

# “Oh, Worship the King” Understanding Culture and Semiotics in Christian Worship

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**Abstract:** God has hard-wired us with unique qualities and behaviors that find their ultimate fulfillment only when He is at the center of worship. Worship is a ritualistic performed expression that serves to foreshadow our ultimate communion with God. It is a structured encounter centered on a dialogue between God and man. Three analytical frameworks from anthropology help to focus on the uniqueness of the human in ritual. Applying these to the worship setting provides valuable insights to church workers for discerning the choice of semiotically significant socio-cultural media and aesthetics that contextualize God’s message effectively—and avoiding possible syncretistic pitfalls in the worship design—allowing church members to affectively express their identity as God’s people.

The goal of all worship is to receive what God has to offer through the preaching and teaching of His Word and the administration of the Sacraments. In the Lutheran circles, we often emphasize that the German word *Gottesdienst* means both “God’s service to us” as well as “our service to God.”<sup>1</sup> The idea of service as a work of the people comes from Romans 12:1 (*τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν*) “the work<sup>2</sup> or service of the people” in offering praise.<sup>3</sup>

This reciprocity in worship is grounded in communication. Communication is innate to human beings. People need to communicate with one another and with God. Social groups form and create identity through communication. All interaction in and with the real world involves communication. It is of fundamental interest to us to understand the dynamics of communication in order to understand human

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behavior and the need for ritual.

Human beings communicate through signs<sup>4</sup> that have an agreed upon meaning within a social group. Any sign that has a meaning has a semiotic significance<sup>5</sup> for the individual and other members of the social group who have shared similar experiences that could add to the meaning of that sign. Basically, a sign can be anything perceivable through the five senses. Communication takes place between two people when there is a shared significance between signs in a social setting.<sup>6</sup> When a person visits another culture, often times that person does not understand the signs; they hold no semiotic significance for that individual. That individual is not part of the social group. Signs can be compounded, joined together, or juxtaposed to carry multiple meanings (polysemous<sup>7</sup>) across various cultural domains or venues. Signs are communicated through cultural media<sup>8</sup> and are governed by cultural aesthetics.<sup>9</sup> Let me illustrate how signs work with an example from a cultural media form: music.

“Oh Worship the King, All glorious above.” The hymn holds no inherent meaning or value; that is, the hymn has no meaning apart from how you have experienced it. As a sign, it signifies a meaning referring to the time you first sang it. As your experience with this hymn continues, there is a diachronic accumulated meaning of other experiences that further enrich the meaning of the hymn for you. Your experience with the hymn has a shared significance with the members of your social group at the time it is sung and accumulates semiotic significance over time.

Because of your and others’ experiences with this hymn, you may use it as a sign to discuss its meaning by comparing your experiences.<sup>10</sup> The hymn now has semiotic significance for your social group. There is no need to think about communicating and using signs; we innately need to communicate.

Ritual<sup>11</sup> is another innate behavioral characteristic of all human beings. We are all created by God not merely to interact with ritual and others in that world, but also with the innate desire to know God and communicate with Him. It is this desire to know and communicate with Him that gives organization and meaning to the individual’s world.

Through ritual, human beings can communicate and experience God (the otherworldly). In ritual, people transcend the mundane. In the ritual process, the social group makes use of everyday objects, altering their sign values and distinguishing their semiotic ritual value from normal value.<sup>12</sup> Ritual is performed as a celebration of the communal identity and the reification of its values.

In 1908, anthropologist Arndt Van Gennep presented a three-step structure to ritual in his book, *Les Rites de Passage*. Van Gennep observed how ritual, as a social performance, changed the social identity of the person who underwent initiation rites from boyhood to adult. His studies showed that initiation rites share a three-stage structure: (1) separation, (2) liminality, and (3) reintegration.<sup>13</sup>

In the first stage, the individual is separated from the normal social group for a specific purpose. The individual is separated perhaps by special dress or markings. In

the second stage of the rite, the individual enters a liminal stage in which he is neither a child nor an adult. Whereas society is governed by norms, the liminal is a stage of anti-structure in contrast to normal social structure. The final stage involves the reintegration of the individual into the social group with a new social status. Van Gennep further observed how common utilitarian objects used in the community were given specific nuance and meaning during the ceremony that aided in the final changed status of the individual.

