible reveals normative concepts to us, it also offers vivid descriptions of antinormative ones (e.g., idol worship), and sometimes, depending on the context, the difference between the two is not so clear. Discernment and humility are necessary. Third, the Bible is not a dictionary; it is not a textbook of handy definitions of key terms. Even a “word study” using a concordance (see below) will not evince a singular definition, or, if it does, one ought to hold it loosely.

Nonetheless, to add more data to our growing number of key words and word clusters, I examined 186 references to “worship” throughout both Testaments of the Bible.⁶ Most prevalent

⁶ The number of verses listed under “worship,” “worshiped,” and “worshippers” in James Strong, *The New Strong’s Concise Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005).

(approximately 90%)⁷ are associational references: “serve and worship” (Deut. 8:19), “to worship and to sacrifice” (1 Sam. 1:3), “worship and bow down” (Ps. 95:6), “worship before this altar” (2 Kings 18:22), etc. Does this mean that worship *is* serving, sacrificing, bowing down, before an altar (and additional terms such as singing praises, blessing, and praying), or that those are various *types* or *elements* of worship? If the former, if bowing down *is* worship, then, as mentioned above, “worship and bow down” would be redundant. Why not just say “bow down”? A footnote in my NRSV Study Bible for Exodus 24:1, where Moses is told to gather the elders and “worship at a distance,” states that “worship” is literally (in Hebrew) “bow down.” So does “worship” equal “bow down” after all?

To make matters more interesting, the Psalms offer connotative clues via poetic parallelism. Relevant examples include Psalm 66:4 where “worship” is parallel to “sing praises,” and Psalm 96:9 where “worship” is parallel to “tremble” (cf. the survey respondent who viewed being afraid of God in a negative way). The nearest I could come to finding a description of worship would be the chapters in Exodus (e.g., 29, 30, 35-40) that go into great detail about dashing blood against the sides of the altar, smearing blood on earlobes, and placing kidneys into the hands of Aaron and his sons. At best, we can glean from these passages a sense of the importance of worship, of imbuing every detail with meaning.

In sum, these are the key terms related to worship throughout the Bible (in order of prevalence, beginning with the most): bowing (prostrate), idols (false gods), submission (obedience, serve, homage, tremble), sacrifice (offering), prayer (invoke name), singing praises, temple (house of the Lord), holy mountain (summit), altar, belief, blessing. Is worship, then, a category, a type of human action under which falls all of these various actions, attitudes, and things (places)? Does worship happen when one or more of the elements occur?

“All of Life is Worship”

Phrases like this, or, similarly, “all of life is prayer” can be inspirational sayings that spur us on to living a life more fully and consciously *coram Deo*, but they do little good in helping us pinpoint a specific definition of worship. Such sayings are more connotative than denotative and lend

⁷ The remaining 10% of the verses merely use the word “worship” without contextual clues as to its meaning, e.g., in Isaiah 66:23 YHWH says, “all flesh shall come to worship before me.” We might assume from other contexts it means to bow down, but that is not explicitly stated in this passage and others like it.

themselves to aesthetic playfulness of language rather than its analysis. Perhaps they are prescriptive, really meaning to say, “all of life *should be...*” Even so, should *all* of life be an intentional focus on God? Perhaps we should say, “All of life should be lived for God’s glory.” This should be distinguished from Evan Runner’s phrase “all of life is religion.” The latter is an ontological statement. Created reality, by its very existence, points to a Creator; humans, in the very *ontos* of their humanness, find meaning in an Ultimate (within or beyond creation). Worship, on the other hand, as we are coming to define it in this paper, is a human action, a response involving a choice: to “bow down” (physically or otherwise) or not to one’s “Higher Power.”

Still, the juxtaposition of Runner’s statement here casts worship in another light. If all of life is ontologically “bent” toward its Creator, then might it also be an ongoing act of worship (toward an Ultimate) whether one is conscious of it (i.e., actively choosing it) or not? In other words, are all of our thoughts, dreams, acts, and words worshipful in the sense of being spiritual or directional (toward an Ultimate), whether we are aware of it or not? Can one worship unconsciously, i.e., without being aware of it? I do not think so.

In his essay “All of Life Is Worship?” John Bolt puts the problem this way: “if everything is worship, then we no longer have the conceptual and linguistic equipment to describe what is distinctive and special about corporate worship.”⁸ Notice the word “corporate.” For Bolt, the word “worship” should be restricted “to the corporate and public worship of God’s people.”⁹ He does not define worship, he merely uses it in a way that seems to be approximately equal to “worship service.” Bolt’s worry is that “worldly neo-Kuyperians” go too far in identifying life with worship (and vice versa).¹⁰ On the one hand, he wants to avoid the Roman Catholic conception that believers can be divided into “laity” and “religious”; for him, discipleship and holiness are a

⁸ John Bolt, “All of Life Is Worship? Abraham Kuyper and the Neo-Kuyperians,” in *Our Worship*, by Abraham Kuyper, ed. Harry Boonstra (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 323.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 324.

¹⁰ In a footnote, Bolt writes, “According to true-blue neo-Kuyperians, chapels do not belong on college or university campuses. The *spiritual* integration and focal point of a college belongs not in corporate worship but in the department of philosophy” (324n9, emphasis original). This is a gross mischaracterization! In my experience growing up in neo-Kuyperian circles and attending a college striving to be neo-Kuyperian (Dordt College, 1984-88), I never once heard these assertions. To see the role of philosophy as *spiritual* integration is to fundamentally misunderstand the distinction between philosophy as the theoretical analysis of the totality of creation entities and their aspects and the human heart as the spiritual root (hopefully) integrating all of one’s life. Neither the philosophy department nor the chapel should be the focal point of the (Christian) university: *solī Deo gloria!* The chapel is a necessary place for human pistic expression—both individually and corporately.

“24/7 deal.”¹¹ On the other hand, he insists a distinction be made between worship and our daily vocation. Unfortunately, instead of identifying the pistic element *within* work, he concludes by not only building a wall between the two but also adding an element of *agon*: “there is in fact a real tension between work and worship.” He asks, “is it not the case that our work, even when done honorably, draws us closer to the world’s stories and away from our identity as the *called-out people of God*.”¹² Sadly, in his attempt to fence off worship from the worldly influences of our everyday work, Bolt finds himself in the company of the very Roman Catholic “religious” (with their nature vs. grace dualism) that he wanted to avoid.

Kuyper on Worship

For Abraham Kuyper, worship necessitates orderliness and respect, not

...coming to church late, leaving before the “Amen,” dressing slovenly or ostentatiously, lounging in one’s seat, taking a nap or sleeping in church[, or] the need for janitors to put up signs to prevent soiling and spitting on the floor. All this is thoroughly un-Reformed because it is absolutely irreconcilable with the basic thought that one appears before the face of God,...that one has an audience with the King of kings.¹³

Between 1897 and 1901, Kuyper, a Dutch pastor and member of parliament, wrote articles on worship in a weekly religious paper, *De Heraut* (*The Herald*). The articles were not meant to be academic or comprehensive, yet, because of his reputation, they were authoritative. They are also useful for our quest to define worship as they cover a multitude of topics from church architecture to singing the Psalms.

He makes it clear from the start that liturgical arbitrariness—e.g., “ministers...[with] their individualistic botching of the form of baptism”¹⁴—is unacceptable: “where the minister is completely free to please himself, there is no liturgy. On the other hand, where his freedom in this matter is restricted, there liturgy is born....”¹⁵ Worship, for Kuyper, “is a searching for fellowship

¹¹ Ibid., 322.

¹² Ibid., 329 (emphasis original).

¹³ Abraham Kuyper, *Our Worship*, ed. Harry Boonstra (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 127.

