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## Worship as Public Theology\*

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“Public theology” is a relatively recently term in theological discourse, and continues to be an evolving concept.<sup>1 2</sup> Not surprisingly, there is no universal agreement on the meaning of the term, and some would argue that public theology is any kind of theology accessible to secondary publics outside the primary circle of believers (e.g., beyond a congregation, denomination, or other religious grouping). More often, however, public theology is a broad classification for various types of theologies that address wider social realities, in the belief that religious values can contribute to the common good of a society. Such theologizing, therefore, is characterized by more than its accessibility for believers and non-believers alike. Instead, the very focus of such theologizing is the wider social order. Public theology is therefore not simply theologizing about society, but trying to bring to bear the riches of a religious tradition for the benefit of that society.<sup>3</sup>

Although the term may be new, this style of theologizing to society for the good of society is not new. It is especially identifiable in Western societies where there has been an intentional division between government and religion. In the early history of the United States, for example, the statesman Benjamin Franklin anonymously penned a pamphlet in which he argued for the necessity of “public religion” in education and its usefulness to society.<sup>4</sup> A more recent public figure in U.S. society who has been identified with this genre of theologizing is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who clearly brought forward the values from his religious tradition when confronting racism, militarism, and other injustices in late twentieth century American society.<sup>5</sup> An increasing number of aca-

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- \* This article originated as a seminar presentation at the International Academy of Practical Theology (13 April 2003) in Manchester, England
- 2 Martin Marty is often cited as the term’s progenitor. See Martin Marty, *Two Kinds of Civil Religion*, in: *American Civil Religion*, ed. Russell E. Richey/Donald C. Jones, San Francisco (Harper and Row) 1974, 139-160.
  - 3 This is clearly the slant of the Online Journal of Public Theology, at: [www.pubtheo.com](http://www.pubtheo.com).
  - 4 See his *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania*, at: [www.us-history.org/franklin/biography/app03.htm](http://www.us-history.org/franklin/biography/app03.htm).
  - 5 Frederick L. Downing, *Martin Luther King, Jr. As Public Theologian*, in: *Theology Today* 44, April 1987, 15-31.

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demic theologians have been identified with this style of theologizing, including Reinhold Niebuhr,<sup>6</sup> Paul Tillich,<sup>7</sup> Jurgen Moltmann,<sup>8</sup> and David Tracy.<sup>9</sup>

In 2003, the International Academy of Practical Theology<sup>10</sup> placed public theology at the center of its biannual meeting in Manchester, England. One important aspect of the meeting was to take the Manchester context seriously as a place for doing theology. In preparation for that meeting, attendees were forwarded a chapter on public theology from a recently published volume by Duncan Forrester. While Forrester expends considerable time in that chapter noting what public theology is not, at the level of affirmation he opines the following:

Public theology is ... a theology, talk about God, which claims to point to publicly accessible truth, to contribute to public discussion by witnessing to a truth which is relevant to what is going on in the world and to the pressing issues facing people and societies today.. Indeed, an important part of its task is to identify and address the deep underlying issues that are often too painful or awkward for politicians and others to address in public debate, and to identify the coming agenda, the issues that people will be wrestling with in a few months or years. It takes the public square and what goes on there seriously, but it tries to articulate in the public square its convictions about truth and goodness. It offers convictions, challenges and insights derived from the tradition of which it is a steward, rather than seeking to articulate a consensus or reiterate what everyone is saying anyway. Public theology is thus confessional and evangelical. It has a gospel to share, good news to proclaim. Public theology attends to the Bible and the tradition of faith at the same time as it attempts to discern the signs of the times and understand what is going on in the light of the gospel.”<sup>11</sup>

The particular question I bring to this or any definition of public theology is whether Christian worship can be or should be properly understood as an act of public theology. This question is born of my social location as a Roman Catholic who teaches worship and practical theology, and who has tried to persuade members of the liturgical academy over the past decade that practical theology is maybe the most appropriate cluster of

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6 An overview of Niebuhr's work in public theology is provided in Larry L. Rasmussen, Reinhold Niebuhr. Theologian of Public Life, London (Collins) 1989.

7 The major attempt to reform Christian theology so that it was capable of carrying on a relevant dialogue with modern secular society was in Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, 3 vols., Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 1951-1963.