Later, Victor Turner became fascinated with the second stage of Van Gennep’s theory. In the liminal stage,<sup>14</sup> Turner observed that common objects of semiotic significance, which were separated in the first stage, were redefined and repurposed. He also discovered that the actual transforming experience of individuals occurred in this stage in the ritual performance, not in the final stage. Redefining and repurposing objects from the normal social order caused alternative semiotic significance, allowing the social group to transcend normal space and time momentarily. This performance affirmed the individual’s identity as part of the community.

In addition, Turner observed that the polysemy, i.e., multiple meanings of the objects, adds to the liminal experience.<sup>15</sup> Objects, individually and in combination, share a semiotic significance in the present, synchronically with other objects in the ritual, but also a diachronic accumulation of semiotic significance collected in subsequent ritual performances. Turner observes that these polysemes are not limited merely to objects but include movement, sound, smell, speech, and all cultural aesthetics used in this liminal stage.

Important for Turner, the polysemous nature of the cultural media ushers the individual into *communitas*: a moment in the liminal stage when the individual experiences a oneness with the group and the historical community. At this point, the individual no longer is aware of time or spatial dimensions and loses a sense of self as an individual and perceives self as a member of a larger whole. Feelings of atemporality and non-spatiality also mark the liminal stage.<sup>16</sup>

Turner concludes that the individual and community social group experience *communitas* through familiarity with and knowledge of the structure of the ritual and the altered cultural media. Ritual structure is normally fixed, allowing individuals to develop a muscle memory that backgrounds mental awareness of structure and frees up the individual and social group to foreground the experience as a whole and achieve *communitas*, transcendence of the normal world into the otherworldly.

Later on, Turner developed a theory of performance. All performances or performance-like events are structured in three stages. Revisiting the three stages of ritual, we can now label their structure in terms of a performance: In the first stage, those involved in the performance put on costumes, apply makeup, ready the stage, etc. The liminal stage begins when the curtain opens. The curtain is a codified referent<sup>17</sup> that signifies the altered use of objects and alerts the audience to the otherworldly experience. Getting “caught up” in the performance, either as actor or

audience, is *communitas* – the oneness of the group. The final stage is the lowering of the curtain wherein people and objects return to their normal state in the social structure.

Folklorist John McDowell offers insight into understanding human nature in communication by analyzing distinctive performative speech discourses in ritual. McDowell has observed that ritual discourse uses a variety of cultural media and cultural aesthetics with distinctive stylized patterns. McDowell observes that stylized discourse is essential in leading participants into *communitas*. His observations lead him to describe ritual discourse as a *commemorative discourse*.<sup>18</sup> The term *commemorative* refers to rituals in which people *remember together*.

In ritual, two discursive patterns emerge: *informative* and *commemorative*.<sup>19</sup> The informative pattern is characterized by rapid speech, commemorative by metered, slower, rhythmic speech. Vital to commemorative discourse is what McDowell calls *words of the ancestors*, or the core narrative, which are the immanently true core values believed and followed by the community. These words are the ancient words and formulas that remain foundational and unchanged. Informational speech discourse applies the core values of the ancestral words to the present-day context. The prosodic interplay between commemorative and informational discourse is significant,<sup>20</sup> as the interplay between these speech prosodies produces what McDowell calls a “speech narcosis”<sup>21</sup> producing the feeling of transcendence and otherworldliness.

