

We have weeks to unpack Maynard-Reid’s eras of Christian worship. So let’s move on to Hoffman’s “A Holistic View of Liturgy.” It shows us what you get when you cross a sociologist and a theologian. The answer isn’t very funny, is it? This selection contains many wonderful points, but I probably shouldn’t have assigned it until after the add/drop deadline.

The first paragraph sets out his project: To show how the way people pray is a window into who they are (Vogel 78). He describes a “holistic study of liturgy” that “may begin with the text but must eventually go beyond it – to the people, to their meanings, to their assumed constructs, and to their ritualized patterns that make their world uniquely their own” (86). Only in light of all these things can we really understand a worship text (for instance, a song lyric, benediction, communion prayer, or sermon). In other words, you can learn more about both people *and* their prayers by looking not just at what they pray, but also at how the praying changes them.

The things beyond a text are its “liturgical field.” Hoffman explores three specific aspects of that field: Its “cultural backdrop” or social context (and here Maynard-Reid’s chapter is helpful), its “master image” or controlling mythology, and its “synecdochal vocabulary” or supply of literary devices for alluding to that mythology (83).

Learning about each sheds light on the others. When we study the history of a particular form of worship, we learn more about its literary world and symbolism. When we study symbolism, we learn about the people who use it. Recovering the original form of the texts throws light on the history of the texts and their people.

By the way, if that’s right, then biblical studies morphs into historical theology (and the study of worship), and vice versa. Remember, biblical texts are worship texts. If we learn more about the Bible as we learn more about the people who use it in worship, and vice versa, then Augustine and Luther and Wesley (and for us, Patterson and Gaede) – what Hoffman calls its “liturgical field” (79) – are part of the Bible’s context (and *maybe* even part of the Bible itself). This insight is working its way through biblical studies as we speak, as you may already know.

*So is the textual history of, say, the Lord’s Prayer also its social history of interpretation? Does Bible study need to look more like study of the Church (ecclesiology)?*

Slightly paraphrasing Hoffman (79), in prayer and worship, a community acts out the world it knows. Then the people scatter to live their lives according to that “master image.” Therefore, study of texts must be more than an exercise in preservation and repetition of those raw texts. We need to know how those texts affect those who pray them.

For an illustration, Hoffman offers *havdalah*, the ceremony that marks the end of the Jewish Sabbath. “Saturday night may be just the middle of a weekend for others, but for Jews enwrapped in (and enraptured by) *havdalah*, it is the guarantee that their very world is passing from a state of holy to one of profane” (80). In other words, when analyzing the Jewish prayer that closes the Sabbath, one must appreciate how Jews who pray it aren’t just marking the passage of time, but are returning to the common (‘profane’) world in which they live six-sevenths of their lives. The prayer doesn’t just sit there in a book in a rabbi’s study. It closes the Sabbath. It lives among those who practice it as part of their weekly rituals. Just as gathering on Sunday mornings to greet the risen Jesus doesn’t kill two hours of our weekends, but participates in the New

Creation that dawns anew whenever two or three gather in the name of its firstfruits. Participates not just imaginatively or metaphorically, but *really*.

As we read texts that belong to other worlds – the Didache, old Orthodox and Catholic and Lutheran liturgies, the Psalms of ancient Israel – remember that knowing their liturgical field is essential for knowing the texts themselves.

Hoffman draws on sociology to offer more insight on worship texts. Social gatherings, including those of corporate Christian worship, purposefully include and exclude by way of linguistic *identification* (82). Praying the same prayer, teaching the same Bible, singing the same songs, and confessing the same creed unite communities over space and time into something larger – something Christians call the universal Church. He calls the language that does this “sacred myth.” You might call these words media of the fellowship of saints.

Note that this identifying language doesn’t have to take the form of entire songs or creeds; little symbols and allusions are enough. This is “synecdoche”: referring, *e.g.*, to a whole by naming only a part. Think of how Paul uses “our fathers” in 1 Cor. 10 when writing to a bunch of Gentile Christians. Like C.S. Lewis’ wardrobe to Narnia, one little phrase is a portal into a whole mythological world.

Human communities, including worshipping communities, also draw boundaries: and not just to distinguish themselves from radical alternatives, but especially to distinguish themselves from close neighbors. This sounds bad, but it can be very good. “Jesus is Lord” is a boundary marker. Among those who worship the God of Israel, it distinguishes those who worship *Jesus* as the God of Israel. That’s a pretty important boundary!

Worship rituals can thus reveal how communities exclude and seek to defeat rivals, especially “close cousins” (81). An “identifying” community reveals its character in how and who and why it includes and excludes. For instance, Eastern Orthodox church services still regularly condemn Arius, Nestorius, Apollinarius, and other figures from the fourth and fifth centuries – because these figures taught heresies that Orthodox Christians believe still threaten and compromise the Good News.

Why exclude? First, to preserve what is distinct about the worshipping community. Second (for evangelistic traditions like ours), to assist in the conversion of the excluded (82-83). Some forms of exclusion aim at inclusion. To agree that “Jesus is Lord” is to convert, to gain an identity and (perhaps) lose others, to join a community and (perhaps) leave others.

Here’s a suggestion: At church and chapel, look for both overt and subtle ways that the symbols and images of worship rituals identify people in order to include or exclude them.

In closing let me express two worries, one from each of our readings. (1) After reading Maynard-Reid’s account of deep connections between culture and worship, do you worry that culture is too often the master, and not always the servant, of worship? Keep the question in mind for the next few weeks as we examine each era more thoroughly. (2) In Hoffman’s expansive use of sociology to describe what goes on in gathered worship, are you nervous that the movement of the Spirit is being reduced to group dynamics? How much have we said about *Christian* worship when we have only spoken of “worship” in general? Does all this apply to Hindu worship? It seems so. On the other hand, why *wouldn’t* the Holy Spirit work through group dynamics? He works through water and bread and wine. Why *wouldn’t* theolatry share sociological features with other kinds of -latry? If worship language were absolutely unique,

sharing nothing with the sociological, cultural, mythological uses of other forms of language, then in what sense could it compete with them, as Christian worship language obviously does?