

*Worship with One Accord*, by Geoffrey Wainwright and *Christian Liturgy*, by Frank C. Senn

reviewed by [Paul Westermeyer](#) in the [October 14, 1998](#) issue

*By Geoffrey Wainwright, Worship with One Accord: Where Liturgy & Ecumenism Embrace. (Oxford University Press, 276 pp.)*

*By Frank C. Senn, Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical. (Fortress, 747 pp.)*

Geoffrey Wainwright and Frank Senn's very different books can both help us enter contemporary dialogues on worship, ecumenism and ethics. Wainwright has gathered 15 lectures and articles he produced between 1983 and '94 into chapters on liturgy and ecumenism. He regards the book's "variety" as arising from "the several occasions that originally called forth its chapters," while its "coherence resides in its being the work of a thinker who claims to stand within evangelical, orthodox, catholic Christianity and seeks the manifestation of the church's unity for the glory of God and the salvation of the world."

Wainwright, a United Methodist academician, has long been immersed in liturgical and ecumenical activity, especially through the World Council of Churches. This book is not a history but a series of illuminating windows framing such topics as ecclesiology, scripture and tradition, sacraments, liturgical revision, reconciliation, ethics and politics, the Trinity, and matters that bear on language.

Wainwright stimulates discussion. For example, he suggests that H. Richard Niebuhr's five Christ-and-culture types serve to foster "discriminating attention on the part of Christians toward every human culture at all times and places" rather than provide "fixed and divergent stances of the Christian faith towards all human culture." He argues that "most cultures will contain some elements to be affirmed, some to be negated, resisted, and even fought, some to be purified and elevated, some to be held provisionally in tension, and some to be transformed."

While he is certainly right that Christians will respond differently to differing cultures, I wonder whether construing the types this way may be too easy. Niebuhr is helpful precisely because he makes clear that Christians don't agree about which elements are which and then sorts out the nature of the disagreements. Wainwright himself

indicates where he stands. He thinks four of the types have theological strengths, while the fifth, Christ of culture, is "abysmal." The idea of Christ as transformer of culture has the most to commend it, and characterizes the 1982 Lima Faith and Order document on *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, which figures heavily in his discussion.

Though there are sufficient endnotes after each chapter, Wainwright's text lacks an index and a bibliography. An index would have been especially helpful. Its lack reflects the book's character as a series of topics organized around a theme rather than a sustained trajectory.

Unlike Wainwright's book, Senn's massive work cannot be read in a few sittings and is best approached incrementally. It divides into two sections of quite different lengths. The "Prolegomena" gives an overview of contemporary liturgical studies, with topics such as symbol, ritual, rites of passage, myth and music, and a section on the incarnational nature of Christian liturgy. That takes about 50 of the text's large pages. The remaining 650 pages is a history divided into three sections: "Meal to Mass," "Reformation Liturgical Traditions" and "Liturgical Loss, Retrieval, and Renewal."

Senn's work stands in the tradition of Joseph Jungmann's *Mass of the Roman Rite*, Gregory Dix's *The Shape of the Liturgy* and Luther Reed's *The Lutheran Liturgy*. It traces in considerable detail the story of the church's worship from New Testament times to the present, with particular emphasis on the Lutheran Reformation, including its Scandinavian components.

Books of this kind are often written by a team of authors. That Senn's is the work of a single writer gives it special coherence. He carefully sifts through the data so as not to be tendentious, while at the same time making sense of it from a unified perspective. The book is also unusually accessible. The study of Christian worship uses complex and unfamiliar terms and concepts. But, avoiding technical jargon, Senn writes so that ordinary people who are willing to work a bit can understand. They can dip into portions of the book as they would a reference volume, or read the whole.

Senn's book contains both footnotes and a substantial bibliography, which is helpfully categorized. The index of persons is ample though not complete, but for such a lengthy tome I would have preferred more amplitude in the subject index,

which is only four pages long. However, this is a minor complaint about a book otherwise so helpful.

Senn thoroughly and respectfully discusses such matters as the difference between offering bread and wine and offering the body and blood of Christ during the communion service. Splendid comparative liturgical tables abound throughout the book. He skillfully explores the place of worship within broad historical currents, setting in context the early church, medieval developments and results, the Reformation, the French Revolution, rationalism, romanticism and modern and postmodern influences. Recent concerns about inculturation, feminist critiques and reaching the unchurched are presented with fairness and balance. Perhaps most remarkable, Senn is sensitive to and knowledgeable about art, architecture, hymnody and music.

But though Senn's scholarly rigor is remarkable, some of his conclusions are debatable. For example, he accepts George Pullen Jackson's assertion that Negro spirituals were based on white revival songs. Jackson's research into white folk hymnody is important, but his ideas about what depends on what cannot be uncritically accepted. Also open to discussion is Senn's assertion that in our postmodern setting the liturgy "must aim for enchantment, not entertainment." If those were the only alternatives, he would be right. Entertainment, as he says, "leaves one satisfied with oneself and one's world," whereas enchantment "leads one from a drab world to another, brighter, more interesting world."

Fair enough, but does such an assertion not inadvertently deny what Senn has already ably demonstrated? Having rightly exposed the danger of romanticist "atmosphere" and other human attempts to work ourselves into God's presence, does he not now lead us back into the same trap? Can the liturgy legitimately aim at anything other than the glory of God? Are human beings able, through rhetoric, music, art, architecture, liturgy or anything else, to lift themselves out of our drab world and into the bright presence of God? Or are the word and presence of God so alien that any leading has to come from God's side? Are entertainment and enchantment different options, or are they but two sides of the same human coin?

The church gravitates to liturgical forms even when it seeks to deny them. I suspect this is not so much because they enchant us as because we realize, perhaps unconsciously, that liturgical forms protect us from our manipulative and bullying tactics toward one another, which we piously call attempts to lead people to God. The incarnational reality that the Triune God addresses us in word and sacrament

requires liturgical embodiment; then, unless we get in its way, it issues in gracious hospitality, enchantment and all manner of other good things. But this all comes, as Senn knows, through the grace of God.