CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AS FORMATION FOR PLURALISM

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Education for pluralism — for living well with others in the midst of our deep, inescapable differences — is a significant concern for philosophy of education. In this paper, I draw the attention of philosophers of education to the resources for educating for pluralism that can be found in an altogether unexpected site: the liturgical practices of Christian worship.

Given the surprising and potentially controversial nature of this claim, a few clarifications are worth making at the outset. First, even within the Christian tradition, 'worship' can mean many things, from more narrow understandings that reduce it to singing praises to God, to much broader interpretations that extend the idea to include, for instance, an individual's sense of and communion with God while alone in nature. For our purposes, I take 'worship' to refer specifically to the practices of a gathered community of Christians, particularly on Sundays, that are intentionally focused on God and dedicated to giving Him glory. In particular, in this paper I do not address the use of elements of worship in formal classrooms, whether Christian or otherwise. Various Christian thinkers have already explored some possibilities for using aspects of the worship liturgy in classroom teaching.[1] Much more good work can and should be done along this highly generative line of thought, but it is not the approach I take in this paper.

A second clarification: I focus exclusively on *Christian* worship, and especially Christian worship within one particular tradition of Christianity: Reformed Protestantism. It may be that other religious traditions offer their own possibilities for educating their adherents for pluralism; it may also be that education for pluralism can take place wholly apart from participation in anything like religious worship. I make no attempt here to argue for the *exclusivity* or even the *superiority* of Christian worship with respect to formation for pluralism, but only its *ability*.

Finally, yet most importantly, nothing I say in this paper should be taken to advocate an instrumental understanding of participation in Christian worship. As Reformed Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith explains, "even [formation] is a by-product of the fundamental aim of worship, which is praise and adoration of the triune God. The point of worship is not formation; rather, formation is an overflow effect of our encounter with the Redeemer in praise and

[1] For instance, Paul Gutacker, Elizabeth Travers Parker, Cody Strecker, and Nicholas Krause, "A symposium on teaching virtue: Interdisciplinary perspectives on pedagogy, liturgy, and moral formation," *International Journal of Christianity & Education* 23, no. 2 (2019): 204–230.

prayer, adoration and communion."[2] Smith elsewhere emphasizes that, "While we believe that it engenders formation, [Christian liturgy] is a normative good apart from its effectiveness precisely because it is the way we meet God, the practice by which the Spirit invites us into the triune life of the Godhead."[3] Reformed Christian ethicist Matthew Kaemingk similarly insists, "we must be clear that worship is an end in and of itself. The glory of God is its own justification."[4] In fact, Kaemingk further argues that making the formative power of worship more important than worship itself serves to undermine that formative potential: "if the worshipper is focused primarily on herself and the betterment of her moral nature, she will not be able to see or receive the moral nature of the One she is worshipping."[5] It is right and good for Christians to engage in regular, intentional, gathered, embodied, Christ-centered worship regardless of its formative effects on their ability to live well in the midst of pluralism.

Yet Christian worship *is* formative, and it is formative in ways that directly relate to living well in the midst of pluralism. I consider each of these claims in turn.

WORSHIP AS FORMATION

The argument that participation in Christian worship is formative rests on a more basic claim about formation, and one that is familiar to philosophers of education: our most powerful education comes not through formal instruction but through informal, regular participation in embodied practices, which shape our sense of self, our view of the world, and our understanding of the story in which we live. Sometimes we consciously and intentionally engage in such practices and the formation they entail, but more often we are formed by them unconsciously and unintentionally.[6] Moreover, some such practices carry more weight and impart more meaning than others; some are 'thin' and others are 'thick.' Smith refers to the thickest practices, the ones that have the greatest formative power, as 'liturgies' (a term he deliberately extends beyond the particular context of Christian worship): "More specifically, I want to distinguish liturgies as *rituals of ultimate concern*: rituals that are formative for identity, that inculcate particular visions of the good life, and do so in a way that means to trump other ritual formations."[7] Importantly, Smith roots his claims regarding the formative power of liturgies in a particular philosophical anthropology that understands human beings as most fundamentally shaped by particular desires, heart affections, and loves. "The core claim of this book is that liturgies —

[2] James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 150.
[3] James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 207.
[4] Matthew Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 206.
[5] Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 206.
[6] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 80–81, 85.
[7] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 86.

whether 'sacred' or 'secular' — shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world. In short, liturgies make us certain kinds of people, and what defines us is what we *love*."[8] Liturgies form who we are by forming what we love.

