



FOUR WAYS CULTURE & WORSHIP RELATE



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Christianity, like every other religion, was born in a particular historical and cultural context, in a particular time and place.¹ For Christianity, this context happened to be the ancient Middle East at the beginning of the first century. While the historical context of Christianity's birth is unchangeable and static, like the recorded time and place on one's birth certificate, its cultural context no longer exists. Culture by definition is dynamic and constantly changing, sometimes slowly and gradually, at other times rapidly and dramatically.

Christianity has always stood in tension with prevailing cultures, no matter where it existed. But as humans we hate tension. We are wired to resolve tension. We look for symmetry. We want a clean end to every mystery novel, an answer to every complex riddle. But what happens when Christianity insists on maintaining its foundations *and* its original cultural forms, no matter what new culture it finds itself in? What happens when Christians see the tension as a chaotic mess, rejecting its constant demands to review one's priorities and revisit difficult questions? A crisis occurs.

A survey of various Christian traditions shows us that some churches try to resolve the tension by downplaying the differences between culture and faith. They try to blend in by matching their beliefs and practices—their entire religion, form and foundation—to those of the contemporary culture. History has proven over and over again that such faith communities lose their salty effectiveness (1 Sam 8; Matt 5) and give up their call to help reshape and reform culture (John 17). What *was* originally a healthy tension breaks down into bland duplication of the ungodly values of the context—a crisis.

Other Christian traditions have tried to resolve the tension by taking the opposite extreme, isolating themselves in opposition to the culture. This can take the passive shape of retreating to fundamentalist convictions, insisting that faith must be practiced in its original and purest forms, crediting the “good ol’ days” for bygone exuberance and growth. But it can also become aggressive, imposing itself on others, fighting about differences in worldview, faith, and practices—a crisis.

In their wisdom the writers of the Nairobi Statement foresaw the shadow of such crises hovering over the church in our human tendency and temptation to resolve tension at all cost. In an attempt to navigate away from these crisis points between Christianity and



culture, they produced this document to help churches view the tension as an ongoing conversation to be protected, preserved, and even promoted. They have carefully designed a four-way conversation in which each persona has a role to perform, yet always remains in dialog with the other partners.

They have chosen to focus on worship as “the heart and pulse of the Christian church” (section 1.1), the most regular corporate event that is both expressive and formative of the beliefs and practices of a faith community.

FIRST: CHRISTIAN WORSHIP IS TRANSCULTURAL

Christian worship contains the same substance for everyone everywhere. In all its diverse expressions, it is beyond culture. This is true not only of the central actions mandated by Scripture, but also of the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ (section 2.2).

This transcultural dimension is probably the single most important factor to the sensed unity of the worldwide church, visible and invisible, across time and space. We read the same letter to the Romans which was read long before us by Saint Augustine in Northern Africa and Luther in Western Europe. We remember and celebrate Christ’s death and resurrection in the Lord’s Supper, in parallel with believers in a megachurch in Korea, and in

NAIROBI STATEMENT ON WORSHIP AND CULTURE²

CHRISTIAN WORSHIP RELATES DYNAMICALLY TO CULTURE IN AT LEAST FOUR WAYS.

FIRST, it is trans-cultural, the same substance for everyone everywhere, beyond culture.

SECOND, it is contextual, varying according to the local situation (both nature and culture).

THIRD, it is counter-cultural, challenging what is contrary to the Gospel in a given culture.

FOURTH, it is cross-cultural, making possible sharing between different local cultures.



a reed-roofed hut in the Amazon. We all sing the Psalms, with our own musical styles, instrumental accompaniment, and languages.³ Understanding these universal and ecumenical elements of Christian unity gives local churches the freedom to use disciplined creativity for authentic contextualization.

SECOND: CHRISTIAN WORSHIP IS CONTEXTUAL

Worship reflects local patterns of speech, dress, architecture, gestures, and other cultural characteristics. Jesus’ incarnation into a specific culture gives us both a model and a mandate. The gospel and the church were never intended to be exclusive to or confined to any one culture. Rather, the good news was to spread to the ends of the earth, rooting the church deeply into diverse local cultures. “Contextualization is a necessary task for the church’s mission in the world” (section 3.1).

