

Two Principles toward Ecumenical Liturgy

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In this essay, I want to discuss two essential principles of Christian ecumenical liturgy: a) the principle of *other-wise liturgy* and b) the principle of *culturally-conscious worship*.¹ These two principles will escort the way we approach different Christian traditions of worship and eventually the way we design and practice ecumenical worship. I owe much to works of John McClure and Kathy Back in figuring out and applying these two principles.

Other-wise Liturgy

Even though his work, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethics for Homiletics*, does not specifically deal with ecumenism or ecumenical worship, the book provides a great deal of insight for ecumenical liturgy. Let us, therefore, first take a brief look at the key points of the book that benefit our discussion and then clearly define *other-wise liturgy* that I claim as the first principle of ecumenical liturgy.

McClure, throughout the book, repeatedly targets the fatal inclination to the church's self-closure, particularly when carried out by the ministry of preaching. He believes that the self-closure evident in Christian preaching eventually makes the church, the preacher, and the congregation indifferent to the "other," whom the church has thus far ignored as the total stranger and thus the *nobody* of the world. No doubt the "other," he continues arguing, should be the church's significant focus now, because today's extremely fragmented post-modern context requires preaching to be widely open to and communicate in diligence with that "other," who also must reflect the divine "infinity" in their faces, a fact that the self-closed church might have intentionally denied in the ministry of preaching.²

In that focus on the "other" in preaching, McClure names his preaching formation or methodology as one of "de-centering," "deconstruction," and "other-directedness," built on the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' deconstruction discourse.³ McClure argues that Christian preaching, specifically in the era dating from the Enlightenment, now faces various critiques because of the serious lack of the "other" in it, needs deconstruction of its own self-closed homiletic formation, and should proceed in an "other-directed" way. He thinks this should be done in at least four ways: in terms of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

¹ In this essay, I intentionally use the two terms, liturgy and worship, interchangeably. Typically, "high" church traditions prefer the term, liturgy, while "low" churches like to use the term, worship. Here, I do not want to make any critical distinctions between the two, so use the two both for the purpose of demonstrating the ecumenical possibility among various liturgy/worship traditions.

² McClure, *Other-wise Preaching*, 63.

³ *Ibid.*, 8 and other places.

Indeed, he organizes the main body of the book around these four “houses” in which the church lives.⁴

After the critical discussion of the four homiletic elements above, in chapters five and six, McClure moves on toward “other-wise” homiletics as an alternative formation of preaching for today’s context. His point is clear: after exiting the four interpretive houses of modern Scriptural approach, traditional ideas and customs, monolithic claims of human experience, and non-communicative modern oppressive reasoning, postmodern homiletics should embark on a journey “into the strange land of ‘social consciousness,’ ‘participatory knowing,’ ‘unlimited conversation,’ ‘colliding with the powers,’ or ‘welcoming the stranger’” [who is the “other”] (131-132). The ultimate purpose of this exit and subsequent journey is also clear. The other-wise preaching now meets the “other” who, ignored before, is now an essential and decisive conversational partner through whom we can witness the infinity of the Divine residing in ourselves and others. Without the “other,” our understanding of the Divine is partial, dangerous, and even oppressive.

In light of McClure’s other-wise preaching, I suggest *other-wise liturgy* as the first principle for ecumenical liturgy for three specific liturgical purposes. First, the ecumenical liturgy should confront the other liturgical tradition as the *unlimited conversational partner*. That is, planners or participants of ecumenical worship or other-wise liturgy from both or more traditions ought to ask before, during, and after the worship service how they are communicating with each other in an unlimited sense with full respect to each other. Second, the ecumenical liturgy should pursue to find the “infinity of the Divine” in others from their other liturgical traditions. It should be clear that we do not want to have the ecumenical liturgy just simply for the artificial harmony among different Christian denominations or just for the purpose of knowing each other more in a liturgical or theological sense, but we participate in the ecumenical worship for the ultimate purpose of witnessing the infinity of the Divine residing in ourselves and others. Third, when we can witness the infinity of the Divine residing in others, we will broaden and deepen our understanding not only of Christian liturgy but the very object of liturgy: God.