¹⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

with the Lord of lords,”¹⁶ “the living God.”¹⁷ And “the crucial element of the worship service of the congregation...[is] *the Christ*.... The congregation does not go to God of itself, but is led to the Father by its only High Priest.”¹⁸ Kuyper’s use of the word “searching” (as in “searching for fellowship”) brings to mind the Native American survey respondent’s words: “a *preparation* for a connection to the Great Spirit” (emphasis added). Is worship then merely the human act(s) of preparation/searching for the connection to the Divine, as we await the grace-filled “movement” of the Other toward us—via the High Priest, the Christ—to complete the connection? Or is it the mysterious experience of the connection itself? Or both? Kuyper does not elaborate, but Geoffrey Wainwright, in his response to Kuyper’s thoughts on worship, offers a poignant metaphor: “to picture the liturgical assembly in terms of systolé and diastolé, the regular contraction and dilation of the heart, the breathing in and out of the church....”¹⁹ He is referring to the rhythm of “gathering for worship and the dispersal into life and witness,”²⁰ but couldn’t it also be applied to the rhythm of worship itself, to the give and take, the mutual nourishment, to the in-breathing (inspiration) and out-breathing (expressions of, e.g., praise and blessing)—as a kind of CPR²¹—together with the Divine?

For Kuyper, all of life is worship. “It is not, of course, that the practicing of worship consists exclusively in going to church. Rather, it must be the one, grand, royal action of our *whole* life, in all our thoughts, words, and deeds.”²² Our whole life should be a practice of worship, “a searching for fellowship with the Lord,” yet, says Kuyper, it should also be differentiated into two types of practices: mediated and unmediated. Mediated refers to one’s disposition in ordinary

¹⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁸ Ibid., 17 (emphasis original).

¹⁹ Geoffrey Wainwright, “Abraham Kuyper: Liturgist, Dogmatician, Aesthete,” in Kuyper, *Our Worship*, 339-40. Wainwright gives credit for this metaphor to Jean-Jacques von Allmen (1917-94), a professor of practical theology at Neuchatel in the 1960s (339).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Cardiopulmonary resuscitation or mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Cf. Song of Solomon 1:2a: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” Also Elisha’s healing of the child in 2 Kings 4:34: “...putting his mouth upon his mouth....”

²² Kuyper, *Our Worship*, 18 (emphasis original).

life, to one’s “walk and lifestyle...[and] the words you speak.”²³ Unmediated is “when you pause in your everyday life”²⁴ to turn directly to God in the assembly of the congregation. Similar to Bolt, Kuyper seems to define what we most often think of as worship—singing, prayer, sacraments, etc.—in communal terms. Yet his division of worship into two “practices,” mediated and unmediated, is unhelpful because it blurs the distinction between one’s primary focus on God or on something else. I would submit that Kuyper’s “unmediated worship” is true worship (i.e., pistically qualified activities such as prayer and baptism), and his “mediated worship” is a description of a Christian’s fundamental (even unconscious) orientation toward God even while focusing on a nonworship activity (e.g., watching a ball game).

Others on Worship

“‘[W]orship’ itself is an exasperatingly difficult word to pin down.”²⁵ These are among the opening words of James F. White’s book on Christian worship. His book is largely a phenomenological description of what Christians throughout the ages *do* when they gather for worship. This includes such broad topics as *time*, the rhythms of the liturgy and the yearly calendar, and *space*, a physical place to “project our voice and reach out our hands.”²⁶ Similar to Kuyper’s essays, it also includes the variety of elements involved in Christian worship services: music, reading the Word, preaching, sacraments, etc. Beyond his phenomenological approach, he includes the historical voices of those such as Luther, who describes worship as a conversation between us and “our dear Lord Himself,” and Calvin, who, in White’s words, says that the “ultimate purpose of Christian worship is union with God.”²⁷ With examples of both structured (e.g., Anglican and Catholic) and spontaneous (e.g., Pentecostal) liturgies, and after the recognition of individual worship (i.e., personal devotions) as well as corporate worship, White submits, “Worship is indeed the recapitulation of salvation history.”²⁸ This is reminiscent—and a

²³ Ibid., 18.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 3rd ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 17.

²⁶ Ibid., 85.

²⁷ Ibid., 22 (Luther) and 23 (Calvin). Calvin’s words are “that we may be united (*conjungant*) to God” (from his Commentary on Ps. 24:7 (*Commentaries* 31:248)).

²⁸ Ibid., 166.

continuation—of the Jewish tradition of “Never forget!” Tell and retell the stories of God’s works every week, every year, every generation.

The Worship Sourcebook published by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship defines “Worship’s Meaning and Purpose” via nine “illustrative norms.” Christian worship should be (1) biblical, (2) dialogic and relational, (3) covenantal, (4) trinitarian, (5) communal, (6) hospitable, caring, and welcoming, (7) “in but not of” the world, (8) a generous and excellent outpouring of ourselves before God, and (9) both expressive and formative.²⁹ I would summarize these nine with the phrase “storytelling community.” *Storytelling* encompasses the remembering of both biblical and church-historical (e.g., trinitarian) traditions within the *community* which is made up of several authentic relationships: us with God, us with ourselves, us with others outside our community, and us with the broader culture of which we are a part (as prophets). These are important elements that confirm what we have already gleaned from others as well as extend worship beyond the worship service setting. But is prophetic interaction with culture a kind of worship? Or is that extending it too far? Perhaps the limit of worship is that it *inspires* one to go out and challenge and critique culture.

It is James K. A. Smith, with his Cultural Liturgies series,³⁰ who is bringing a philosophical edge to the discussion on worship. He is one of Bolt’s “worldly neo-Kuyperians” who not only defines worship more broadly but identifies humans as fundamentally worshipping creatures or, in Smith’s words, “liturgical animals.”³¹ Smith uses “the term *liturgy* as a synonym for *worship*”;³² we are synonymously *Homo religiosus*, *H. liturgicus*, and *H. adorans*. This is the key to Smith’s project. Begin with all of life—all of reality—as religion (the intimate ligature between Creator and creation); then focus on humans as radically directional worshipping creatures, i.e., all of our choices inherently “bow down” to some Ultimate(s); and finally recognize that our core choices (heart habits) are shaped by the repeated practices of our community, what Smith calls

²⁹ *The Worship Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Institute of Christian Worship/Faith Alive Christian Resources/Baker Books, 2013), 16-17. Available online at <http://www.faithaliveresources.org/Products/420021/the-worship-sourcebook.aspx>. Accessed May 10, 2015.

³⁰ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009) and *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013).

³¹ Smith, *Desiring*, 24.

³² *Ibid.*, 25n8 (emphasis original).

liturgies. In this way, worship is “a formal, ineradicable structure of human being-in-the-world.”³³ It is not a mere *expression* of Christian faith; it is the very “matrix” out of which we form worldview and (liturgical) life practices.³⁴ In *Cultural Liturgies* volume 2, subtitled *How Worship Works*, Smith describes Christian worship as a “counter-liturgy,” an “alternative imaginary,” and an “intentionally decentering practice.”³⁵ Remember, “Christian worship” for Smith is not limited to a Sunday morning worship service. Life is inherently, radically worshipful. The question is whether you will let your worship-center, your heart, be formed by the liturgical narratives of the mall, the stadium, the media—or the Christ.

Smith’s work is brilliant, certainly the most penetrating integration of anthropology and spirituality that I have read, yet the breadth of his usage of the synonymous terms worship and liturgy is problematic. To paraphrase Bolt, if everything is worship then we lack the language to describe what is distinctive about worship. Smith says the goal of Christian education is “the same as the goal of Christian worship: to form radical disciples of Jesus.... [Therefore] Christian universities...should be...extensions of the mission of the church.... Instead of talking about ‘Christian colleges’...we should instead speak of ‘ecclesial’ colleges....”³⁶ It is true that the rituals (habits) of everyday life can form us into disciples of various gods/idols. It is also true that all Christian institutions (spheres of society)—church, family, school, business, etc.—ought to play a role in forming us into disciples rooted in Jesus, but *it does not necessarily follow* that all of those spheres fall under the jurisdiction of the church (*ekklesia*). I have difficulty believing that a neo-Kuyperian like Smith would breach Kuyper’s principle of sphere sovereignty in so cavalier a fashion and can only conclude that he uses the term “church” (“ecclesial”) in an equally broad way as he does “worship.” Whatever the case, worship goes deep. It is bound up with our core commitments (trust, faith) to the Ultimate(s) in our lives.