8 Jurgen Moltmann, God for a Secular Society. The Public Relevance of Theology, London (SCM Press) 1999.

9 David Tracy, A Social Portrait of the Theologian, in: The Analogical Imagination. Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism, New York (Crossroad) 1981, 3-46.

10 Some of the mission and scope of this society is explained at: [www.ia-pt.org](http://www.ia-pt.org).

11 Duncan B. Forrester, Truthful Action. Explorations in Practical Theology, Edinburgh (T & T Clark) 2000, 129f.



methods available today for studying worship.<sup>12</sup> If worship is effectively studied through the lenses of practical theology, and if one influential strand of practical theology holds that practical theology needs to be, by definition, public theology,<sup>13</sup> then I am prompted to examine to what extent worship can be understood as public theology.

Besides my intellectual curiosity on the matter, such questions are also grounded in my experience of what I perceive to be a widespread worship practice in many theological academies. Often such academies gather for a conference in a great city, often a major urban environment, and construct worship in a hotel or conference center that is disconnected from the local environment. For example, it was a decades-long practice of the North American Academy of Liturgy<sup>14</sup> to celebrate worship in a hotel ballroom rather than with a local community of faith in one of their ordinary worship spaces. More recently, the International Academy of Practical Theology chose to shape closed worship events for itself during a meeting whose theme was “public theology.” It seems that one possible interpretation of this self-constructing approach to academy worship is to understand that such worship is not so much an act of public theology but instead a valuable conference service provided along with meals and other acts of hospitality. We ponder the question about worship as public theology in the hope that it could provide not only insight for thinking about worship in practical theological terms but also reflection on worship praxis for ourselves and for other worshipping communities.

### Worship as a Theological Act

There is an ancient tradition, asserted by Protestants,<sup>15</sup> Roman Catholics<sup>16</sup> and Orthodox<sup>17</sup> alike, that the act of worship is not simply an expression

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12 The rationale for this contention is outlined in Edward Foley, Academy Membership. A Case Study in Liturgical Methodology, in: Proceedings of the North American Academy of Liturgy Annual Meeting (Chicago, 4-7 January 1997), Valparaiso IN (The Academy) 1997, 3-16.

13 James Poling/Donald Miller, Foundations for a Practical Theology of Ministry, Nashville (Abingdon Press) 1985, 29-61. Poling and Miller present a schema that maps six possible positions in practical theology. Three of these place primary focus on the formation of society rather than on the development of the church alone.

14 An introduction to this organization can be found at: <http://naal-liturgy.org>.

15 Gordon Lathrop, Holy Things. A Liturgical Theology, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 1993, 5; Don Saliers, Worship as Theology. Foretaste of Glory Divine, Nashville (Abingdon Press) 1994, passim; and Geoffrey Wainwright, Doxology. The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life. A Systematic Theology, New York (Oxford University Press) 1980, 8.

16 Aidan Kavanagh, On Liturgical Theology. The Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury- Western Theological Seminary 1981, New York (Pueblo Publishing Company) 1984, 3, 8, passim; and David Power, Cult to Culture. The Liturgical Foundation of Theology, in: Worship 54, 1980, 484.

17 Alexander Schmemmann, Introduction to Liturgical Theology, Crestwood NY (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press) 1985, 12.



of belief or theology, but actually a theological event of the first order that gives rise to faith and belief. The *locus classicus* of this notion is the maxim of Prosper of Aquitaine, *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*, sometimes abbreviated *lex orandi, lex credendi*.<sup>17</sup> While some have inappropriately restricted Prosper's insight, narrowly asserting that it is only worship that is foundational for belief and that belief has no impact on worship, the central point of this maxim is that worship is not just about belief or theology, but is itself both creedal and utterly theological in nature.

The teaching of my own Roman Catholic tradition on this point is even more pointed, for the documents of the Second Vatican Council, building on other magisterial teachings of the early twentieth century, declare that liturgy is not simply one kind of theology but actually the church's *first* theology, and is what the Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* calls the fount and summit of the church's life.<sup>18 19</sup> Such a striking phrase is used of no other activity of the church by the Council fathers.

#### Elements in Worship as Acts of Public Theology

While it is one thing to note that worship is a theological act, it is quite another to suggest that it is an act of public theology. We return, therefore, to Forrester's characteristics, but this time our revisiting will first be filtered through a particular element of worship that is common to virtually all Christian worship: the preaching event. Consider Christian preaching worthy of the name and juxtapose this with Forrester's criteria. Do these criteria aptly describe authentic Christian preaching?