Although liturgies can be found in all areas of life, Smith calls particular attention to the formative effects of distinctively Christian gathered worship, explaining how each element of Christian worship shapes those who regularly participate in it.[9] To give just a handful of examples, the Call to Worship at the beginning of the service shows congregants that their worship is a response to something larger than themselves;[10] in the Confession of Sin and the Assurance of Pardon, congregants practice receiving forgiveness for their own sin and forgiving the sins of others;[11] the Lord's Supper brings the Christian story to life in vivid, tangible symbols and points beyond the limitations and imperfections of present-day worship to its fulfillment at Christ's return;[12] and the Offering enacts an economics of gratitude in response to God's many gifts, rather than one of consumption or competition.[13]

One particularly compelling site of formation in Christian worship is congregational singing of Psalms and hymns. Smith points out that singing involves our entire bodies and therefore shapes our heart desires more thoroughly than mere speaking ever could.[14] The Psalms in particular train those who sing them in a new language for talking to God and responding to the many joys and difficulties that life brings.[15] Kaemingk drives home the role of singing in worship as language training: "through years of singing, a worshipper stores up a rich spiritual and emotional vocabulary that will help her express praise in times of joy, confession in times of guilt, and lamentation in times of frustration."[16]

The fact that congregants participate in "*years* of singing" (and worshiping more generally) is important here. The formative potential of Christian worship does not come to fruition overnight. As Kaemingk observes, "A worshipper's response to falling skyscrapers and murdered countrymen will be determined much more by the three thousand songs he sang before the trauma than the three songs he sings after."[17] In consequence, "the true power of worship lies in its ability to prepare worshippers for tragedies and crisis before they come.

[8] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 25.
[9] Smith, 159–207.
[10] Smith, 159–166.
[11] Smith, 176–182.
[12] Smith, 197–203.
[13] Smith, 203–205.
[14] Smith, 170–171.
[15] Smith, 171–173.
[16] Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 224. Both Smith and Kaemingk make substantial use of the work of Reformed Christian worship scholar John Witvliet.
[17] Kaemingk, 227.

While worship can be reactive, it works better when it is understood as preparatory."[18] Smith makes a similar point about the slowness of formation through worship:

> One of the most crucial things to appreciate about Christian formation is that it happens over time. It is not fostered by events or experiences; real formation cannot be affected by actions that are merely episodic. There must be a rhythm and regularity to formative practices in order for them to seep into our *kardia* [heart] and begin to be effectively inscribed into who we are, directing our passion to the kingdom of God and thus disposing us to action that reflects such a desire.[19]

In fact, this slow accretion of affective, embodied desires and heart orientations over time is one crucial way that a Christian education rooted in worship differs from a more cognitivist approach to Christian education that emphasizes developing and maintaining right beliefs. The latter approach, which emphasizes what Christians *think* over what they *do* and *love*, holds considerable sway among Christian educators in America today. As Smith says, "Before we articulate a worldview, we worship…given the sorts of animals we are, we pray *before* we believe, we worship before we know — or rather, we worship *in order* to know."[20] Intellectual formulations of Christian faith, then, come about *in response to* Christian worship: "Live worship is the fount from which worldview springs, rather than being the expression or application of some cognitive set of beliefs already in place."[21]

One way that formal, doctrinal, cognitive instruction supports the formative work of Christian worship is through what Smith calls *liturgical catechesis*, a term that connects worship with the Christian church's historic practice of instructing children and new believers in the basics of the faith.

> Indeed, we might think of the heart of discipleship and faith formation as liturgical catechesis whereby instruction in the faith is primarily focused on helping the people of God understand why we do what we do when we gather for worship…In short, liturgical catechesis will encourage reflection and worship precisely so we constitute worship *as* that "suite" of disciplines that are habituations of the Spirit,

[18] Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 226.
[19] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 226.
[20] Smith, 33–34.
[21] Smith, 136.

> into which we're invited in order to learn how to imagine the kingdom.[22]

In fact, Smith suggests that a *neglect* of liturgical catechesis may partly account for a *failure* to form a Christian character through worship.