³³ *Ibid.*, 90n1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11. Cf. also 33f. and 138.

³⁵ Smith, *Imagining*, 149-50.

³⁶ Smith, *Desiring*, 220-21.

Worship: A Modal Analysis

As Wittgenstein recognized, we could examine others' usages and definitions of a term *ad infinitum* but eventually the quest must be drawn to a (temporary, temporal) close in order to be of any help. Key words and synonyms for “worship” can be gathered like so many data points into clusters but I am under no illusion that this is solely a logicomathematical exercise. How does one separate words into clusters except by experience and a sense of fittedness? This one *seems* closer to that one. Everything is simultaneously interrelated and unique. So what is this thing we call worship?

By my count we have accumulated more than 80 key terms along the way, many have been bundled into categories such as “actions” and “attitudes,” and we have faced a number of additional categorial questions such as corporate or individual, mediated or unmediated, laity or religious, all or part of life. How do we sort out this disarray? I propose to make use of Herman Dooyeweerd’s modal aspects³⁷ as a set of sieves through which to sift the data. As such this might be called a modal or aspectual analysis of worship.

In biblical Hebrew, *s’gad* and *shachad*, both having to do with physically bowing down or lying prostrate, are often translated “worship” as noted above. We are not the only creatures that bow in the presence of others. Other mammals—canines, felines, and apes, to name but three—lower their heads and bodies in a submissive posture before higher ranking members of their community. In a *biotic* sense, we share this innate (re)action toward those we acknowledge as our superiors. A remnant of this is present in society today when we give a friendly nonverbal greeting to someone with a brief nod of the head; it is a form of showing respect for the other. Already at the basic bodily level, this aspect of worship displays a connection between two entities, one superior, one inferior.

The bodily action of bowing down is deepened, made more resonant, when we consider the *sensitive-psychical* elements involved, i.e., the feelings and emotions that make up one’s attitude about and/or during the act of bowing/worshiping. Is that humiliating, as the Wiccan survey respondent suggested? Do you tremble with fear before the power of the Other? Or does the submission make you feel excited just to be in the presence of your superior? Does it bring you a

³⁷ As described by Strauss, *Philosophy*, ch. 3.

sense of tranquility, peace, perhaps a sense of safety? Or a feeling of hope: now that the Superior One is here, everything will be fine?

All of this might be deepened further were we to consider the *logical* aspect of worship, i.e., forming a distinct concept of Who or What it is we are worshipping and what are (im)proper forms of worship. Indeed, this paper is an exercise in this very kind of deepening.

Worship may begin with the body but humans are quick to create a *cultural* filigree around the things that matter to us. Our posture, feelings, and concepts of worship are expanded by the forms developed over generations: places of worship (mountaintop altars, temples, synagogues, churches), artifacts (vestments, bread and wine), and liturgies abound in every culture and religion.

Worship is made more significant when expressed in *language*. For the Abrahamic “religions of the Book” this is particularly important as the Word of God is the primary way to hear from the Superior One. The biblical writings include myths of origin, tales of interaction between people and their God, poetry and songs, prophetic utterances and more—all written and recorded that we may never forget covenant history. But beyond Holy Writ we use language to call out to God as well as to teach and assure each other that YHWH is the Superior One, the One to whom we bow.

What is already being described, for all of this is interrelated, is the communion of the saints, a *social* interaction as we intercourse with God and each other. Worship is inherently social; as mentioned above, it begins with the relation between two individuals, a superior and an inferior. It is also amplified in the presence of others. There is an entirely different feeling between bowing before the Superior One alone and doing it *en masse*. An action in a multitude seems to multiply the power of the event. And so, whether one-on-One or altogether, worship is a conversation (Luther) and a gathering as one (Calvin, understood socially or mystically).

Part of being-in-community is not hoarding one’s blessings but sacrificing as a form of giving thanks: giving the alpha wolf the first bites of the kill, bringing the best flour to the altar of YHWH (Lev. 2), and leaving the crops at the edge of the field for the poor and hungry (Lev. 23:22; cf. Mk. 2:23). This is what Strauss (paraphrasing Dooyeweerd) would call the *economic*

aspect of worship, i.e., being frugal, not wasteful. For Kuyper, it means the minister should not make the congregational prayer too long lest the congregants fall asleep.³⁸

“Sing to the Lord a new song!” (Ps. 149:1). Decorated vestments, hand-crafted implements, breathtaking architecture, angelic children’s choirs, stirring music, an inspirational sermon—all of these are examples of an aesthetic augmentation of the elements of worship. The beauty of a glass sculpture or the allusivity of a clever poem can turn a moment of worship into a timeless ecstasy. And, sad to say, an off-tune tenor or a turgid sermon can just as easily become a worship-ending distraction.

Worship at its (etymological) core is a *jural* activity, i.e., it is about giving every person his or her due. In this case, the Superior One is worthy of being praised, honored, exalted, celebrated, etc.—lifted up (as we bow down) and recognized as above us in rank and power.

And yet even this high power status is, among humans at least, able to be heightened (or deepened) by its being embraced by the *ethical* gift of love. Without this, worship can truly seem oppressive, like groveling before a capricious potentate. It is here that worship is enriched by affection and adoration. Where there is love, there is an opportunity for trust, which brings us to the final unfolding (flowering, opening, revealing) of the worship experience.

The *pistic* (faith) aspect is the risk of trusting a Superior One. It seems easier, safer really, to have faith in oneself; after all, you never know if the Other will come through for you. If you want trustworthiness (and certainty³⁹), you must trust Someone/Something that will never let you down. You must bow down, lay down, put your life in the Superior One’s hands. This is devotion and allegiance. This is worship in its fullest sense. And it is here, in this act of complete trust—a trust that is paradoxically both emptying of the self (*kenosis*) into the Other (“into your hands I commit my spirit”) and being filled by the Other—that a distinction must be made between other activities (eating, playing, working) and those mysteriously timeless (*kairos*) moments of devoting oneself to (i.e., worshiping) the Other. The latter is what I believe Kuyper is after when he speaks of unmediated (devotional/*pistic*) activities.

³⁸ Kuyper, *Our Worship*, 36.

³⁹ Strauss uses the term *certitudinal* to describe the aspect of faith in our lives. *Certitudinal*, cumbersome as it is, may be a more easily recognizable word than *pistic*, but it carries too much modernist baggage for my taste. Cf. Strauss, *Philosophy*, 101f.

It is also an aspect of reality that, when misunderstood, can lead to a dangerous dualism. In my explanation of these various aspects (modes) of worship, I have used metaphors such as deepened, heightened, amplified, and augmented. Although there is a sense of unfolding as we move from one aspect/mode to the next, it must never be thought that one aspect of creation—in our case, the act of worship—is more important than another. Indeed, all creational entities (things and their actions), including worship, encompass all of these aspects (modes, elements) simultaneously. There is no way for any human act of worship to exclude being emotional, social, aesthetic, etc. The only sense in which some are “higher” than others is that the “lower” ones need to be in place “before” the others can unfold. For instance, one cannot have a lingual or social experience if one’s physical body (brain) is not in good working order. In that sense, the “lower” aspects, as prerequisites, might even be misconstrued as more important.