b. Culturally-Conscious Liturgy

Kathy Black in her *Culturally-Conscious Worship* has great practical suggestions for creating multi-cultural ecumenical liturgy between two or more unfamiliar cultures,⁵ although she does not specifically focus on the issue of ecumenism. Her practical ideas and ideological reasoning behind those ideas are very helpful for us since we are now also considering the *multi-cultural* or *bi-cultural* ecumenical worship service between the AA

⁴ Regarding human reason, in particular, McClure argues for *communicative reason*, which “is rooted in a praxis-epistemology in which praxis is understood as communicative action or interaction.” For him, this homiletic reason, departing from various modern theories of reason such as John Broadus’ propositional-deductive reason, ontological reason of the New Homiletic, David Buttrick’s phenomenological reason, and Ronald Allen’s process reason, enables preaching to meet with the “other” honestly in that communicative framework, away from “the oppressive dangers of [modern] ontologies, philosophies of consciousness, and radical empiricism” still permeating today’s homiletics. McClure, *Other-wise Preaching*, 98.

⁵ See Kathy Black, *Culturally-Conscious Worship*.

church and the EO church, each of which obviously has a highly distinctive cultural and racial background, experience, and expression from the other, in particular regarding their regular worship service. Among her many helpful suggestions for multi-cultural worship, I find two of them most compelling for this project.

First, have kin-dom visions in worship service. This kin-dom is obviously connected to the traditional apocalyptic image of “Kingdom of God.” Yet, the former, originally coined by Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz,⁶ has a great emphasis on the unity, not uniformity, of multi-racial and multi-cultural groups in one Christian faith and in equality. Basically, this kin-dom vision says that we are, though racially and culturally different, the same creation before God as “all kin-members of the family of God.”⁷ Worship is the place where all kin-members become united in one faith for the praise of God in various expressions of liturgy.

Second, create a shared story of worship. Black finds that “[l]ike the people after Pentecost, creating a shared story with a multicultural congregation is essential” for culturally-conscious worship. As a matter of theological-liturgical practicality, Black suggests several understandings of Christian worship as potential shared stories below.

Worship is giving honor and praise to God.

Worship effects a new relationship between God and each individual present.⁸

Worship mediates God’s grace to us.

Worship expresses and embodies God’s reality and presence.

Worship “offers Christ for human acceptance.”⁹

Worship is the communal living out of the kin-dom on earth.

Worship empowers us to move out into the world as disciples of God’s love.

Worship is the “offering of our whole selves to God.”¹⁰

Worship is the event in the present where God’s past acts of salvation history and the living out of God’s future eschatological promises come together.

Black advises us to express any, or other, kinds of *shared* stories above through biblical images, visual arts, music, and other liturgical elements in worship, in efforts to concretize and experience the kin-dom vision in a liturgical sense during the actual worship service.

Summary

Above, we discussed the two critical liturgical principles for any multicultural, ecumenical worship service, theological-ideological and practical respectively. The first principle has the emphasis on the unlimited respect for the *other*’s liturgical presence while the second focuses on the liturgical ways of congregational unity in and for the multicultural worship service. Obviously, it would be the best to have both, theological-ideological on the

⁶ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, “Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the 1980s,” in Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, eds., *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 31-40.

⁷ Kathy Black, *Worship*, 35.

⁸ Andy Langford, *Transitions in Worship: Moving from Traditional to Contemporary* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1999), 62.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁰ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Whispered Word: A Theology of Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999).

one hand and practical on the other. Without the former, the latter might lead one cultural or liturgical group's power dynamic to dominate over the other group, while without the latter, the former might lack a concrete, practical direction in creating a multi-cultural, ecumenical worship service.