In particular, the failure of catechesis often contributes to a compartmentalization that effectively nullifies the liturgical practices of worship, undercutting their counter-formative power. When we are never invited to understand why we do what we do when we worship, then the repertoire of practices is no longer worship but something else — an ethnic identifier, a superstitious hedge, a way to consolidate social capital, or whatever. Liturgical catechesis is an integral aspect of formative worship.[23]

Yet, as important as liturgical catechesis is, even this is not enough: the congregant's own attitude, whether of openness to change through worship or of simply 'going through the motions,' shapes and constrains the formative power of participation in Christian worship, even as congregants are themselves shaped by that participation. There is a tension here that Smith does not seek to resolve: "worship requires full, active, conscious participation even if it is also forming us in ways that elude our conscious awareness."[24] Overall, then, the mitigating influence of the congregant's own attitude and the frequent neglect of liturgical catechesis lead to a sobering result: "clearly, regular participation in the church's 'orthodox' liturgy is not enough to prevent such 'worshipers' from leaving the sanctuary to become (sometimes enthusiastic) participants in all sorts of unjust systems, structures, and behaviors."[25] Though Christian worship is powerful, it offers no guarantees.

Kaemingk, writing later than Smith and perhaps benefiting from the critiques raised in response to Smith's work, acknowledges the limitations on worship's formative potential even more diligently. He notes three ways that Christian worship can be impotent or even malformative rather than beneficial: through oversimplification, through sentimentality, or through lack of worshipper participation and understanding.[26] Yet, he maintains, the response to these shortcomings is not to abandon formation through Christian worship, but rather to more faithfully pursue Christian worship that involves full congregational participation (*and* catechesis) and reflects the genuine richness and complexity of Scripture and the Christian tradition. Kaemingk urges Christians to dive deeper into the resources of Christian worship, rather than giving up after only experiencing the shallows.

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[22] James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works (*Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013), 187, 189, emphasis original.
[23] Smith, *Awaiting the King,* 205.
[24] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom,* 187.
[25] Smith, *Awaiting the King,* 167–168.
[26] Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration,* 233–235.

WORSHIP AS FORMATION FOR PLURALISM

Even granting the formative potential of Christian worship, the relevance of worship for *pluralism* might not be immediately obvious. After all, congregants gather as *Christians* to worship the *Christian* God, not any other, an exclusive practice that could seem to work against a commitment to pluralism. To address this, I draw on Christian legal scholar John Inazu's framework of "confident pluralism," which involves three aspirations: patience, tolerance, and humility. I use these aspirations to illuminate the connection between pluralism and Christian worship.[27]

First, the liturgical movements of Christian worship train congregants in *patience*, as their understanding of their present cultural moment is reoriented in light of Christ's first and second coming. "It is in the formative worship of the church — rehearsing the biblical drama whose *telos* is the eschatology [that is, Christ's return at the end of time] — that we learn both the norms of flourishing *and* how to wait."[28] Again, the Psalms in particular provide a new language — one learned best through singing — with which to respond to specific moments of tragedy, hurt, injustice, or failure (whether personal or communal) in both lament and hope for reconciliation. Especially when understood in light of Jesus' crucifixion, the Psalms offer an alternative vision of human moments in which God is not only present in our suffering, but suffers with us.[29] This alternative vision and new language enable Christians to live with, and even be hurt by, those who are deeply different from them, without seeking to secure their own safety or comfort but instead pursuing the good of those around them, trusting in God's eventual restoration of all things.

Similarly, Christian worship's Godward focus cultivates the *humility* that is indispensable for living well in the midst of deep pluralism. Kaemingk differentiates Christian humility from mere modesty:

> Modesty is a nice word. But Christians have historically used heavier words to describe what they wrestle with during periods of self-examination. Christian descriptions of the self include weighty words like blind, broken, depraved, evil, weak, selfish, and feeble. The Christian virtue of humility goes beyond…modesty. Christian pluralists confess that they are

[27] John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (University of Chicago Press, 2016). In so doing, I am following Smith's suggestion that we can begin to explore this connection by "align[ing] Inazu's aspirational virtues (tolerance, humility, patience) with the rhythms and rituals of historic Christian worship and consider how/whether/why these emerge from the imaginary carried in liturgical practices." Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 147–148.