The point here is not importance but distinction. Worship, as a human activity, includes all of these aspects. Inasmuch as any of them are faulty, the worshiping itself will be diminished—and whichever particular element is faulty handicaps all the others “beyond” (“higher than”) it. Creational entities may be primarily defined (qualified) by one particular aspect (e.g., a book is mainly a lingual/“language” thing) but can be “opened up” (deepened) when a human engages it on “higher” levels (loving the book and trusting its message). Worship, I would suggest, is mainly a pistic (trusting, devoting) activity. It may have its etymological roots in “worthiness,” a jural reference (as mentioned above), and it may be used to translate the Hebrew for “bow down,” a bodily (biotic) reference, in the Scriptures, but the concept underlying these references is one of submission, of trusting your life in another’s hands. And, as already mentioned, if the substrata (“lower” aspects) are faulty (i.e., one feels oppressed, it doesn’t make sense, the message is unclear, the Superior One does not seem worthy, etc.) then the worship will be proportionally diminished. This addresses the question of normativity: not “normality,” not “what most people do” when they worship, but what are the norms or laws—not human-made laws but emergent cosmomic laws—for right worship?

As we have already seen, worship will be diminished if any of its substrata are faulty. If any one substratum is utterly defunct (e.g., the person is “brain dead”) or the cumulative effect of several faulty substrata is too great, then worship may be impossible altogether. But there is still the pistic stratum itself, the very aspect of created reality that makes worship what it is. How are we to know if we are aiming our worship in the right direction, at the Superior One? For wolves

it is easy: the alpha female, the toughest lady around. But for humans? It is tempting to revert to that lower (superficial, undeveloped) instinct: “might makes right.” Just consider the annual budget of the U. S. Defense Department. Apparently we feel safer when we entrust our lives to our military-industrial complex. Do we then unconsciously worship our defenses (and offenses)? Only in a deeply flawed way: a way that is primarily instinctual (biotic) and that makes a shambles out of social cohesion (vs. special interests), clarity of discussion (vs. hidden agendas), and love of enemy, to name but a few. It is idolatry.

Dooyeweerd’s genius lies in his corrective for all forms of idolatry, from the gods of consumerism to those of professional sports. He saves the pistic aspect of reality for last, makes it dependent on all the other substrata because it is our link to the Beyond/Other/Superior One. His premise is as simple as it is profound: we are most human when we entrust our lives to, and live for the sake of, Another.⁴⁰ But when we double-back and place that trust in one of the strata of creation itself—whether life, love, power or security—then we make it an Ultimate, as if to say that everything is fundamentally (reduced to, dependent upon) Life or Love etc. But is this right? Life, love, even subatomic particles are merely *parts* of the multilayered, interrelated, unfolding things we call reality (the universe, the cosmos, etc.). Worship is no more or less important than breathing or loving, but it is our uniquely human way of peering beyond this created reality to the Creator. That is true worship. And, of course, for Dooyeweerd as for all Christians, the Creator (Other, Superior One) is God and the “bridge” between this reality and the Beyond is Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

All of life is not worship. Worship is merely one human activity among many; however, all of life, properly lived, opens up the opportunity for true worship. True worship is that which points a person beyond this reality to its Origin. Idolatry, faulty worship, is the intracreation focus on one (or more) element(s) as Ultimate; it is giving one’s life for a subsidiary, entrusting it to something temporary. Just as the pistic (trusting, “faithing”) aspect is integral to all human activities (whether expressed normatively or not), so it could be said that there is a worshipful element to all of life, but this must be recognized for the analogue that it is. One can, for instance,

⁴⁰ The sages of many religions (and psychologies) have said something to the effect of “those who empty themselves shall be filled.”

play a game of basketball for the glory of God and call it a worshipful recreational activity (in an analogous way), but to call it an “act of worship” is, in my opinion, to confuse matters. Worship is a matter of one’s focused attention on God. In Kuyper’s words, the commitment to God is *mediated* by focusing on one’s God-given ability to, say, “sink a three-pointer,” whereas prayer or singing the Psalms or baptism are *unmediated* activities; one is (or ought to be) focused wholly on the Superior One. Human attention is not easily split between two objects; at best, it can flicker back and forth. This isn’t a bad thing. God isn’t necessarily forgotten when we eat, play, or make love. And, it must be reiterated, worship (as the only unmediated human activity) is not more important than other activities just because its *raison d’être* is to point us to the Beyond. If it were more (or most) important, then creation would be split into two tiers, the mundane and the worshipful, and we would all starve because there would be too many priests and not enough farmers.

More seriously, there are two counterarguments to consider: the Bible’s use of “worldly” vs. “holy” categories and Smith’s liturgical (worship-centered) anthropology. My point is that *all* of creation in its interrelated complexity is good. There is no one section of human action that is inherently more godly or closer to God than another. The Bible does not contradict this. The temple, priests, and sacrifices are not more “good” than any other part of creation. Those cultic things are holy or sacred in the sense of being set apart for special times and places when we pause from focusing on the many other good/godly things in life and focus directly (in an unmediated fashion) on the Beyond. Just as we were not made to eat all day or play all day, so we are not to worship all day. Even priests don’t worship nonstop; they are merely the servants assisting us to worship in a more normative way, e.g., their singing does not distract but rather helps us to stay focused (for a timeless moment) on our Superior One. The biblical language of avoiding the things of this world is best understood using Al Wolters’s distinction between *structure* and *direction*. Farming, for instance, is not inherently more or less holy or sacred or closer to God than worshiping at a worship service. One isn’t godly and the other worldly (secular). Both are good creational activities, equally potentially God-glorifying. That is their *structure*. The *direction* (purpose, goal) of any activity reveals the direction of the heart, toward or away from God. There is good (godly, normative, God-glorifying) farming and there is bad (evil, antinormative), such as profiteering in the face of others’ starvation. It is the same for worshiping and all human activities.

As I said above, Smith’s work is invaluable; my only concern is with his choice of key terms. Yet this is more than “mere semantics.” By using ecclesial language to describe his anthropological concepts, he obfuscates the critical importance of the fact that humans are *directional* creatures in *everything* we do. But when he says our worldview comes from our worship matrix,⁴¹ it sounds like church is the (main? only?) place to develop that perspective. When he calls our repetitive cultural practices “liturgies,”⁴² he is using what is usually thought of as an ecclesial term. And when he borrows terms from the church to describe the core of our being, it begins to appear that the church has the pride of place in developing our hearts and our culture.⁴³ Despite his nomenclature, Smith’s concepts are of the utmost importance. At our very core, we are religious (not “liturgical”) creatures; we are ligamented to God, and everything we do has a directional (spiritual) element, whether we are worshipping or farming. To say that farming is (a form of) worship might confuse matters: putting the church in charge of agriculture and the theologian in charge of determining normative agrarian practices. When all of life is literally worship, we end up diminishing the diversity of creation by reducing it all to, and making an idol of, the institutional church.

And so, with no further ado, I conclude by offering my own descriptive definition of worship:

Worship is, in the fullest sense, the human act of loving submission to an Other by entrusting that Other with one’s very self. It is a total commitment to and faith in the Other that is evidenced and enhanced by any or all of the following: a physical lowering of the body by bowing the head, genuflecting, lying prostrate, etc. before the Other; experiencing feelings of joy, wholeness, excitement, tranquility, to name but a few, because of the Other; gaining a deeper understanding and discernment of one’s core beliefs as they relate to the Other; participating in one’s cultural-historical traditions including place, time, clothing, artifacts, etc. as they help one focus on the Other; storytelling the Other’s involvement with creation throughout history; joining in the solidarity

⁴¹ Smith, *Desiring*, 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, cf., e.g., 220f.

of a community focused together on the Other; sacrificing from one's abundance as a form of thankfulness to the Other; artistically reflecting the Other's beauty-in-creation; recognizing the worth of the Other to be exalted above all else; and loving the Other like no other. Although we are at the core religious creatures and can do nothing without it flowing from the direction of our heart, worship is a distinctive act for which we are called to set apart time in the rhythms of the day, week, year, and lifetime. We are not meant to spend every moment worshipping, but those that we do are (pre)served by those who have dedicated their lives to making it as normative as possible (priests, rabbis, theologians, et al.). All of life is directional and includes the pistic (trusting, "faithing") aspect (alongside all the other aspects of creation) that we are called to exercise in a normative way, i.e., to place our trust beyond the bounds of creation in its Origin.