Robert Plant Armstrong offers yet another valuable tool in understanding what is innately human in the use of aesthetics as communicative sign values within culture. Armstrong observes that in any given culture, certain cultural media distinguish themselves from utilitarian media, for example, a wine glass vis-à-vis a beautiful communion chalice, not merely because of the formal structure of the object, but the qualities (aesthetics) that carry specific value in the culture. The use of color, texture, height, design, proportions, sound, and smell, etc., are intentional choices used by the artist to *present*, not *represent*, the core values and allegiances of the social group. These cultural media present the core metaphor of that culture and are an independent paradigm of communication.<sup>22</sup> The panoply of aesthetic paradigms, across the cultural media, all share equal communicative potential.<sup>23</sup> The mere presence of the object affects, without the need for words. His term for this characteristic in communicative cultural media is *affecting presence* because it has an affective semiotic significance shared by the social group. Speaking as a theologian/anthropologist, I find Armstrong’s insight into aesthetics to be very incarnational; the core values of the social group exist in, with and under multiple cultural media and aesthetic forms.<sup>24</sup>

Because Christian worship is ritual, these three theoretical approaches teach us about our innate behavior as human beings in the worship setting. All worship structures are human and, as such, use and alter signs affectively and effectively the same way all over the world. Let us examine a common form of liturgical structure

with the aforementioned theories.

The charts on the next page show the flow of movement and media during a common form of liturgical worship. We use common cultural media in the worship service: music, speech, candles, etc. We also use cultural aesthetics: stylized and performed speech, specific tonalities in music. What we do with these signs together and separately is a part of their altered semiotic significance.

From Victor Turner and performance theory we can identify the three stages of ritual organization. First, the celebrant sets himself aside with a robe, a cross, and a Bible. The altar may be prepared for Holy Communion. Pre-service candles are lit. An organ plays in the background as people file into the church. All of these are signs that signify the introductory stage of the ritual.

The second stage begins with the Invocation. These words are a codified referent to opening the ritual. With this referent, everyone knows that songs are now hymns, not entertainment; the pastor’s words are God’s Word; his absolution is God’s absolution.

As the second stage progresses, what McDowell refers to as the words of the ancestors,<sup>25</sup> or the core narrative (Scripture), is present through a diversity of media. We sing God’s Word, we recite God’s Word in creedal form; we confess God’s Word in public confession and absolution; we read directly from the words of Scripture; we eat and drink God’s Word in the form of the Sacrament; and God’s Word is preached, an act that applies God’s Word to present-day situations and that reifies or makes apparent the identity and core values of the congregation for the present day.

The progression of the service allows for an intensification of sign values’ becoming polysemous: the candles are referents not only to light, but also our prayers ascending; the cup is not merely a container, it is a chalice and the wine is the blood of Christ, etc. Sign values in this secondary stage may be polyvalent serving as individual or corporal referents and carry weighted meaning. For example, a hymn sung within the congregation carries meaning as sainted “grandma’s favorite” may also carry creedal meaning when sung by the congregation.

In worship, the Sacrament is actually a ritual within a ritual. The singing of the Sanctus marks the first stage: bread and wine are set apart for a specific purpose. The words of Institution are used to initiate the liminal stage. These words are codified referents to the otherworldly: the cup is a chalice, not an ordinary cup; the bread is the body of Christ, and the wine is Christ’s blood. After the celebration, the elements and objects reintegrate into normal structure and sign value. They are bread and wine, and the chalice is a cup.