- It points to publicly accessible truth;
- It contributes to public discussion by witnessing to a truth which is relevant to what is going on in the world and to the pressing issues facing people and societies today;
- It takes the public square and what goes on there seriously;
- It tries to articulate in the public square its convictions about truth and goodness;
- It offers convictions, challenges, and insights derived from the tradition of which it is a steward;
- It is confessional and evangelical;
- It has a gospel to share, good news to proclaim;
- It attends to the Bible and the tradition of faith;

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18 *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, 51, 209. For a further discussion of this concept, see Paul de Clerck, "Lex orandi, lex credendi." *Sens originel et avatars historiques d'un adage equivoque*, in: *Questions liturgiques* 59, 1978, 193-212.

19 *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 4 December 1963, n. 10, in: *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Austin P. Flannery, Grand Rapids (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.) 1975, 6.



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- It attempts to discern the signs of the times and understand what is going on in the light of the gospel;  
and, to close with another of Forrester's characteristics not previously mentioned,
- It is inevitably ecclesial.<sup>20</sup>

Forrester's criteria could almost serve as a checklist - incomplete to be sure, but a checklist nonetheless - for evaluating the preaching event in Christian worship. Moreover, these criteria serve as a partial yet credible framework for evaluating preaching that is not only *in* worship but also preaching that is *of* worship.

It was the French Jesuit, Joseph Gelineau, who provided this distinction in his preconciliar writings on music and worship. In defining what he called "liturgical music," he stressed that this term could only be adequately understood as music *of* the liturgy and not merely occurring *in* the liturgy.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, when the U.S. Roman Catholic Bishops speak about the homily, they note that it is not a talk "given on the occasion of a liturgical celebration. It is 'a part of the liturgy itself.'"<sup>22</sup> This distinction between "in" and "of" worship is critical if we are going to be able to assert that worship is not only a venue for communicative acts like preaching that can be construed as public theology but also that the whole of the worship itself is an act of public theology, whose public theological nature is manifest and symbolized throughout the entirety of its ritual enactment, including the preaching.

In order to move from simply asserting that elements within worship can be perceived as expressions of public theology to demonstrating that the whole of the worship is an act of public theology, two things seem essential. First, it is necessary to ground our assertion in the ministry of Jesus. For Christians, Jesus is the foundation for all theological assertions, including assertions about the nature of public theology, worship, and their conjuncture. Besides this Christological foundation, it seems necessary to demonstrate how worship is a key means by which the church continues its mission in the world today. These two reflections will finally lead to a consideration of worship in practical theological terms. Specifically, we will consider how the widely accepted tenet of practical theology emphasizing the centrality of communal experience helps to clarify worship as an act of collective public theology, and not simply a public theological act by the preacher or presider.

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<sup>20</sup> Forrester, 130.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Gelineau, *Voices and Instruments in Christian Worship. Principles, Laws, Applications*, trans. Clifford Howell, Collegeville MN (The Liturgical Press) 1964, 63.

<sup>22</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops - Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing. The Homily in the Sunday Assembly*, Washington DC (Office of Publishing Services, United States Catholic Conference) 1982, 23.



### Liturgy and the Ministry of Jesus

While it may seem at least anachronistic, if not a theological stretch, to consider Jesus as a public theologian, it is a framework worth considering. He clearly ministered in public view for an extended period of time, during which he emerged as a critic of the religious as well as social institutions of his day. He theologized with the coin of the realm in his hand and the religious leadership in his sights. He publicly instructed and debated about the nature of God's reign and its in-breaking in human history, and after being charged by both religious and civil authorities, he was eventually executed in public view. From the viewpoint of Christian theology, Jesus was the aboriginal public theologian.

Besides attempting to establish the public ministry of Jesus as foundational for any understanding of public theology, we need also consider his worship and ritualization in the same vein. There are individual pericopes, like Jesus' reading and preaching in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-27), that could with some ease be understood anachronistically as individual acts of public theology. More important and central, however, is the sustained table fellowship that marks Jesus' public life.