And for a Christian definition of worship, it must be added:

The Other, the Origin, in whom we place our trust is the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

To put it more succinctly:

Worship is the distinct act or set of acts expressing one's loving trust in God by taking a portion of one's time to focus primarily on God.

Post Scripta

By way of putting worship into a fuller context, I will address three additional topics: (1) how does worship relate to ritual and liturgy, (2) what is normative worship music, and (3) how do/should children worship?

P.S. #1: Worship, Ritual, and Liturgy

"Liturgy is poetry in motion."

—Nuinn (20th century English bard)

Romano Guardini (1885-1968), the "father of the German liturgical movement," asks if "man in this industrial and scientific age, with its new sociological structure [i.e., individualism], is no

longer capable of a liturgical act,”⁴⁴ an act that is inherently social (congregational). Writing in the final years of his life, in response to Vatican II, he is hopeful that “the wonderful opportunities now open to the liturgy will achieve their full realization.”⁴⁵ Liturgy, for Guardini, is a “corporal-spiritual” act learned in the church environment.

Not so for James K. A. Smith. He sees liturgy as a subset of practices and rituals. *Rituals*, the broadest term, refers to “routines (as in the rituals of a batter before he steps into the batter’s box).”⁴⁶ Next comes the *practices*, which are rituals directed toward an end. Finally, *liturgies*, the narrowest subset, are rituals (practices) of ultimate concern. “Liturgies are the most loaded forms of ritual practice because they are after nothing less than our hearts.”⁴⁷ Smith’s project is to expand the concept of worship to include all of life, so liturgies “are not necessarily linked to institutional religion.”⁴⁸ For him, “there is no secular. If humans are essentially liturgical animals, and cultural institutions are liturgical institutions, then there are no ‘secular’ (a-religious or nonreligious) institutions.”⁴⁹

So who is correct, Guardini or Smith? Liturgy as church practices or as all of life’s rituals of ultimate concern? Smith’s elimination of the sacred/secular dualism is a noble pursuit and I have applauded the importance of his work above, but I do not think that broadening the use of ecclesial terms (like “worship” and “liturgy”) helps to desecularize nonchurch activities. I would suggest a third way, but first, to be clear: Guardini represents the venerable Roman Catholic tradition of sacred/secular dualism, i.e., there is an ontological difference between some parts of creation (“sacred”) and others (“secular”). A priest is a holier (closer to God) vocation than a farmer. The Church is a holier institution than a public university. If the farmer and the university want to serve God, they need to go to the Church. The priest will give the farmer the Eucharist, and the theologian will create a theology department at the university. With this

⁴⁴ Romano Guardini, “An open letter,” in *Foundations in Ritual Studies*, ed. Paul Bradshaw and John Melloh (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 8. It is interesting to note that Guardini is the most extensively quoted individual in Pope Francis’s recent encyclical *Laudato Si* (May 24, 2015).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁶ Smith, *Desiring*, 86.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 88n20.

additional holy component added on to the life of the farmer or university, they can be considered religious—as they continue in their secular vocations.⁵⁰

In the same volume as Guardini’s essay, John D. Witvliet, drawing from Henk Hart, describes a radically different approach to ritual: “A full-orbed theology of creation would reject the secular/sacred dichotomy.... [N]othing is outside of God’s domain.”⁵¹ This is the tradition from which Smith hails. Farmer or priest, church or university, all are potentially godly. Potentially. The difference between godly (good, closer to God) and ungodly (evil, away from God) is not ontological or geographical or institutional. *All* of creation is good/godly. Only with the direction of the human heart does evil/ungodly enter the picture. A priest or church can just as easily be godly as ungodly; it depends on the person(s) involved.⁵² In the same way, a farmer or university can be godly or ungodly. Sacred and secular as antipodes are misleading in categorizing people, vocations, and cultural institutions. Smith goes further. Having banished the secular because all of life is sacred, he applies the ecclesial terminology—worship, ritual, and liturgy—to the whole of human life. As I have argued above, this is confusing so long as the primary (dictionary and academic) usage of these terms is in reference to religious ceremony.

So, back to my third way, or perhaps just a different angle on the second. After all, I am in full agreement with the tradition⁵³ from which Hart, Witvliet, and Smith come: sacred/secular dualism has to go! The problem with this “neo-Kuyperian” tradition, as identified by John Bolt above, is that when everything is holy/sacred (i.e., “set apart”), then how does one label (identify, define) a “burning bush” moment? Is it *extra* holy, set apart from the set apart? This, I believe, is straining these terms too far. I would suggest leaving the terms *worship*, *ritual*, and *liturgy* for the

⁵⁰ It must be said that just as there are Catholic thinkers who reject this (Thomistic) dualism—called nature/grace dualism by Dooyeweerd—a significant number of Protestant traditions have embraced it. Mark Searle writes, “The Puritan preference for word to the exclusion of rite was based on an anthropology that granted priority to the individual over the community, to mind over body, and to the conscious over the unconscious” (“Ritual,” in *Foundations*, Bradshaw and Melloh, 13).

⁵¹ John D. Witvliet, “For our own purposes: the appropriation of the social sciences in liturgical studies,” in *Foundations*, Bradshaw and Melloh, 13.

⁵² And, it must be added, the split between good and evil is not between different people but within every human heart. No one is entirely good or evil all the time.

⁵³ That of Calvin, Kuyper, Dooyeweerd, and Vollenhoven.

ecclesial environment, i.e., as religious or religion-related activities.⁵⁴ *Worship*, as defined above, is the act or set of acts expressing one's loving trust in God. Some of these acts may be spontaneous or one-time events, others may be set *rituals* that are imbued with the meaning gained by repetition (over generations). *Liturgy* is "the customary public worship done by a specific religious group, according to its particular beliefs, customs and traditions."⁵⁵

When Smith speaks of "worship at the mall" and the "liturgies of consumerism,"⁵⁶ his cultural critique is accurate and penetrating, but to use "worship" and "liturgies" as anything more than analogies is to risk losing their salience in the ecclesial setting. An even greater danger to using ecclesial terms across the entire horizon of human experience is the temptation to place that horizon under church authority, which is simply another form of dualism.⁵⁷ Smith would be better off speaking of all human activities (including shopping at the mall and worshipping at church) as being directed by heart-habits that are formed by the regular (repetitive) practices of one's community.

Rather than a sacred/secular dualism (Guardini) where one part of creation (the church) is closer to God than others⁵⁸ (the farm or the classroom), and rather than an all-of-life-is-sacred holism (Smith), perhaps we could repurpose the terms "sacred" and "secular" as a *duality* (not a dualism). Consider Moses' burning bush experience. It was definitely set apart from his ordinary daily experiences. He may very well have recognized the beauty of his arid surroundings—the exquisite rock formations, the surprising flowers, the blessed oases—and identified it as God's good handiwork. But the burning bush was something different altogether, something set apart,

⁵⁴ The bind here is the use of the word "religion." It is traditionally and most commonly synonymous with a belief system; however, in the "neo-Kuyperian" tradition it is used more widely, e.g., "life is religion" (Evan Runner) and "the myth of religious neutrality [of any part of human life]" (Roy Clouser). These all-encompassing uses of "religion/religious" make the critically important point that every moment is lived in obedience to an Ultimate; they also stretch those terms so far that they make discussions of "religion" difficult. Does "religion" equal all of life or just the part dealing with belief systems? For the sake of clarity, I will use the term "religion" in the more restricted sense, i.e., as a belief system (and the institution qualified by the pistis aspect of human life). As for Runner and Clouser, two men that I deeply respect, I would paraphrase them with "life is directed toward an Ultimate" and "the idea that life can be lived neutrally, i.e., without being directed toward an Ultimate, is a lie"—admittedly not as catchy, but there it is.