Although the feeling of oneness happens at any point in the ritual, the Words of Institution, the density of cultural media, polysemous and polyvalent signs,<sup>26</sup> and the build-up of sensory stimulation all contribute to and produce a communal oneness or *communitas* in which the feeling of transcendence and otherworldliness most likely will occur. Individuals may feel at one with the group and the absence of singularity

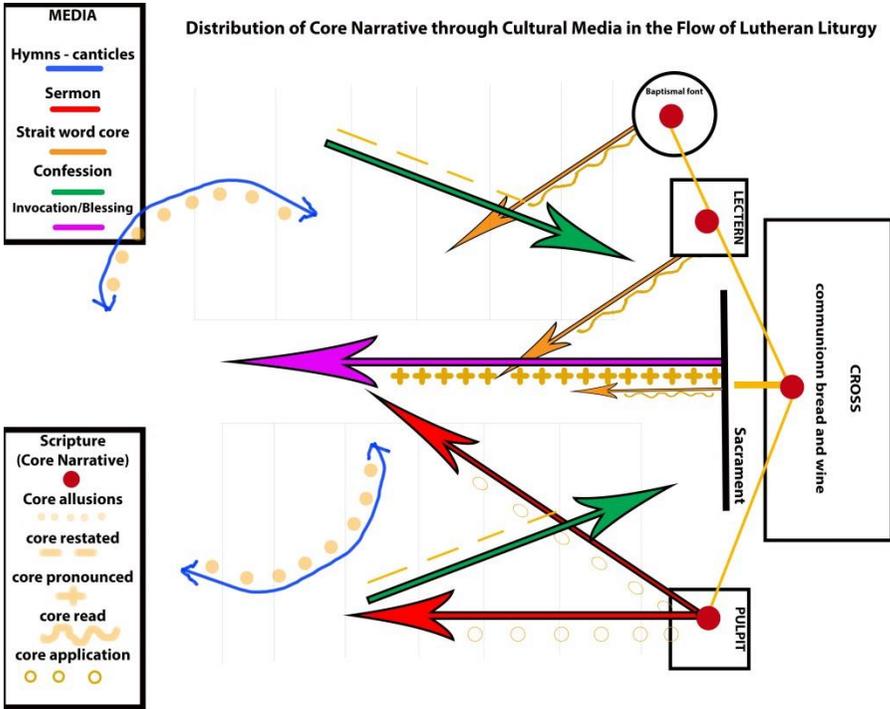


Figure 1.

PROSODIC SHIFTS AND SENSORIAL DENSITY DURING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE LUTHERAN LITURGY

Discourse/sense																	
Commemorative	*																
Informative		*	*		*	***	*	***	*	**	*	***	*		*	*	
Moving																	
Tasting																	
Touching																	
Seeing																	
Talking/singing																	
Hearing																	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17

1. Invocation	2. Hymn	3. Confession	4. Absolution	5. Hymn	6. Lessons
7. Creed	8. Sermon	9. Hymn (offering)	10. General prayers	11. Words of Institution	12. Agnus Dei
13. Sacrament	14. Nunc Dimittis	15. Prayer	16. Benediction	17. Hymn	

<sup>1</sup> The number of \* indicates a level of use. For instance, one star is one utterance. There are three asterisks for the three readings from the lectionary.  
<sup>2</sup> \* in alternating sequence between informative and commemorative discourse indicates which discourse initiates that part of the liturgy.  
<sup>3</sup> This is intentional seeing, watching the pastor during the sermon; watching the movement to the altar for the Sacrament.  
<sup>4</sup> Gray indicates that at times there is a litany involving participation by the congregation in the prayers of the church.

Table 1.

when singing the Agnus Dei together. Atemporality and non-spatiality occur as the moment is shared with the group and at the same time referencing the historical context of all who have previously partaken of this meal: “the communion of saints.” The accumulated density of sensorial stimulation over the course of the rite—singing, speaking, now smelling, tasting, moving, hearing the directives “take and eat”—moves the worship toward *communitas* and transcendence. The transcendence in this performance is a foreshadowing of the celebration of “the feast that is to come.”

The worship service then concludes with the singing of the last hymn and the Benediction, which signals a return to the normal world.