Increasingly, scholars reason that the beginning point for grounding a theology of worship (especially of eucharist) in the public ministry of Jesus is not the Last Supper, but the pattern of table ministry that so characterized his public ministry.<sup>23</sup> In that vein, scripture scholar Robert Karris asserts that, at least according to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus got himself crucified because of the way he ate.<sup>24</sup> Such an assertion can be sustained beyond the Lukan gospel, for throughout the gospels one finds consistent evidence that Jesus is one who eats and drinks with sinners.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, there is an explicit and consistent charge leveled against Jesus by his critics that he "he eats and drinks with sinners" (e.g., Mark 2:16, Matt. 9:11).<sup>26</sup> Thus, while on the surface the religious accusation may have been blasphemy and the political incrimination sedition, the true catalyst for crucifixion seems to have been the public theology that Jesus enacted through table ministry. It was his sustained and public dining with tax collectors and sinners that ultimately drove the Jewish authorities to plot his death. Norman Perrin, reflecting on Jesus' table ministry with outcasts and sin-

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23 See the focus on the "common banquet tradition" for the development of Christian eucharist in Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist. The Banquet in the Early Christian World*, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 2003, 5 and *passim*.

24 Robert Karris, *Luke, Artisan and Theologian. Luke's Passion Account as Literature*, New York (Paulist Press) 1985, 47.

25 See the useful summary in Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus. An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins, New York (Vintage Books) 1981, 206-13.

26 For an expanded discussion of this facet of Jesus' ministry see Francis J. Moloney, *A Body Broken for a Broken People. Eucharist in the New Testament*, Melbourne (Collins Dove) 1991.



ners, summarizes it this way: “Jesus welcomed these outcasts into table fellowship with himself in the name of the kingdom of God, in the name of the Jews’ ultimate hope, and so both prostituted that hope and shattered the closed ranks of the community against their enemy. It is hard to imagine anything more offensive to Jewish sensibilities.”<sup>27</sup> Given this foundational precedent for the emergence of Christian worship - and even what could be considered the foundation for the emergence for Christianity itself, which can be said to have developed “around the table”<sup>28</sup> - it seems at least credible to assert that the prayerful ritualization of Jesus at table can be evoked as a paradigm of public theology.

### Liturgy and the Mission of the Church

Besides its grounding in the mission of Jesus, a second important step for establishing that worship is a *de facto* act of public theology is by demonstrating how it continues to fulfill the basic mission of the church today. Mission is also an evolving concept, too often reduced to nineteenth century frameworks that equate mission with proselytizing. This is no longer adequate, however, and mission in its developing sense is not a church’s acquisition of new members but rather the way a community of faith brings its gifts to the service of the world. For Roman Catholics this missionary vision is embedded in the Second Vatican Council’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. In the preface to that document, we find this vision of the church’s mission:

The Council will clarify these problems in the light of the Gospel and will furnish mankind with the saving resources which the Church has received from its founder under the promptings of the Holy Spirit. It is man himself who must be saved: it is mankind that must be renewed. It is man, therefore, who is the key to this discussion, man considered whole and entire, with body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will. This is the reason why this sacred Synod, in proclaiming the noble destiny of man and affirming an element of the divine in him, offers to cooperate unreservedly with mankind in fostering a sense of brotherhood to correspond to this destiny of theirs.<sup>29</sup>

The church’s mission so conceived is the very foundation of the kind of ecclesial public theology that Forrester envisioned. Thus, any consideration of worship as public theology necessitates a strong linkage between the church’s mission and worship.

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27 Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, New York (Harper & Row) 1967, 103.

28 Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum. L’eucharistie et l’eglise au Moyen age. Etude historique*, Paris (Aubier) <sup>2</sup>1949.

29 *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965, n. 3, in: *Documents of Vatican II*, 904f. Note that metonymic use of male terms to stand for human beings or humanity appears in this paper only in direct quotes.



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While many may not often think of worship as an expression and enactment of the church's mission, it certainly seems to meet the criteria. Pope John Paul II has stated that "mission is a single but complex reality, and it develops in various ways."<sup>30</sup> Worship is not the only expression of the church's mission but, at least from a Roman Catholic perspective, it is a key mode of the church's missionary activity. In my own tradition, many of the pioneers of the twentieth century liturgical movement saw a fundamental connection between liturgy and the missionary thrust of the church.<sup>31</sup> Key figures in that movement stressed the intimate link between liturgy and social justice.<sup>32</sup> Virgil Michel, in particular, stressed the liturgy as the central vehicle for communicating the church's social message to the world.<sup>33</sup>

While the connection between liturgy and mission (or what was sometimes called "social action") waned in the middle of the twentieth century, it was a theme that strongly reemerged in Roman Catholicism after the Second Vatican Council. That was possible because the Council, in its *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, asserted that "it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church."<sup>34</sup> The ripples of that magisterial perspective were officially manifest in 1984 when the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Christians (as it was then called) named five elements of mission, one of which was "liturgical life, prayer and contemplation."<sup>35</sup> Pope John Paul II explicitly linked liturgy and evangelization<sup>36</sup> when he called in 1988 for a "new evangelization"<sup>37</sup> and linked this new evangelization with a renewal of church life, i.e., not only a mending of society but first a remaking of "the Christian

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30 Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 41.