⁵⁵ "Liturgy," *Wikipedia*, accessed May 8, 2015, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liturgy>.

⁵⁶ Smith, *Desiring*, 93 and 93n6.

⁵⁷ Which, troublingly, Smith does at the end of his book *Desiring* where, as mentioned above, he proposes "ecclesial universities" (221), i.e., Christian universities "as extensions of the mission of the church" (220), a clear breach of Kuyperian sphere sovereignty.

⁵⁸ A Thomist-Aristotelian model.

holy, sacred. We all experience those holy moments—the birth of a child, a mathematician’s eureka breakthrough—and, like Moses, they don’t always happen in church. They are not necessarily ecclesial events; they are life-deepening events; they are freighted with meaning. And yet I do not want to call them “closer-to-God events” or “worship events,” although they may very well lead to that, for fear that they become sought after like a drug-induced experience in place of pursuing one’s vocation and allowing the holy moments to occur unbidden. If there was a way we could imbue “secular” with all the creational goodness that surrounds us in the “world,” and reserve “holy/sacred” for those timeless moments that can occur in *any* part of creation, then the duality marks different instances of awareness while avoiding the hierarchical tendency to denigrate the lower. A musician, with eyes wide open to the splendors of God’s creation, can then practice Mendelssohn’s violin concerto for months with nothing to show but sweat and callouses until suddenly, unexpectedly, a flash of aesthetic insight hits her—a holy moment—and the tears flow. And this, in turn, may drive her to *worship* God right there and then (through prayer or a Paganinian flurry of notes) and/or go to church to worship God via the *rituals of liturgy*.

For those who have eyes to see, all of creation is (not holy or sacred but) exuding its God-crafted goodness. Even nuclear warheads are made of atoms that are busily doing what God created them to do. Antigoodness (evil, sin) is present when humans with antiGod heart-habits—that’s all of us at times—abuse God’s good creation by shaping it toward evil purposes. From this perspective, “secular” equals God’s good creation and “sacred/holy” is reserved for those moments filled with something special, setting them apart (*kairos*) from the rest of time (*chronos*) we (should) spend faithfully doing God’s work. In this way, not-God believers are surrounded. Everything around them, including their bodies and much of their actions (e.g., loving others), are shouting, “God made us!” but their ears are plugged. Our job, both in (ecclesial) worship and throughout all of life, is to remain aware (aesthetically, socially, etc.) of the secular goodness in which we move and breathe and have our being, to cherish those holy/sacred moments that

surprise and inspire us, and to help others to see and hear the God-crafted reality in which they are immersed.⁵⁹

P.S. #2: Normative Worship Music

Music is part of that God-crafted reality. Like bowing down, evidences of it are found throughout the animal world, but humans have taken it to new heights by unfolding its potential to be emotionally moving, logically (mathematically) analyzed, culturally significant, aesthetically nuanced and spiritually lifting, to name but a few of its aspects. In the West, it has evolved from simple lute-and-pipe dance music to the courtly music of Bach and Mozart to the magnificent symphonies of Beethoven and Brahms to the soaring film scores of Williams and Morricone—all within the tradition of the “fine” arts, a priceless tradition that comes at the very real cost of socioeconomic stratification. Simultaneously, the commoners maintain their “folk” music, with varieties as far reaching as human creativity. All of this made (and continues to make) its way into the church, from Luther’s appropriation of tavern tunes to Calvin’s Genevan Psalter based on Renaissance melodies (composed and arranged by Louis Bourgeois et al.) to nineteenth-century English Methodist hymns (that sound like marches) to the plaintive Negro spirituals of the American South to the jazz, (1960-70s) folk, and (1980s) rock-and-roll influences that form the modern repertoire of “praise and worship” music. In some of today’s churches, congregants may choose which service to attend according to the style of music used. The “traditional” service is for the old-timers who prefer those nineteenth-century hymns; the “contemporary” service is for the youngsters who like rock-and-roll. It is quipped that Sunday mornings are the most racially segregated time of the week in America, but that may also extend to segregation by age.

This breaking of community certainly was not the standard throughout most of Christian history, or at least it was not the intent of early-church house-gatherings or medieval parish churches. Up to the 1950s—and in a few traditional churches today—it was not unusual for three

⁵⁹ My playing here with the idea of a secular (creation-celebrating) Christian is related to my critique of Al Wolters’s “structure and direction” paradigm. Its heuristic simplicity may be its Achilles’ heel if interpreted to mean that the structure of creation (things, laws) is neutral and inertly awaiting humans to make use of them in directional ways. This is not how Wolters (and neo-Kuyperian philosophy) understands reality. By definition, creation points to a Creator just as art points to an artist. No matter how hard he tries, an evildoer (which could be any of us on a bad day) cannot make God’s good creation evil. Its very structure is a testimony to its good God-craftedness (hence Dooyeweerd’s point about an *Arché*, an Origin beyond created reality). Its very *structure* is *directioned*! Any of us, recognizing and serving the Creator or not can then take that God-directioned structure (the stuff of creation and its underlying laws) and use it for good or for ill.

generations of a family to be sitting together in the pew for the entire service.⁶⁰ Only after the service might they split up for age-appropriate Sunday school lessons (where children would learn nursery-rhyme-style “Bible songs”). Singing as a form of social cohesion may be as old as humankind. How can the music of the church—worship music—be an agent of unity (John 17:21) for our shattered church(es) instead of a further segregator?

Problems with church music are not new. Nine hundred years ago monastic chants were the norm, the range of notes allowed were severely restricted to avoid unnecessary distraction. Hildegard von Bingen had other ideas. Her “soaring melodies...[went] well outside of the normal range of chant at the time.”⁶¹ She had the idea that the emotive meaning of the words ought to have their counterpart in the music: soaring notes for soaring words. Over time the Catholic Church developed a music complex enough that, four hundred years later, Calvin demanded it be greatly simplified. Along with whitewashing church frescoes and removing (and often destroying) statues and icons, the Council in Geneva requested single-note (monody) set melodies, a different one for each psalm, and hired Louis Bourgeois and others to compose the material. When, later on, Bourgeois changed one of the tunes without permission, he was thrown in jail.⁶² This musical simplification was not because the Calvinists had a tin ear; theirs was a reaction against the fancy (multi-part; polyphonic) professional performances in the Catholic churches where the congregants stood silently. In order to encourage congregational singing in Geneva, giant songbooks were held up for all to see and learn the single-note melodies. Instruments were also largely removed because of their “‘lascivious’ connection with dancing and secular entertainment.”⁶³ Bourgeois, however, ever pushing the envelope, got permission to

⁶⁰ This was my experience growing up in the Christian Reformed Church of the 1970s. By the 1980s I was playing guitar and singing folk-song-style “praise music” during communion—to the consternation of a few of the elders.

⁶¹ “Hildegard of Bingen,” *Wikipedia*, accessed August 14, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hildegard_of_Bingen.

⁶² “Louis Bourgeois (composer),” *Wikipedia*, accessed April 19, 2015, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Bourgeois_\(composer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Bourgeois_(composer)). Calvin intervened so he only spent one night in jail. It must have soured Bourgeois’s relationship with the Calvinists for he later left Geneva, ended up in Paris, and had his daughter baptized in a Catholic church (“Louis Bourgeois (Composer),” *Grove Music Online*, accessed April 19, 2015, <http://www.bach-cantatas.com/lib/Bourgeois-Louis.htm>).

⁶³ “Louis Bourgeois (Composer),” *Grove*.

publish four-part harmonies for use *at home*.⁶⁴ Thanks to Luther, another tradition entered the church music repertoire: adapting popular tunes for the church by changing the lyrics. “A Mighty Fortress” is (in)famous for once being a beer-slinging bar tune, a perfect example of Luther’s nature/grace dualism (learned from his Augustinian Catholic training): music (nature) is neutral and the words/lyrics reveal one’s beliefs. Replace the bad (“worldly”) words with good (grace-filled) ones and you have a godly song.