After the service, the pastor, standing to greet the congregants, may wonder if his sermon was doctrinally sound and if everyone heard and received the message. Nevertheless, upon exiting the sanctuary, congregants may state, “Beautiful service,” “I love that hymn we sang,” or “I really feel energized or uplifted.” Whereas the pastor is trained theologically to spiritually attend to the congregation, performing the ritual, remembering together, and playing<sup>27</sup> with and restructuring the cultural media in the ritual are the acts that reify or make clear the identity of the individual and the group. The ritual is not solely an issue of informative or instructional communication, but a performance of identity and core values. The cultural / aesthetic labels, e.g., describing the service as *beautiful*, actually mean that the person has been confirmed in his/her identity as a Christian.

Whereas all human beings organize and experience ritual in the three stages, they do not share the same affective experiences and may use dissimilar cultural media and aesthetics in communication and creating social identity. Take, for example, African American cultural aesthetics.<sup>28</sup>

African American’s have a different social identity, marked by cultural aesthetics, from other social groups. The ritual structure will progress through the three-stage process, but with specific cultural aesthetics laden with semiotic significance for the social group. Music employs call and response, a type of antiphonal individual with group response. Competitiveness is a cultural value and may surface in forms of singing or other worship areas. They include corporal body movements and clapping: body moves on beats 1 and 3 and clapping is on 2 and 4. Sermons, as well as singing, are stylized to begin quietly and gain momentum in the middle and raise the roof at the end. Singing is from the chest and, like the sermon, starts out slow and grows. Vocal gruffness, timbre, accentuation are among desirable cultural aesthetics for communicating in this cultural medium. The use of rhyme and assonance is stylized in groups of three. Call-and-response occurs during the preached message, and music may be interjected as well.

If the structure and the affect of ritual is a human phenomenon, where is God in all of this? God is exactly where He promises to be, namely, in His Word and Sacraments. In worship, He comes to us in His Word, and we perform His word back to Him, much as a confessional response.<sup>29</sup> His Word is performed using cultural

media in accordance with those cultural aesthetics that are accepted in the social group to communicate that word effectively and affectively.

In many churches and denominations today, there is an ongoing controversy regarding contemporary and traditional<sup>30</sup> worship. Currently in our culture, much effort goes into designing worship. Many congregations have worship leaders. Many congregations do not follow a liturgy. Both worship structures contain the characteristic three stages of ritual. However, in their polemic against each other, both groups may ground the source of transcendence in the liminal stage in the cultural media and aesthetics instead of in God's Word (the core narrative). This ultimately leads to syncretism or contextualization.

As can be surmised from our analysis of the liturgy, traditional form allows a familiarity with the structure, contributing to the experience of *communitas*, *transcendence* and *oneness*, both synchronic and diachronic. Traditional worship has maintained the centrality of the core narrative. It allows for a diversity of cultural media and aesthetics in expressing and communicating that core narrative. The intensification and density of the signs largely assure that the liminal *communitas* experience will be grounded in God's word.

What if, however, the experience of *communitas* is not grounded in God's Word? If *communitas* is not grounded in God's Word, the experience of transcendence or the otherworldly will be grounded in the cultural media or cultural aesthetics. It must be emphasized that the source causing the experience of *communitas* constitutes the difference between religious syncretism and contextualization.

If God's Word is not the core narrative that defines the identity of the congregation leading to experiencing *communitas* in worship, the result is replacing God with media and aesthetics as the cause. In that case, the cultural medium or aesthetic has actually affectively named as its core value something other than the means by which God reveals His presence, i.e., His Word and Sacraments. Ultimately, the individuals or community have made or created God in *their* image. They have effectively made Him a part of their community based on *their* standards and experiences, not on Scripture.

For example, if someone believes that only through frenetic worship, singing, dancing, vibrating, applauding, that the presence of God is felt, a cultural medium and aesthetic has replaced the core narrative. In this example, transcendence is based on the individual medium or aesthetic and not on God's Word. This is syncretism.<sup>31</sup>

Let us look at an example of possible syncretism in worship. Here, instead of an analysis of the accepted three-stage structure of ritual, the use of cultural media and aesthetics, together with the signs that lead individuals to the transcendent feeling of *communitas*, needs to be analyzed.

