

RELIGION, CULTURE, AND OUR WORSHIP

The Jan. 1998 edition of *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (published by Fort Wayne Seminary, LCMS) had a series of articles on the subject of culture and worship. A church in south London has been conducting “services” on Tuesday nights in a pub. People sit around tables, and smoke and drink. There are no preachers, no sermons or hymns, and the group decides which subjects it would like to discuss. In Papua New Guinea and among Aboriginals some have been advocating that cultural and “spiritual” elements should be incorporated into Christian worship. Some humanists like to talk as if religion itself is merely a product of culture.

At the same time it is a mistake to minimise culture. An article by G E Veith distinguished three levels of culture 1) unconscious or folk culture, of which children’s nursery rhymes are just one example: 2) high culture, forged by education, of which a classical symphony is one example, and 3) mass culture, also known as popular or pop culture. The third kind is prominent in the entertainment industry. For example, because television channels are interested in ratings they give the audience anything it wants.

How does this apply to worship? Christianity can be supported by folk culture. For example, there are valuable family and community associations in regular Sunday church attendance. Church services have elements of high culture, in the sense of education, theology, music and the other fine arts. However, in so far as pop culture rests on self-gratification, and enthrone the sinful flesh, it should have no place in worship. The Word of God transcends the mind-set of entertainment such as is seen on TV. The example of the Tuesday night worship in a pub tries to adapt Christian worship to this third level.

There is value in the liturgy we use. It brings together the folk culture and the high culture as a vehicle of prayer and praise to God. It is absurd to say that our Lutheran liturgy has its roots in German culture. They go back to Rome and Greece, North Africa, and the Middle East, including the worship of the synagogue. It incorporates many passages of the Bible itself and offers a framework that both transcends, and accords with, all cultures. There are elements of the careful work of scholars in high culture, including theologians and musicians

An important point to realise is that it is impossible to separate our Lutheran liturgy from Lutheran doctrine, and the starkness of Reformed liturgy from Reformed doctrine. Reformed churches have no absolution of sins, because of a conviction that no man can forgive sins. The Reformed have a different attitude to the Scripture readings and the sermons, because the doctrine of election determines the perception of the means of grace, on the assumption that they are intended to be effective only in the elect. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are devalued because of a basic conviction that material elements such as water, bread, and wine, cannot impart a spiritual gift such as the forgiveness of sins. There is no crucifix, and no chanting.

It is important not to regard the liturgy as completely neutral. There is a relationship between style and substance. During the Leipzig Interim Lutherans were put under pressure to reintroduce certain forms of the Roman Mass. What the Lutherans had deleted or changed in the Roman Mass they had inherited reflected the theological differences between Rome and Wittenberg. The Lutherans were very clear about the principle that they had to confess openly, not only in words, but also through their deeds and actions. The Roman ceremonies were not “*adiaphora*.”

Human nature always leads people to emphasise the subjective side of worship. There should be a solid objective emphasis on the means of grace, the Gospel and the Sacrament. Subjective elements, which have their proper place, in prayer and praise, should not obscure the primary objective in worship, for sinners to receive God’s gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation through the means of grace. We should distinguish between what is sacramental and what is sacrificial in worship.

We have to beware of attempts to allow the world, erring denominations, or liberal theology, to set the agenda for worship. Liberals nowadays may well accept elements of the supernatural, but they will adjust them to fit the cultural demands of the moment. A person who is liberal in his theology is willing to regard culture as if it had more authority than the Word of God.

In the Roman Catholic and Reformed traditions the church rules the culture. In the Anabaptist and monastic traditions the church had to be utterly separate from the culture. However, Lutherans have the doctrine of the two kingdoms. They say that for citizens God’s moral Law rules over folk culture, high culture, and pop culture. However, Christians may participate actively in all the various levels of culture in the kingdom on the left. A person who is fond of Country and Western music should be free to enjoy it, except where there are elements that are contrary to God’s moral Law. However, he should not ask for pop music in the divine service. It is the same sort of thing as saying that a Christian might be a good businessman, but should not want to turn the church into a business. A Christian might, in the kingdom on the left, enjoy good TV programs and computer

games, but he should not look to the church to be entertained. Why? Because in church God in His Law Word often asks people to hear what they would rather not hear. The Christian's receiving comfort and assurance in the Gospel is not the same thing as being entertained. What is so in society is different from in church. The church must be set apart from the culture, because there the Word of God must govern everything.

There is an important related question, Should our church services be geared to Christians, or be evangelistic services that aim to convert non-Christian hearers? Our baptised people would resent being preached to Sunday after Sunday on the assumption that they were not yet Christians. We have to recognise that there are many elements in modern secular culture that are actively hostile to the church. It has an exaggerated individualism. It is interested only in what seems to work; it wants popularity, and focuses on experience at the expense of the truth. There are parallels to New Age thinking in modern culture's interest in self and self-image. In secular culture there is often a willingness to believe in what is deeply irrational, and in this sense, it is open to the occult. If the church identifies Jesus Christ with what non-believers want, it renders His person superfluous, and denies His authority.

Surveys of Christians' reasons for attending church have often shown that many are interested in church for reasons other than worship. Lutherans need to be reminded that when they talk about a church "service", the chief thing is that this is a service in which God serves them, through the Gospel and the Sacrament.

It is not that we do not want the church to grow when we say that evangelism is not the chief aim of Christian worship. Do we come together on Sunday mornings primarily to evangelise the unchurched? Why should they want to come if they are not Christians? The place for presenting the Gospel to the unchurched is in other contexts, such as in homes. We need to be actively evangelistic, but be clear about where our focus should lie. Once new Christians are properly instructed, worship makes much more sense to them. We should evangelise, so that, under God's blessing, newly baptised believers may join us in worship. There is an interesting example in Jesus' approach to "outsiders." He taught them in parables, and explained the parables to His disciples, the "insiders", in private. Certainly the church service should be intelligible, so that the "outsider" who happens to come to a Christian service, a funeral, a wedding, or any other, is led to the conviction that here God really is among us, and is led to worship Him, through Law and Gospel. Archaic words may be a deterrent to him, just as uninterpreted speaking in tongues may be (1 Cor 14:23-25). However, non-Christians, those who are presumably spiritually dead, should not be the people who determine the worship practices of a Christian congregation.

Some have probably pushed too hard the argument that music has "meaning." People often enjoy opera when they don't understand the words at all. Is that meaning? Meaning is conveyed in words and, less so in moods and feelings. The impact of music is less precise, but important. The power of music to create moods is not neutral. Next time you are watching a movie, and feel tense and anxious, just silence the music with the mute button, and your tenseness will quickly disappear. The Lutheran principle is not that music should produce a mood to prepare for worship. Music should not dominate the Word, but serve the proclamation of the Word. To those who ask for pop music in church the reply should be: "There are standards to be applied in the use of music in church." It should be noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy (Plp 4:8).