

# The Oxford History of Christian Worship

reviewed by [Susan J. White](#) in the [November 27, 2007](#) issue

Any addition to Oxford University Press's rich treasury of companions, dictionaries and comprehensive histories is an event of note. Indispensable resources for generations of scholars and religious professionals, these volumes can be relied on for their readability and thoroughness. *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, edited by Geoffrey Wainwright of Duke University Divinity School and Karen Westerfield Tucker of Boston University School of Theology, is no exception. At over 900 pages and with contributors representing a variety of Christian traditions from around the globe, it is intended to give clergy, liturgical scholars and other readers with an interest in Christian common prayer a single authoritative source for information about and interpretations of the historical development of the liturgy.

The trajectory of the editors' version of liturgical history is set at the beginning of the book by their reference to Paul's call for believers to present their bodies as "a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1), and it is sustained by the theological argument that all worship is an aspect of humanity's outworking of the *imago dei*, which has both a vertical (Godward) dimension and a horizontal (societal) dimension. Thus the editors have set the historiography within the broader context of both ecclesiology and eschatology. Occasionally the authors of individual chapters lose touch with this essential grounding, but there are sufficient reminders throughout to keep readers on track.

The 34 chapters are arranged in roughly chronological order, but with the various liturgical traditions and the complex patterns of the expansion and enculturation of Christian worship across the globe given separate treatment, readers are left with the sense that the historical progression is intricately layered rather than strictly linear. Some readers might wish for separate treatment of the historical development of certain areas of liturgical practice as well, but a comprehensive index enables readers to track subjects of particular interest.

Although some question might be raised about why the editors chose certain authors and not others, the overall scholarly quality of this volume is as high as should be expected from a book with the Oxford University Press pedigree. The editors clearly had comprehensiveness as their overarching goal, and even the most cursory glance will reveal their admirable struggle to overcome the usual limitations of both Eurocentrism and the narrow, ritualistic definition of *liturgy* that has sometimes dominated academic discussions of Christian worship.

Of course, any attempt at comprehensiveness will invite a reviewer to embark on a hunt for gaps in content. There are a couple worth mentioning, if only because they show us just how difficult it is to write a decentered liturgical history. In the chapter called “Mainline Protestantism in Latin America,” no mention is made of the profound influence of Pentecostal worship. And the chapters titled “Mission and Inculturation in East Asia and the Pacific” and “Mission and Inculturation: Africa” contain another lapse: although there is an admirable description of the shape of traditional African religiosity in the latter, questions of the enculturation of worship are almost exclusively centered on the indigenization of the official Roman Catholic rites within the missionary situation.

The effects of these lapses are counterbalanced by chapters of astonishing elegance and breadth, such as Conrad Donakowski’s “The Age of Revolutions” and Wainwright’s treatment of ecumenical challenges to Christian worship. The text is augmented by plentiful and helpful illustrations throughout, with illuminating captions and cross-references to relevant chapters. The reproduction quality of the illustrations varies, however; those in black and white are more difficult to decipher than those in color.

Where does this volume fit in the larger picture of the historical study of Christian worship? As an academic discipline, liturgical historiography is around 150 years old, with its roots planted firmly in the mid-19th-century burgeoning of comparative textual studies. As the field has matured, it has experienced both the benefits and losses of the compartmentalization that has marked other theological disciplines. Partitioned into discrete periods, each with its own authoritative rites and interpretations of those rites, the history of the liturgy has largely been studied as a history of small variations in texts, punctuated by a few grand ideological revolutions.

In recent years, however, there have been serious challenges to the standard curriculum in worship history, and it is this new situation that makes comprehensive treatment possible. But this transformation is in its early stages, and there is still a great deal to be worked out before we know what the new shape of liturgical historiography will be. Surely it will be a history written both “from above” and “from below,” which takes into account all the players in the drama of worship: clergy and congregation, liturgical reformers and those whose liturgy has been reformed, people at the center of liturgical power structures and people at the margins. It will take into account all of the places of worship, interpretations of worship, and varied significances of worship arising from within the popular imagination as well as from official church structures. It will consider both text-based and nontext traditions of worship and will explore the politics, sociology and psychology of worship. Finally, it will take account of the wider human context of pluralism, cultural diversity and multiple religious participation.

Because the new historiography of Christian worship is still taking shape, one might wonder whether this is the right time for the publication of this volume. The book seems slightly behind the curve in a few ways. The author of the chapter titled “Vestments and Objects,” for example, describes in detail the development of liturgical dress for presiders but ignores traditions of dress in the congregation. Were it not for the separate excursus on African indigenous art provided by one of the editors, the chapter on the visual arts might lead readers to think that only big-name artists and architects ever contributed to the liturgical environment. Ignored are the generations of ordinary men and women who painted murals, arranged flowers, embroidered banners and altar cloths, and carved religious motifs into wood and stone.

The larger social and religious contexts within which the history of Christian worship has unfolded are also only vaguely addressed. The influence of Islam receives attention in only a single chapter, and the liturgy of Judaism is treated only as the ancient precursor to certain Christian ritual practices, rather than as a living religious tradition and a continuing context for interfaith conversation. Nor is attention given to scientific, technological, sociological or economic influences on Christian ritual behavior.

Despite these omissions, the volume is remarkable and noteworthy. The two Methodist editors (one British Methodist and one United Methodist) brought all their many gifts to bear in this task: wide global, ecumenical and academic experience;

the respect of their peers in the academy; and years of work on the front lines of contemporary liturgical reform. They brought the courage to imagine that such a volume as this was possible. But most important, they brought their sharp recognition that anyone wishing to understand the history of the Christian church must possess a lively sense of the ways the church has gathered for common worship over the centuries, and of the ways in which it has understood what it is doing when it gathers.