There are those who say that only traditional worship forms should be used to worship God. The possible obsession with form and the use of only traditional cultural media in worship not only centers worship on a specific form and cultural

media, but it also grounds the identity of the individual and the group in those specific media. For example, claiming that the organ is the only correct instrument to use in worship or that preaching from the right side of the altar is the only correct way to preach claims God to be present or worshiped in a specific way that is not a part of the core narrative. As a result, the danger is an ethno-specific or denominational God, in which the liturgy is the core narrative and not God.

On the other hand, most contemporary worship reflects the apparent need to use the latest Christian songs found on the radio. This approach does not guarantee a better communication of the core narrative and can be equally syncretistic and run the risk of secularizing God as an item of commodification. Musicians may select songs based on their popularity within the music group leading worship. Many times the words or lyrics of the song are overlooked for doctrinal soundness in favor of the song’s emotive aesthetics. The need for something new and different is fueled by cultural consumerism and the contemporary Christian music market. It is grounded in popularity and aesthetics. Transcendence and the feeling of oneness are based on the aesthetics of popularity and not necessarily the core narrative.

I offer the following illustration to show that the polarized polemic misidentifies the real issue. The issue is the identity of the individual as Christian in the social group, which ultimately is reified or made apparent through a shared semiotic knowledge of the signs and the use of cultural media and aesthetics to communicate God’s Word. It has nothing to do with an objective correct form.

What happens when someone who has grown up with traditional worship attends contemporary worship? The individual most likely feels lost, not because of the lack of theological truth, but because of the unfamiliarity with the cultural media and aesthetics used to communicate. There is a semiotic breakdown in the significance of objects, and there is no affective meaning that links the person with the community. Over time, diachronically, the individual has developed competency in understanding the semiotic significance of cultural media in traditional worship and a projection screen, for example, has no semiotic significance in that setting.

The same dynamic holds true for new Christians who have no prior experience in worship. They will be equally lost in a liturgical or a contemporary worship service. An identity has not been built up for the new believer, based on God’s Word preached and confessed, which orients the person as to how the objects in worship are to be viewed and used. A person’s identity as a Christian will develop over time as he becomes adept in the meaning of the signs, cultural media, and aesthetics used in worship. New Christians will adopt ritual expression over time, and their identity will develop within cultural media of that specific community of believers.

Being aware of human behavior and the innate need for ritual expression and structure should aid worship leaders in assuring that the cultural media and aesthetics give God’s Word an affecting presence. Worship leaders need to discern what media and aesthetics need be studied within each congregation to assure that *communitas* is experienced through God’s Word and not grounded only in a media aesthetic. In so

doing, God's Word becomes contextualized<sup>32</sup> in the social group and not syncretized.

Contextualization of God's Word in worship occurs in all cultures. Worship allows people to celebrate God's Word as it speaks to them through diverse cultural media and aesthetics in the ritual ceremony. Through worship, God's people also respond through specific cultural media and aesthetics, welcoming God to be part of their community. Through worship we are in communion with God through His Word, and God is with us and among us (Emmanuel). He is clothed with cultural media and aesthetics that are semiotically significant and thus "is clothed" as a contextualized part of the community. He is welcomed as American, Indian, African, and Latin American, sharing with them in their culture, media, and aesthetics.

In light of the polemic between traditional and contemporary worship, church workers should not force any specific form on the congregation, nor should a worship form be forcibly changed. These are not issues of modernity or popularity but identity. Neither should a particular form of worship be used as an evangelistic gimmick to gain greater membership. Worship is about the identity of the community and the cultural media and aesthetics used reify or make apparent this identity. Using ritual as a gimmick defeats its purpose and decenters the focus from God's Word. If there is change, it should come from within the congregation, for the congregation. Only they can change the semiotics and cultural forms that identify them.