In his book on global worship, Charles Farhadian stresses how important it is to “appreciate the immense variety of expressions of Christian worship in order to take seriously the social and cultural context that plays such a significant part in worship...[with] emphasis on culture as the potential, not the problem of worship.”⁴

The Nairobi Statement outlines two useful approaches to ensure adequate contextualization. First, *dynamic equivalence*—which involves re-expressing components



of Christian worship with something from a local culture that has an equal meaning, value, and function. For example,

moderate, mediating voice in the vicious conflict. This prayer demonstrates how worship goes decidedly against the surrounding cultures of intolerance and war, refusing to bow down to the false gods of greed, racism, and uncompromising self-righteousness, choosing instead to transform people and cultural patterns by acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God, the Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6; Mic 6:8).

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the lordship of Jesus is taught among the Maasai tribe in

Kenya by painting a black man dressed in a red robe, since red is the color of royalty and is always worn by the village chief. The second approach is *creative assimilation*, which involves enriching worship by adding pertinent components of local culture. For example, in Egypt the harmonic sound of an *oud* (lute) is used to add a fuller expression to psalms of lament.

Both of these tools go beyond mere translation and must be used with caution. Discernment is essential to decide how to equivocate and assimilate, while preserving the transcultural elements of unity and ecumenicity with the church universal. As the Nairobi Statement says, “The fundamental values and meanings of both Christianity and of local cultures must be respected” (section 3.5).

THIRD: CHRISTIAN WORSHIP IS COUNTER-CULTURAL

Christians in the Middle East take their call to be peacemakers very seriously, intentionally designing worship that breaks down barriers and promotes reconciliation through prayers like the following:

*Gracious God, you have promised through your prophets that Jerusalem will be home to many peoples, mother to many nations. Hear our prayers that Jerusalem, the city of your visitation, may be for all—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—a place to dwell with you and to encounter one another in peace. We make this prayer in Jesus’ name. Amen.*⁵

In a meeting with a delegation of Christian leaders, the president of a Middle Eastern country said that Christians have a vital presence in the region because they offer a

Every culture contains some sinful, broken, dehumanizing elements that are contradictory to the gospel and present us with rival “secular liturgies that compete for our love.”⁶ Christian worship must resist the idolatries of a given culture. This doesn’t mean that we become anticultural; rather, it challenges us to become careful readers of our culture in light of biblical truths.

In commenting on Psalm 73, John Witvliet writes, “Public worship, then as now, is a superb way to practice not being the center of the universe and learn to see the world right side up. Worship is, by the Spirit’s power, like spiritual cataract surgery that restores vision, clear and true.”⁷

FOURTH: CHRISTIAN WORSHIP IS CROSS-CULTURAL

At a seminar in North America on using songs from other cultures in worship, a participant asked this question: “I am a pastor of a small rural congregation, and my entire congregation is Anglo-European descendants, so why would we sing African or Asian or Latin songs in worship?”


This question betrays a faulty assumption that when we worship with songs, prayers, instruments, and visual arts from other cultures, we do it for “them”—meaning people who come from those cultures. While it is a great act of hospitality to make “them” feel welcome and included (a most commendable practice in the growing context of immigration and refugee resettlement), we must also realize that we do this for “us”—meaning people who feel at home in the commonly used language and musical style of “our” worship. Sharing worship resources cross-culturally expands our view of God and the church as transcending time and space, develops our repertoire of worship expressions, and crystalizes our understanding of the kingdom of heaven.

There are, of course, many issues to consider when engaging in cross-cultural worship—such as authenticity, instrumentation, languages, ethnic identities, and respect. To do this fourth aspect properly, we must faithfully practice the first three aspects by asking questions like: What elements of transcultural faith are we celebrating? To what degree do these elements fit in our local context? What brokenness in my culture will these borrowed practices help redeem and reform? Asking such questions will help us avoid slipping into the danger of viewing our own cultural processes as superior to others.