31 Johannes Hofinger, *Basic Missionary Values of the Liturgy*, in: *Worship. The Life of the Missions*, ed. Johannes Hofinger and others of the Institute of Mission Apologetics, Manila, trans. Mary Perkins Ryan, Notre Dame IN (University of Notre Dame Press) 1958, 21-38.

32 F. W. Franklin, *Virgil Michel. An Introduction*, in: *Worship* 62, May 1988, 194-201; and Kenneth Himes, *Eucharist and Justice. Assessing the Legacy of Virgil Michel*, in: *Worship* 62, May 1988, 201-24. The entire May 1988 issue of *Worship* commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Virgil Michel.

33 Himes, 224.

34 *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 2, in: *Documents of Vatican II*, 1.

35 Secretariat for Non-Christians, *The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions. Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*, *Pentecost* 1984, n. 13, cited in: Stephen Bevans, *Unraveling a "Complex Reality." Six Elements of Mission*, (unpublished). See also: Stephen Bevans/Eleanor Doidge, *Theological Reflection*, in: *What Mission Confronts Religious Life in the U.S. Today?* ed. Barbara Kraemer, Chicago (Center for the Study of Religious Life) 2000, 37-48.

36 For material mentioned in this paragraph, see Thomas Rausch, *Liturgy and Evangelization in the North American Context*, at: [www2.bc.edu/~morriib/Rausch.CTSA.html](http://www2.bc.edu/~morriib/Rausch.CTSA.html).

37 Avery Dulles, *John Paul II and the New Evangelization. What Does it Mean?* in: *John Paul II and the New Evangelization. How You Can Bring the Good News to Others*, ed. William Houck/Ralph Martin/Peter Williamson, San Francisco (Ignatius Press) 1995.





fabric of the ecclesial community present” in society.<sup>38</sup> Later on that same year, he remarked that “such a total evangelization will naturally have its highest point in an intense liturgical life which will make the parishes living ecclesial communities.”<sup>39</sup> This linkage of worship and mission is reiterated in his most recent encyclical on the eucharist.<sup>40</sup>

It is not only the Roman Catholic *magisterium* that understands worship as an act of mission. A growing number of Roman Catholic theologians, in the tradition of twentieth century liturgical pioneers, assert this as well. At the forefront here is the work of Karl Rahner. Rahner believed that the world is permeated by the grace of God, constantly and ceaselessly possessed by God’s self-communication from its innermost roots.<sup>41</sup> This continuous self-communication of God through all of human history is what Rahner called the *liturgy of the world*. “The world and its history are the terrible and sublime liturgy, breathing of death and sacrifice, which God celebrates and causes to be celebrated in and through human history in its freedom, this being something which he in turn sustains in grace by his sovereign disposition.”<sup>42</sup>

It is this liturgy, according to Rahner, that is fundamental and prior to any particular notion of ecclesial worship. It is the liturgy of the world that unequivocally demonstrates that true worship is not so much the enactment of rubrics as it is what happens when “we freely immerse ourselves in the abiding, absolute mystery during the great and small moments of life.”<sup>43</sup> What occurs in the particular and defined sacramental action of the church that we call liturgy is, according to Rahner, a symbolic manifestation of the liturgy of the world. It is where the church enacts in sign and symbol its “concrete self-fulfillment ... as the basic sacrament of salvation for the world.”<sup>44</sup> Michael Skelley elaborates:

When we participate in the Church’s liturgy, we are not doing something basically different from other activities but explicitly focusing on the deepest meaning of those activities. The liturgy of the Church is the explicit manifestation of the implicit liturgy of our lives. It is not simply identical with that liturgy of the world, but it is so derived from it and deeply united with it that it really expresses the cosmic liturgy and makes it present to us.<sup>45</sup>

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38 Pope John Paul II, *The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World*, 30 December 1988, Washington DC (United States Catholic Conference) n.d., 96.