The challenges of worship music are perennial: simple vs. complex music; professional performers vs. congregational participation; new vs. old tunes; and the dualistic accommodation of “neutral,” “secular” music. Additionally, our contemporary world includes the ubiquity of professional-quality music, the individualism interdependent with increasing personal choice (different genres of music), and the globalization of music that leads to homogeneity (international music fads) at the expense of local/regional music. Let’s look more closely at these current issues.

Ubiquity. When professionally produced music is everywhere, it is good news for musicians but there are other effects. Its omnipresence ironically makes it less special; its professional quality makes us less appreciative of amateurs (if not outright derisive; cf. “American Idol” tryouts). Hearing music at church is no longer an unusual treat, and if it is not professional quality then it is a “turn off,” yet how many churches without the money or talent pool can meet that standard?

Individualism. Freedom of choice is a sacred cow in our culture yet it comes at the expense of social cohesion. Families no longer eat together because of individual schedules and no longer worship together because of different tastes.⁶⁵ “The traditional service is too boring”; “the contemporary service is too loud.” These critiques are mostly about music. Music no longer ties generations together; it tears them apart—although there are notable exceptions. Nostalgia still trumps style when it comes to patriotic music, Christmas carols, and Christian classics—all nineteenth-century hymns. The national anthem (“The Star-Spangled Banner”), for example, is

⁶⁴ He used a technique called homophony which is familiar to anyone used to four-part hymnal singing. Everyone sings the same syllables/words at the same time, just using different notes. Polyphony, the idea that the multiple parts might separate, singing the words at different moments (e.g., echoing), one part holding a note-word for a long time while the others sing several note-words, was still too complex for the Genevans’ ears. Bourgeois did stretch his aesthetic wings later in life after leaving Switzerland (“Louis Bourgeois (Composer),” *Grove*).

⁶⁵ Interestingly, there is some convergence of the old and young as those who were raised with traditional hymns die off and are replaced by the now-graying Baby Boomers who were raised with rock-and-roll. The complaints of drums and electric guitars in church are fading.

terrible for group singing—too large of a range, too many melodic leaps—but young and old alike still screech it out at sporting events. A Christmas hymn like “Angels We Have Heard on High” contains that notorious “Glo-o-oria!” that only trained singers can sing correctly, yet everyone warbles it out with great gusto. And a Christian classic like “Amazing Grace” with its countless arrangements draws in every voice.

Finally, *homogeneity*. Paradoxically, the more that regional music from all over the globe is made more widely available (primarily via the Internet), the more it sounds the same. For instance, distinctly Indian or Korean music has long adopted the Western rock beat, synthesizer, and rap-style lyrics to create an almost universal “dance mix.” This high-energy music appeals to the excitable youth culture, has swept aside deference to the elderly, and made worship services without it unappealing (to the youth). Truly local music, that which has tied together a (sub)culture of people for generations, is largely forgotten. A wonderful exception to this is African-American gospel music. Rap and R&B (rhythm & blues), two of its progeny, have been chipping away at its following for years, but the tradition lives on.

With all these competing factors for “proper” church music, is it any wonder that some church traditions (denominations) have reverted to all-acapella, all-congregational singing? And for those of us who believe there are creational norms (laws) for godly worship (and its substrata: normative aesthetics, normative social/community structures, etc.), how do we make sense of this cacophony? I will conclude with three suggestions.

First and foremost, for clarity of communication, the music must match the words, and, in the case of worship music, the music must be subservient to the words, as a means of conveying the message. Christianity, as a religion of the Book, has a wealth of powerful words to communicate; music should enhance not hinder the words. The spoken word has a natural melody; the music should find and enrich it. The speaking voice rises to emphasize words; it also usually rises at the end of a question. The music should do likewise. Louis Bourgeois knew this and incorporated it into his melodies. It need not be an inflexible rule, but it ought to be at least a fundamental guideline.

In most nineteenth-century hymns and contemporary “praise music,” the musical verses and refrain are set beforehand and the lyrics are added later. Consider “Amazing Grace.”⁶⁶ If you

⁶⁶ John Newton’s lyrics were put to the simple 16-measure tune we all know so well 22 years after he died.

speak the first half of the first verse aloud, there are several words that might be emphasized. The current setting emphasizes “grace” (a long note and the highest note in the first phrase), “wretch,” and especially “me” (the longest, highest note in the song).⁶⁷ I would have chosen differently—perhaps “grace,” “sweet,” and “saved”—but that’s just me. The trouble arises as more verses are force-fitted into the same melodic mold. The same emphatic note for “grace” in the first verse is the word “taught” in the second.⁶⁸ That makes little sense. Three other words in that first phrase would have been far better—“grace,” “heart,” and “fear”—but the melody offers no flexibility. I could go on. The same point could be made with the national anthem and its absurd emphasis on “see” in the opening phrase.⁶⁹ The typical nineteenth-century hymn marches along and the typical “praise song” repeats the same three chords with little or no acknowledgement of the message being told. The verse-plus-refrain format is easier to learn because of its repetitiveness, but it does not commend itself to the dramatic communication of anything but a very short message. One solution is to sing only short lyrics—repetitively, meditatively. This is the tradition of Taizé music. Another solution is to write lengthy melodies that form-fit the lyrics such as you might hear on Broadway (or in Disney movies). John Michael Talbot has met with some success in that regard.

Second, instrumental music, including an interlude in a song, is another controversy. From a Bach composition to a Kenny G. (jazz saxophone) rendition of “Silent Night,” when does the music help you worship—focus on God—and when is it a performance (with a focus on the musician)? Is it possible to do both: give thanks to God while admiring the talent given to the musician? Arvo Pärt and John Tavener are two contemporary composers who have written instrumental (and choral) works for the church in the classical style. Their use of modern techniques, like sustained dissonance, makes for a haunting beauty that, for me, captures twenty-first-century angst in the harmonic interstices of the music. Much of it is heart-rending and contemplative; some of it is “high energy” but of a different palette than driving drum beats and electronica.

⁶⁷ “Amazing grace! How sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me!”

⁶⁸ “’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear....”

⁶⁹ “Oh, say, can you see, by the dawn’s early light....”

Third, there is something about singing together—making music together—that creates a bond between the participants. For this reason, worship without congregational singing is amiss.⁷⁰ But what songs are appealing to both old and young people, and are simple enough for the untrained to sing well, yet complex enough to match music to words? Taizé music seems to meet all of those criteria for a growing number of people. So does gospel music within the African-American community. I believe it is too much to ask of worship music to be the primary draw to a given worship service. That makes it dangerously close to entertainment. Like the African-American churches, the *community*—the way people treat each other—must be the “main attraction”; the music (and the Word and the sacraments etc.) are then part of the shared tradition that binds one to that community. In this way, the music of the church is distinctively pistic, i.e., it helps one to focus on one’s Ultimate. Instead of popular music (waves of fads) flowing into the church to make it entertaining, the worship music matrix might flow out of the church to show the broader society not only how to celebrate one’s Ultimate but how to do it in a way that ties people from various backgrounds and age groups together.

P.S. #3: Children and Worship

Church is not for children. At least so it seemed from my perspective as a child. The pews were built for adult-sized bodies; the prayers and sermons were too long to keep my attention; although my dad gave me a one-dollar bill to put in the collection plate as it went by, I had no concept of what a tithe was; and my stomach growled as the neatly-sliced squares of bread and tiny (child-sized!) cups of grape juice went by, but I wasn’t allowed to touch them. My Sunday school songs taught me that I was a child of God *now*, but it was obvious in church that I wouldn’t *really* be one until I grew up. I was no rebel; I eagerly wanted to be a full-fledged member. At home I would turn a chair around, mount my “pulpit,” and give sermons. I studied the Heidelberg Catechism and joined at the earliest possible age: 13, the age of reason.