For church workers working cross-culturally, the research is even more vital. Since church worker may not share the same culture, it will be necessary to study and know the secular diversity of media and aesthetics and their semiotic significance before developing a worship ritual with them. Involving people from within a culture who know the signs, as well as what are acceptable media and aesthetics<sup>33</sup> to communicate affectively and effectively the core narrative, is absolutely necessary, since the worker will be unfamiliar with the complete semiotic significance across these expressive domains.

The cross-cultural worker, however, must be aware that not all cultural aesthetics may lead to contextualization. Two examples can illustrate my point. In India, breaking a coconut over a stone is an expression of repentance. This symbolizes the breaking of the heart. Should this act be used in Christian worship? Will this cultural medium and aesthetic, together with its semiotic significance, mean the same thing?

This act probably should not be used in Christian worship for a number of reasons. Although it signifies repentance, it is part of a Hindu ceremony offering to Krishna. "The heart is the coconut and it is converted by the fibre (sic) of desires. The water that flows out is the *samskara* or the 'earned merit.' The fibers on the surface are the desires. We must strip the heart of all desires and offer the core without the fibre (sic). It then becomes an offering to God."<sup>34</sup> The semiotic significance of the event is compromised; the action and the medium (the coconut)

are cross-culturally polysemous. Any time one cultural medium or object that has religious significance is celebrated in a ritual that has distinct and separate semiotic significance it will lead to syncretism and the assimilation of one of the deities into the semiotic significance of the other religious system. This is most notably achieved in *Santeria* in Latin America.

In one of my classes, a student from the Cameroons shared with me a phrase which his people used for God. He cupped his right hand and, while slapping it on the palm of his left hand, bowed his head and said, “Lion.” He also said that one of the priestly garments of Christ was a lion- or leopard-colored print cloth. Could this be contextualization or syncretism? Most likely it does achieve contextualization and clothe Christ with appropriate cultural media and aesthetics that carry semiotic significance. It makes Christ “one of them,” and He is welcomed as a recognizable part of the community. Why? Most likely because, first, there is no religious significance to a lion, and the semiotic reference is one of power. Second, the cloth is used by royalty in the social group and thus speaks of Christ’s kingly attributes. Third, he was a Baptist pastor and a mature Christian who obviously negotiated the semiotic significance as not syncretistic with regional religious beliefs.

In conclusion, anthropology offers insight into the unique behavioral and innate qualities of human beings in ritual worship. The need for ritual is innate in all human beings, and the use of the same ritual structure is found in all organized human ritual. Ritual structures are common to all human beings, and all people experience moments of transcendence in performing such rituals. God has endowed all human beings with a diversity of cultural beauty and communication so that through His Word in ritual expression He may come to His creation in an affective way, add people to His kingdom, and provide safe haven for the growth and sustainability of faith of the individual and the community of the faithful. Through ritual expression, God also provides a way for His creation to make Him a part of their lives, celebrate their life in Him, and clothe Him with the beauty of their culture. The church worker can avail him/herself of these theories in developing contextual worship services that are faithful to the Word of God.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers into the Presence of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1999), 47

<sup>2</sup> Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988), 30–31.

<sup>3</sup> Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. IV (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 216. Kittel shows both *λατρείαν* (service) is etymologically related to *laos* people and the work that they do. In the LXX it refers to the work of the priests; by the New Testament Epistles, *leitourgia* is used more as a specific form of service.

<sup>4</sup> A sign is any real world object or phenomena that has acquired an established meaning to an individual or to a social group.

<sup>5</sup> Peter L. Burger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 35–36.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>7</sup> Polysemes are signs that have multiple meanings within a diversity of semantic domains.

<sup>8</sup> Cultural media is any cultural way (media) used to communicate, which hold a semiotic significance in the social group. This includes music, speech, dance, art, etc. Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Cultural aesthetics are aesthetic qualities that function as signs within a social group and are attached to cultural media, both of which nuance the semiotic significance of the sign. For example: what is considered ugly, beautiful, with special attention given to what is and is not acceptable to use with specific cultural media. Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence: An Essay in Humanistic Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 47.