39 *L’Osservatore Romano* (English edition) 49, 4 December 1988, 14; cited in Dulles, 32.

40 Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 22, [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/special\\_features/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_20030417\\_ecclesia\\_eucharistia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_ecclesia_eucharistia_en.html)

41 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations XIV*, trans. David Bourke, New York (Seabury Press) 1976, 166.

42 *Ibid.*, 169.

43 Michael Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World. Karl Rahner’s Theology of Worship*, Collegeville MN (The Liturgical Press) 1991, 93-94.

44 Rahner, 181.

45 Skelley, 101



Rahner's ideas echo through a stream of Roman Catholic theologians. Regis Duffy, for example, proposes the maxim "as our sacraments, so your church."<sup>45</sup> Thus, when he addresses the "public presence" of the church in America,<sup>46</sup> Duffy stresses that it is the worship of the church which links the church with the world in a unique way.<sup>47</sup>

Don Saliers has been at the forefront of Protestant thinkers who highlight this linkage of liturgy and life by stressing the ethical implications of our worship. In language familiar to practical theologians, he argues:

The mutually critical correlation of liturgy and ethics is part of the critical reciprocity between the *lex orandi* (pattern of prayer) and the *lex credendi* (pattern of belief). But these issue in the *lex agendi* (pattern of intention-action) of the church. Hence we may say that true doxology issues in fitting orthodoxy as reflective faith, and both in orthopraxy of the church's servanthood in the social order in which it is placed.<sup>48</sup>

A recent summary of this trend to understand worship as a particular and honored manifestation of the church's mission comes from Lutheran theologian, Gordon Lathrop, who concludes, "Worship, then, is not just for us. Lines of connection and meaning run out from the worship gathering to the very contours of ordinary daily life, to the structures of our societies, to the commerce and communication between peoples, to the earth itself and all its animate and inanimate inhabitants."<sup>49</sup>

#### Who Are the Public Theologians?

If it is credible to assume that there is a foundation in the ministry of Jesus and in current understandings of the church's mission to comprehend worship as an act of mission and evangelization broadly speaking, rehearsing and promoting our ethical responses and responsibilities to those issues that confront us in contemporary society, then there is one further insight that springs from the juxtaposition of worship and practical theology that needs examination here. This concerns the place of the worshipping community, and not simply the worship leadership, in acts of public theology.

One of the tenets of practical theology espoused by many is the assertion that wisdom is in the group. From this perspective, it is not the refined

45 Regis Duffy, *An American Emmaus. Faith and Sacrament in the American Church*, New York (Crossroad) 1995, 139.

46 *Ibid.*, 111.

47 *Ibid.*, 122.

48 Saliers, 187.

49 Gordon Lathrop, *Liturgy and Mission in the North American Context*, in: *Inside Out. Worship in an Age of Mission*, ed. Thomas Schattauer, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 1999, 102.



thinking of the academician that defines one mode of theology as “practical.” Instead, it is academic reflection set on a level playing field with the praxis of ordinary believers. While some may hold the title of practical theologian, the hoped for outcome of this theological approach that we could call “orthopraxis” does not belong to any individual, but only to a group, a faith community, a church.<sup>46</sup>

One of the reasons why the image of public worship as public theology delights me is that since public worship belongs to a community and not simply its leadership, so public theology as worship is something that wells up from and is embraced by the body and not simply the talking head. In Forrester’s language cited previously, public theology is inevitably ecclesial. At least in my religious tradition, there are few other activities as authentically ecclesial, public, and missionary as public worship. In that very local, always provisional act, faith in dialogue with the world becomes manifest, whether the worshipping community is aware of this or not.

Unfortunately, many if not most communities of faith have little self-awareness that their public worship is, in fact, public theology. This does not remove their worship from the realm of public theology, but it certainly mutes its effect. The effectiveness of any public theology, at least in the view of Tillich, Moltmann, Tracy, and a number of the other authors cited here, is the ability of a faith community to bring its values and insights to bear in a sustained dialogue with society. If the dialogue is mutual and critical, there is every possibility that both faith community and society can be enriched. A faith community that is unaware that its worship is an act of public theology, however, is unaware that it is engaged in such dialogue. It is therefore uncritical of its own assertions to society, and brings no self-awareness of their adequacy or appropriateness.