One of the most common, though often unspoken, reasons for not engaging in global worship is our fear that somehow our own heritage will be lost. C. Michael Hawn responds to this fear most eloquently: “Liturgical plurality is not denying one’s cultural heritage of faith in song, prayer, and ritual. It is a conscious effort to lay one’s cultural heritage and perspective alongside another’s, critique each, and learn from the experience.”⁸

The Nairobi Statement reminds us of what is at stake when we plan Christian worship. It helps us to major in question asking. The topic of worship practices is important not just for cultural anthropologists, missionaries, and missiologists, but for all Christian leaders and believers. And those of us who are novices in this area must enter the conversation with more questions than assertions.⁹

My hope and prayer is that local Christian communities may be instructed and inspired by the Nairobi Statement to see a third way when viewing the tension between

worship and culture. Though sometimes difficult and unsettling, tension is not an evil that deserves rejection, but a four-way conversation that holds great potential to help us faithfully uphold the gospel’s beauty and power while engaging culture, and in so doing we follow the example of Christ. 

- ¹ Condensed from Krabill, James R. et al, eds. 2013 *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 64–71. Used by permission.
- ² Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Department for Theology and Studies, Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities (Nairobi: Lutheran World Federation Department for Theology and Studies, 1996). To view the full text, see www.tlcvv.org/pdf/nairobi_statement.pdf and for Spanish and Korean translations, visit the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship website at www.worship.calvin.edu.
- ³ See the sidebar below by Paul Neeley—“The Psalms: Let All Nations Praise the Lord.”
- ⁴ Farhadian, Charles E. 2007 *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, x.
- ⁵ For the full text, see Churches for Middle East Peace, “Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem” (2006), accessible at <http://www.cmep.org/sites/default/files/PrayforJerusalemLiturgy.pdf> (page 2).
- ⁶ James K. A. Smith, in a lecture at the Calvin Worship Symposium, January 2011.
- ⁷ Witvliet, John D. 2011 “Worship in a Beatitude-Shaped World: Learning from Psalm 73” *Reformed Worship* 100: 5.
- ⁸ Hawn, C. Michael 2007 “Praying Globally: Pitfalls and Possibilities of Cross-Cultural Liturgical Appropriation.” In *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices*, Charles E. Farhadian, ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 210.
- ⁹ John Witvliet, 2003 “Worship Worldwide” (seminar presented during a conference on World Christianity at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI).

THE PSALMS: Let All Nations Praise the Lord

/ PAUL NEELEY

The biblical psalms have been the songbook of devotion for God’s people for 3000 years. They have also been used in frontier missions among UPGs and in trauma healing workshops.

I’ve led workshops to translate some Psalms and set them to culturally-appropriate music in Ghana, Nigeria, Togo and Benin. The workshop in Benin was among a people group that did not have a single known Christian at the time—not even the Bible translators;

all were Muslim. Because the Zabur (Psalms) are mentioned in the Qur’an and are regarded as inspired by God, they were a “safe” part of the Bible to use in translation and song creation. And because many cultures in West Africa influenced by Islam have an “arts patronage” system established, it was easy to commission songs based on Psalm excerpts from a local Muslim composer, who made part of his living by composing songs for a small payment. The recorded songs were welcomed by the Muslim community, and not perceived as threatening as if we had started by making NT passages into songs. And since the alphabet and literacy were in the early stages of development, indigenous Scripture songs were by far the best way for the

majority of the people to learn God’s Word. This way they could get used to the idea that it could be sung using their local music system and language.

Psalms 117 is one of my favorite Psalms:

*Praise the Lord, all you nations;
extol him, all you peoples of the earth.
For he loves us with unending
covenantal love,
and the faithfulness of the Lord
endures forever.
Praise the Lord!*

What a wonderful call to the nations to find their true calling: worshiping the King of Kings as revealed in Scripture!

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