<sup>10</sup> Burger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 68.

<sup>11</sup> Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 157–158.

<sup>12</sup> Burger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 35.

<sup>13</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 24–30.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 84. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995), 96ff. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 50ff.

<sup>17</sup> A codified referent is a sign that serves to mark changes in the performance such as a curtain in the theater. These referents are an accepted marker by the community and alerts them to the change that is about to take place. An example is the beginning of many Christian worship services with a special hymn/song or with the statement, “In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

<sup>18</sup> John H. McDowell, “Folklore as Commemorative Discourse,” *The Journal of American Folklore* vol. 105. No. 418 (Autumn, 1992), p. 417.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 404, 412–413.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 419.

<sup>21</sup> Regarding speech narcosis, McDowell explains, “Underlying these impressions of autonomy and transcendence is a physiological effect I would label speech narcosis. As we have seen, the dramatic levels of speech efficacy associated with commemorative discourse originate in a confluence of two significant factors: on the acoustic plane, a movement toward regular speech prosodies; on the semantic plane, a movement toward the evocation of immanent truth. We are dealing here with a two-punch combination that first creates an affective receptivity by preparing the central nervous system of the recipient, and then drives home a transcendental revelation by invoking a privileged vision of ultimate reality. Speech narcosis, the mood-altering capacity of speech, derives from rhythmic enhancement in the acoustic medium working upon the central and peripheral nervous systems in complex ways that scientists are now beginning to understand.” (*ibid.*, 4418)

<sup>22</sup> Paradigm of communication would be an independent (self-standing) system of communicative cultural media without the need for verbal explanation.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence*, 25, 75.

<sup>24</sup> I purposely choose the Lutheran theological phrase *in, with and under* used to explain that the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper are not merely symbolic *representations* of Christ’s presence, but rather that He is *present* “in” the elements through His word, “with” the elements, and “under” the form of the elements as a description of Armstrong’s distinction between *represent* and affecting *presence* and its incarnational significance. Neither I nor Armstrong are alluding to the fact that he is referring to a sacramental presence in cultural media and their aesthetics.

<sup>25</sup> John H. McDowell, “Folklore as Commemorative Discourse,” 417.

<sup>26</sup> Polyvalent (polyvalence) signs are those that have different meanings for different people.

<sup>27</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 27.

<sup>28</sup> In speaking about African American cultural media and aesthetics, I am not attempting to limit this diverse cultural group to one stereotypical cultural description. I am emphasizing the cultural media and aesthetics that were, and still are grounded, in the diversity of African culture.

<sup>29</sup> The Greek word, ὁμολογέω, means to confess. Literally, it means to “to say the same thing.” In confession, we repeat back to God, what He has told us. Doing so means that we are in agreement with who He is and what He says we are. Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. V (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 200.

<sup>30</sup> By “liturgical” I mean a specific form or structure of worship that has been used for centuries in different denominations. In the rest of the paper, I use term “traditional” to refer to the use of a specific liturgy. I use “contemporary” to refer to another worship format. Generically, all ritual is liturgical in that liturgical speaks of a fixed structure. Ritual is a fixed structure in its three stages.

<sup>31</sup> Syncretism occurs when God is named or made part of the community by conforming Him to cultural or religious values expressed through the use of signs in cultural media and aesthetics apart from His Word. (my definition)

<sup>32</sup> Different from syncretism, contextualization occurs when the cultural media and aesthetics are used in such a way that the core narrative is communicated more effectively in the culture of the people. As in a confession, the cultural media and aesthetics repeat back to God exactly what God has revealed in His Word.

<sup>33</sup> Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence*, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Charlene Leslie-Chaden, *A Compendium of the Teachings of Sri Sathya Sai Baba* (Vishruti Prints, 2004), 386.

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