[28] Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 89, emphasis original.

[29] Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 231–233.

> not simply contingent — they are bent, broken, and deformed.[30]

Kaemingk finds the potential for cultivating humility especially concentrated in the specific kinds of prayer found in the liturgy of Christian worship: the prayer for illumination, offered before reading and preaching Scripture, which "trains worshippers in epistemic humility;" the prayer of confession of sin, which "trains them in moral humility;" and the intercessory prayer, in which they "practice taking on the hopes and fears, needs and feelings of others," thereby being formed in "self-forgetfulness."[31] In learning to see their ability to know, their moral uprightness, and their personal importance through *God's* eyes, participants in Christian worship develop the humility that will enable them to live with those who are different from them without assuming that they alone are knowledgeable, that they alone are good, or that they alone matter. And this attitude grows not (only) through listening to a sermon or reading a treatise on humility, but through *acting out* a posture of humility in regular prayer in the company of others.

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, Christian worship trains congregants in *tolerance*, not through relativizing or privatizing their deepest commitments, but through reminding them of their own strangeness to and alienation from God, and of His welcome of them. Smith connects this to the Passing of the Peace, a pause in the middle of the service for participants to greet one another. Smith interprets this moment of the liturgy in terms of both receptivity and hospitality: "In response to God's gracious welcome, we practice hospitality in worship, which is practice for extending hospitality beyond it."[32] At first glance, it might seem that those offering welcome and those being welcomed are so similar to one another that the question of pluralism is irrelevant. But in fact, many significant kinds of difference *do* manifest in Christian worship. In particular, one aspect of social difference that is all too often overlooked is that of *age*. I wholeheartedly echo Smith's point that "there is something deeply formative about *intergenerational* worship that is crucial to the kind of people the church is called to be."[33] Especially for young people, regularly participating in communal worship with parents and grandparents, babies, toddlers, and retirees, offers practice in welcoming (and being welcomed by) those who are different in immediately perceptible ways.

The implications of Christian worship for tolerance come to the fore in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Smith points out that this shared meal is both "a table prepared in the presence of *our* enemies" and "a table where *God* sits down with those who were once *his* enemies" — that is, Christians themselves.[34]

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[30] Kaemingk, 228.
[31] Kaemingk, 228–230.
[32] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 169–170.
[33] Smith, 225, emphasis added.
[34] Smith, 201, emphasis added.

"The Supper is a gracious communion with a forgiving God; but it is also a supper we eat *with one another*, and that too will require forgiveness."[35] Most Christian traditions only offer participation in the Lord's Supper to those who are themselves Christians. Even so, practicing forgiveness, reconciliation, and table fellowship with those who share the same faith prepares congregants to do so with those who are *not* Christians, as well. "As a school for learning to love our neighbor, and thus becoming reconciled, it is also a school for learning to love our enemies — the most scandalous element of renewed community in the kingdom come."[36] Once again, this love and reconciliation is possible not because of an abstract commitment to tolerance, but rather because of a deep appreciation that Christians themselves are the recipients of God's loving forgiveness, a truth enacted and experienced throughout the elements of Christian worship.

CONCLUSION: CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AND PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Given the inherent exclusivity of Christian worship, it is surprising to discover that it holds such potential as a site for formation for pluralism. On the contrary, however, as each of the examples discussed here demonstrates, the very distinctiveness of Christian worship proves to be not a barrier to pluralism, but rather the foundation for it. This offers a pointed contrast to a liberal understanding of education for pluralism, which requires students to hold their commitments loosely in order to live well with others.[37]

Furthermore, formation through worship contradicts liberal understandings of freedom as autonomy. Smith sees this particularly clearly in the liturgical moment of the reading of God's law, whether through the Ten Commandments or some other divine command in Scripture.

> Embedded in this practice is an understanding of freedom that runs counter to almost every other cultural institution of which we, in Western democracies, are a part. The announcement of the law and the articulation of God's will for our lives signals that our good is not something that we determine or choose for ourselves…Such a conception of autonomous freedom as freedom of choice — freedom to construct our own ends and to invent our own visions of the good life — chafes against the very notion of a law outside of ourselves.[38]

[35] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 201.
[36] Smith, 203.
[37] Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Meira Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). For more on the difference between a liberal approach to education for pluralism and one rooted in Christian worship, see Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 215–219.
[38] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 175.