The age of reason: a curious thing. At 13, I was called precocious, my peers not joining the church until age 16 or 17. At least by that age one’s body generally fits in the pew properly. I was taught that one must be fully cognizant of the mystery of the Lord’s Supper before one could participate (as if one can ever be fully cognizant of a mystery). Besides, our Jewish forbears’

⁷⁰ Kuyper agrees. Cf. Kuyper, *On Worship*, 52.

tradition was to celebrate manhood at age 13 with a *bar mitzvah*—but no one mentioned that the *entire* family, even tiny children, celebrates the deeply symbolic Passover Seder together.

Contemporary churches have an equal and opposite solution: give children a worship service of their very own, with child-sized seats, puppet shows, silly songs, and tasty treats. With a cupcake in hand, who wouldn't want to be a child of God? Other churches are hybrid: start the service with everyone together, sing some upbeat songs, offer a cute children's sermon (with lots of nods, winks, and smiles among the adults), and then send the little squirmers off for some entertaining babysitting while the grown-ups get down to business.

It's all so neat and packaged.

But God is not neat and packaged, nor is our worship relationship with God. I agree with Kuyper; we need orderliness—a liturgy—to keep from devolving into chaos, but an *earthy* liturgy, one that, like our Jewish forbears, celebrates God's real and present faithfulness here and now by including the entire community, especially the young children. They may not fully understand the symbolism of the Lord's Supper or any of the rituals or even have a well-developed sense of God (Who does? These things develop over a lifetime), but they know when they are not included, not welcome. The Jewish tradition of remembrance (“Never forget!”) is also—or should be—our tradition. It is a tradition of storytelling, enacting, making believe (a child's *forté*) that one *is* Moses talking back to authority, Miriam dancing and singing, Thomas touching, Mary running to be first at the tomb, Jesus hugging a leper. Are these stories so dull that we need high-energy twenty-somethings with puppets to tell them? When a child runs up to her parent after church and says, “Have you heard the story about...?” I feel sad. The child should have heard the story while sitting on her father's lap and listening to her grandparents tell it, each taking different parts and voices. Then, instead of a “new story I'll bet you haven't heard,” it is a treasured story that even the adults say, “Tell it again!”

Worship should be nurtured, developed over a lifetime together in community. We all develop at different rates. When I was a junior high (middle school) student, struggling with self-identity at school, the last place I wanted to be was corralled with a bunch of other young teens at church. I yearned to be with the adults, to learn what they were learning, to be accepted as one of them. Childhood (and young adult) development and educational fields may offer us help here, but we must be wary of importing industrial-style schooling (e.g., division by age group) into

our churches. I would suggest something like Kieran Egan’s work and will conclude by sketching an application of his educational theory to worship.

Egan, a professor at Simon Fraser University, uses a developmental approach he calls “imaginative education” that unfolds through five ways of knowing: somatic, mythic, romantic, philosophic, and ironic.⁷¹ *Somatic* is the bodily, pre-lingual way that we know the world when we are very young. Even as we eventually learn language and move on to other levels, we never lose the earlier ways of knowing. We are always embodied and connected to the world around us via our senses. When we are birthed into a worshiping community we first begin to understand it through the sights (stained glass windows or JumboTron screens, all sorts of different faces and clothing), sounds (loud music, high and low voices singing, periods of near silence), smells (incense, colognes and perfumes), textures (wearing special clothes, smooth wooden pews, the carpet or hardwood floor under the pews), and tastes (a piece of candy during the sermon, cookies and punch after the service). Sitting still is easier for some small children than others. What are the emotions being formed in these early worship experiences? Are there expectations of it always being place of excitement, fun, and good food—or itchy clothes and stern looks—or warmth and acceptance?

As we grow into oral language, the *mythic* stage, stories take us beyond our own immediate experience to the experience of others. We never lose the love of storytelling, and the Bible is replete with stories for all age groups. Over and over again the characters make mistakes (children can relate to this!), and over and over again God picks them up and dusts them off (hopefully the children have parents/siblings/elders who do this too). Egan talks about a particular love of jokes (puns), wordplay, and binary opposites at this stage. Good and evil loom large. Us and them: prejudices (distinctions, discriminations) are formed willy nilly. Black-and-white thinking is a necessary cognitive step to later analytical thought, but parents, teachers, preachers beware! It is also the time to lay the groundwork against social (e.g., racial) prejudices and creational dualisms (e.g., church is good, politics is evil); it is time to learn habits of compassion and a love for all of creation including all the spheres of society.

Not many years into the mythic stage, writing and literacy open new horizons and a fascination with extremes and limits (e.g., *Guinness Book of World Records*) turns into “hero worship,”

⁷¹ The following summary of Egan’s paradigm is drawn from the Imaginative Education Research Group website at <http://www.ierg.ca>. Accessed November 27, 2013.

or, with the resurgence of the term “idol” in popular culture (referring to entertainment personalities), “idol worship.” Egan calls this stage *romantic* because, like the Romantic era, life is seen as a heroic adventure. Posters of heroes (idols) adorn the bedroom walls and the cult of personality takes hold.⁷² Note the key terms: idol, cult, worship. Perhaps this is when an independent sense of worship becomes manifest (not independent from one’s peers but from one’s parents). Are the wall posters merely a harmless phase? Should we provide posters of Noah, Mary, and Jesus?⁷³ I believe these years are critical for getting children actively involved in communal worship. Instead of “worshipping” the latest sports or movie star or pop singer, children should be exposed to a heroic grandparent/elder and learn to emulate them and love the things (including God) that he or she loves.

As already noted, our society tends to stagnate in the romantic world, so moving beyond it is a bumpy road. Most every adult experiences some amount of the *philosophic* stage, the sense that there are connections, regularities (laws), theories holding the disparate elements of reality together. The Big Picture. Unfortunately, our media diet is almost exclusively romantic soundbites, and an ill-educated philosophic understanding quickly degenerates into conspiracy theories, dogmatism, or some combination thereof. This is where I was at 13. I craved the knowledge of the overarching construct (*cosmonomos*) that held all things together, but rather than working through it myself, I merely (romantically) idolized Calvin *et alia* and (dogmatically) memorized the main points (portions of the catechism). In any contest of religiophilosophical perspectives (e.g., versus materialism), I was reduced to spluttering doctrinal soundbites.

What was needed—and did not come until many years later—was what Egan calls *ironic* understanding, the realization that even those cherished doctrines and that philosophy have limits. Calvin and Dooyeweerd don’t have all the answers! I was crushed. I would have to “work out my own salvation,” my own theology, my own philosophy, my own religion. This is not a well-traveled path in contemporary America and the only thing that kept me from utterly collapsing into postmodern nihilism was community. Not just any community, but the very worship

⁷² Egan writes, “newspapers, magazines, films and television shows are largely oriented toward Romantic understanding.” From the shock-and-awe Evening News to the unending stream of (extreme, graphic) sports/survival/crime TV shows, our society seems stuck in this level of (im)maturity.

⁷³ Sadly, such “Christian” (antinormative) kitsch (including shapely action figures) is readily available at a Bible bookstore near you.

community of my youth.⁷⁴ Christianity has a rich history of mystics and philosophers, orthodoxies and heterodoxies, people to be studied and some to be emulated. I don't need to construct my own theology etc. from scratch after all. I just need to (ironically, philosophically, romantically, etc.) ligament myself to God in a way that is both true to the collective wisdom of my tradition and authentic to my unique self.

“Children and worship” is not really about children; it is about a lifetime of God-experiences that transcend and include earlier stages of knowing, earlier stages that ought to be immersed in the intergenerational community of worshipers.

⁷⁴ Henk Hart, Roy Clouser, and John Van Dyk have been prominent in this role.

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