Maybe one of the contribution of those who call themselves practical theologians is to enable communities of faith to come to some awareness of what kind of theology they are making when they worship, what kind of ritual and euhological commentary on world events are they enacting. Critique follows awareness, and many are unaware that worship is a public, interpretive act by a community of their relationship, understanding and hopes for the neighborhood, society, and world in which they pray. Do we have some responsibility here, not only to reckon with the public nature of such worship, but to equip communities for recognizing, understanding, evaluating, and developing their worship-as-theology?

The 1997 movie *Contact* is a science-fiction examination of a first direct contact with life forces from outside our galaxy. An initial stage in that contact is the reception of an audiovisual message sent from outer

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46 See the emphasis on the community of faith as “doers” and not simply recipients of practical theology in James Fowler, *The New Shape of Practical Theology*, in: *Pastoral- theologische Informationen* 16, 1996, 212-214.



space. After some confusion, the scientists are finally able to discern the message, and it stuns them. The message is a television transmission of Adolph Hitler speaking at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The scientists are distraught by the transmission, and wonder aloud whether the transmission reveals the malevolence of the sender. Finally, it dawns on them: they are receiving back exactly what they sent out, the images and sounds from the first large-scale television transmission in the history of the planet. Unaware of what they had sent, they were unprepared for what they received. Analogously, many faith communities may be unhappy with the “return transmissions” they are receiving about their worship from society, but may be unaware that they are receiving back their own original transmissions. The more such communities are empowered to understand the social and public nature of their worship transmissions, however, the more it is possible that they will nuance and fine tune those transmissions so that they encourage dialogue and not simply return static.

### Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to demonstrate that public worship in the Christian tradition, and more particularly in the Roman Catholic tradition, is *de facto* an act of public theology. This does not mean that the worship of a given community is necessarily an appropriate or effective act of public theology, but it remains public theology nonetheless. Such awareness could suggest a variety of strategies and responses. Given the impetus for these reflections, it could suggest that when worship accompanies or punctuates gatherings of theologians, especially practical theologians, it might hold them in better stead if they immerse themselves in the worship of the resident-host community rather than construct decontextualized worship in a hotel facility. It might further suggest that that practical theologians have serious work to do with faith communities around issues of worship. In particular, we would seem to have certain models and frameworks for theological reflection that may empower people of faith to recognize, critique, and redress the public theologies embedded in their cycle of public worship. Beyond conference strategies or a new agenda for congregational studies, however, perhaps the interface of worship and practical theology serves as a potent reminder that theologizing is not always a discursive, linguistic, and textual affair. It is just as much a symbolic, presentational, and ritualizing event. Since this is true for theology in general, it is also true of practical theology, especially in its public face. Linell Cady underscores this point when she opines, “The task of public theology is to elicit a recognition of and commitment to the common life within which we exist. In and through the appropriation of religious symbolism, public theology seeks to nurture, deepen, and transform our common life that, while obscure and damaged, is never totally



eroded.”<sup>47</sup> Our public worship is surely one of the richest depositories of religious symbolism, and we cannot nor should not overlook this vital resource in the shaping of practical theologies in public mode.

### Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel behandelt die Frage, ob und ggf. in welchem Sinne der christliche Gottesdienst als ein Vollzug öffentlicher Theologie verstanden werden kann. In einem ersten Schritt analysiert der Verf. den Gottesdienst als eine theologische Handlung. Um zu zeigen, dass nicht nur einzelne Elemente *im* Gottesdienst, sondern dass der Gottesdienst *insgesamt* als ein Akt öffentlicher Theologie aufgefasst werden kann, reflektiert der Verf. sodann auf zwei im Blick auf diesen Sachverhalt entscheidende theologische Begründungsfiguren. Die eine - christologische - wird unter Hinweis auf die im Abendmahl realisierte Tischgemeinschaft mit Jesus expliziert. Die andere - ekklesiologische - sieht der Verf. in der Schlüsselbedeutung verankert, die dem Gottesdienst unter den gegenwartskulturellen Bedingungen hinsichtlich des Missions- auftrages der Kirche zukommt. In einem Schlussabschnitt erörtert der Verf. Funktion und Bedeutung lokaler Gottesdienstgemeinschaften als Subjekte einer im Modus der Liturgie öffentlich agierenden Theologie sowie die spezifischen Herausforderungen, die sich aus einem solchen Verständnis des Gottesdienstes ergeben.

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47 Linell E. Cady, *Religion, Theology and American Public Life*, Albany (State University of New York Press) 1993, 92.