Philosophers of education tend to see pluralism and autonomy-based liberalism as basically complementary, even when they recognize some tension between these values.[39] This analysis of Christian worship suggests, on the contrary, that repeatedly enacting a stance of submission to a higher law can in fact provide justifications for living well with others that cannot be found in liberalism's autonomy.

Worth comparing here is philosopher of education David Lewin's argument that "every movement of learning entails a kind of epistemological submission or affirmation that generally goes unnoticed and unthematized."[40] An interesting continuation of this paper's project would be to expand Lewin's discussion of submission in education to include *all* the kinds of humility with which Kaemingk identifies the prayers of the Christian liturgy: not just epistemic humility but moral humility and self-forgetfulness as well.[41] Is it as easy to apply these latter kinds of submission to a post-secular context? And if not, does that raise questions about post-secularism's ability to extend welcome to religious ways of life?

Finally, the formative potential of worship depends upon congregants' participation with their whole bodies, which works against the cognitivist orientation of both many Christians and many liberals.[42] As Kaemingk explains,

> Employing the body is particularly uncomfortable for many Western Christians for the simple reason that their dis-embodied ideas about faith demand less than their embodied actions of faith. The anxious discomfort a Westerner feels when she commits her whole body to a liturgical act tells us something about that action's power and implications.[43]

Western liberals, and Christians shaped by life in the midst of Western liberalism, resist this embodied participation because it calls forth their whole selves. Yet it is precisely this whole-self involvement that makes Christian worship so effectively formative.

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[39] For a particularly astute articulation of both the nature of pluralism and autonomy-based liberalism and the relationship between them, see Walter Feinberg, *For Goodness Sake: Religious Schools and Education for Democratic Citizenry* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[40] David Lewin, *Educational Philosophy for a Post-secular Age* (Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2017), 87.

[41] Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 228–230.

[42] For further discussion of the cognitive focus of both Christian and secular understandings of religion, see Lewin, *Educational Philosophy for a Post-secular Age*, Chapter 3. Note however that, at least regarding the Christian religion, Lewin perhaps goes too far in *de*-emphasizing cognitive beliefs.

[43] Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration*, 223–224.

In fact, some liberals are starting to rediscover the formative potential of regular, repeated, communal, whole-body activities. Kaemingk briefly considers the work of Jeffrey Stout, William Connolly, and Adam Seligman and Robert Weller regarding formation for pluralism through shared rituals, noting that "the Christian church has always known what liberals and pragmatists are just now discovering — the habits of the heart are shaped more by ritual and shared experience than by ideas and institutions."[44] Even so, there is a crucial difference between the rituals of liberalism and the rituals of Christian worship, and that is the primary agent of change. Kaemingk explains that Stout "argues that the spirit of democracy will be self-actualized and self-nourished by the streams of solidarity located within the human spirit itself…We, the people, are responsible for nourishing ourselves."[45] In contrast, the formative power of Christian worship works not *because* of human effort, but *in spite* of it — since all that humans do is always tainted by sin. "Thankfully," Kaemingk explains, "…the primary agent in worship is not the pluralist — it is God. Through the Holy Spirit's invasion into the sanctuary, the imperfect sermons, songs, and practices of disciples can become powerful avenues for spiritual and political nourishment."[46] My purpose in raising this point here is not to argue that God is in fact present and active in Christian worship (which would take us well beyond the scope of this paper), but rather to highlight two deeply different understandings of how formation occurs. Those who accept one or the other of these two understandings will necessarily have widely divergent views on what kind of education is necessary for living well in the midst of pluralism.

Despite the contrast between Christian worship and liberal educational philosophy, Christian worship remains deeply significant for many members of our society — as do also worship practices in other religions. At the same time, religious worship provides a powerful example of informal, embodied formation, putting on display the longstanding adage of educational philosophy, 'education is more than schooling.' For these reasons, philosophers of education would do well to pay greater attention to the potential that religious worship has for both formation and malformation. By drawing attention to the possibilities of Christian worship for formation for living well in the midst of pluralism, I hope that this paper will open the door for further philosophy of education research on religious worship as a site of education.

[44] Kaemingk, 202.
[45] Kaemingk, 236.
[46] Kaemingk, 236.