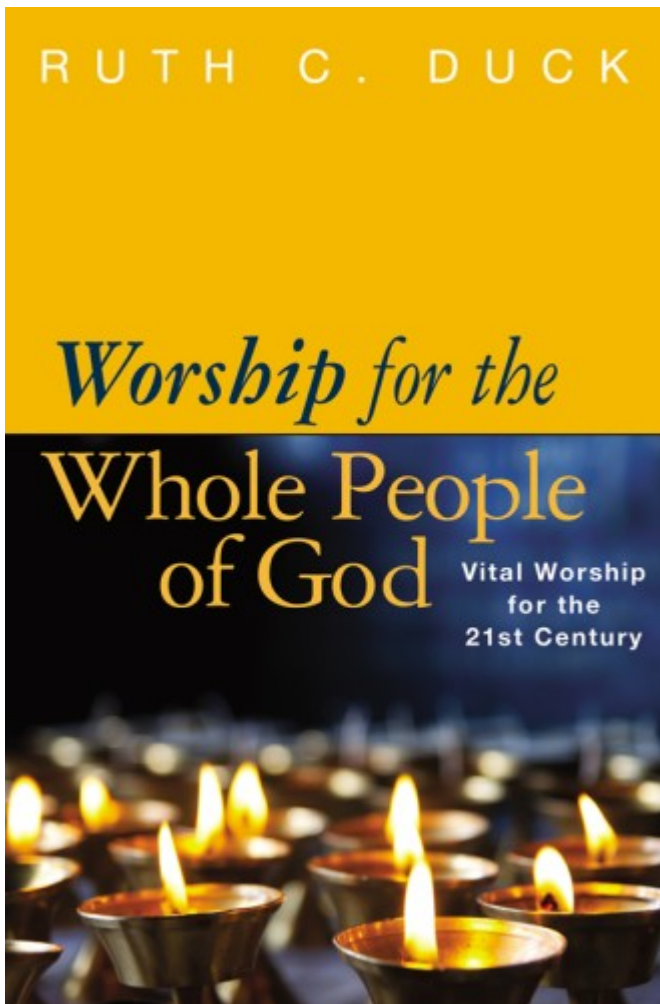


Worship for the Whole People of God, by Ruth C. Duck

reviewed by [Marlene Kropf](#) in the [July 23, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Worship for the Whole People of God

By Ruth C. Duck

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This is the book I wished for when I taught courses on worship in an ecumenical context. Ruth Duck acknowledges in the introduction that she also struggled “to find readings adequate to the great diversity of denominational and cultural backgrounds

of my students”; this is what prompted her to undertake this challenging project.

Well known as a prolific hymn writer and the author of finely crafted worship resources (such as those found in *Bread for the Journey*, *Flames of the Spirit: Resources for Worship*, and *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship*), Duck is professor of worship at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. In that context she regularly teaches students from varying denominations and cultures. Her engagement with these students, visits to their congregations, and ongoing cross-cultural research make this book a unique contribution to worship studies.

Duck is a well-grounded student of Christian liturgical theology and history, both ancient and modern, and especially appreciates the renewal unleashed by the reforms of Vatican II. At the same time, she recognizes the limits of what has passed for a complete account of worship history and practice. She says forthrightly, “The European and White North American measure of what is adequate liturgy must be decentered, so that Christians of many backgrounds can learn from one another and the Spirit how to worship and honor one another more deeply and fully.”

While liturgical scholars and seminary professors will no doubt cherish this book, Duck’s hoped-for audience is much broader. With her passion for the practical, she cares most deeply for pastors and worship leaders who guide the everyday worship life of congregations. Her aim is not to champion a single style of worship but to offer a sturdy foundation for good pastoral and congregational reflection. To that end, she has written the sort of book that pastors of many denominations will pull from their shelves when they are seeking to reinvigorate their role as ritual presiders or to enliven the ministry of their congregations’ worship committees.

The book is comprehensive. Duck covers the theological foundations of worship, addresses the mechanics of planning and leading worship, and discusses prayer, the arts, the role of scripture, the Christian year, and choosing words for worship. Nearly half of the book is devoted to the history and practice of sacrament and ritual, with specific chapters on baptism, Eucharist, pastoral liturgies (including weddings and funerals), and rituals of healing and reconciliation.

Duck has a sensible, balanced, and inclusive approach to liturgy. Beyond a chapter devoted to characteristics of worship in widely varying ethnic and cultural contexts, she weaves diverse examples into every discussion, and she does more than

present colorful anecdotes. She enlarges the discussion by probing more deeply into how and why communities of faith do what they do. She says, for example, “I never understood the joyful tenor of African American funerals until I learned that the wake is a time for tears, for focusing on the loss of the deceased, while the funeral is a time for giving thanks for the deceased and celebrating his or her passage into life eternal.”

Duck illuminates common ground among those who use prayer books and those who don't by exploring theological assumptions and examining the role of language in worship. She honors a wide variety of ritual traditions, observing faithfulness among those who baptize infants and those who reserve baptism for adults. Such breadth of vision requires deep respect for the whole church and a willingness to invest significant time in study and relationships.

Among the most engaging chapters in the book are those on sacraments. In a panoramic review of emerging understandings of sacraments, Duck describes the sea change from modern rationalism to a growing appreciation for embodied and holistic knowing that welcomes mystery. Because of the potential for powerful personal and communal encounters with God in the midst of ritual, many will agree with Duck's assessment that the renewal of worship demands careful, creative attention to sacraments. She goes beyond theory to offer guidance for significant practical matters, such as the quantity of water used in baptism, generous gestures at the Lord's Table, suitable sources for good communion bread, steps for beginning a local ministry of healing, and finding vivid, evocative language for prayer. Though these chapters may be most immediately useful for churches that have the freedom to design their own rituals, they could also expand the possibilities for those whose liturgical words and gestures are more prescribed.

Worship for the Whole People of God offers a well-grounded place from which to launch conversations that will need to continue for many years to come. The beauty of the book is its breadth and depth. Some readers may be overwhelmed by the wealth of detail, but others will recognize the validity of an inductive approach that values the particularity of specific traditions, rather than imposing Western cultural and ecclesial norms. Duck sifts through the data and proposes core theological values for the global church that promise a faithful and creative way forward in changing times.

In the churches I know, I would also want those who plan worship to comb the exhaustive end notes for primary source material from their own and others'

traditions. Duck goes a long way toward remedying the limited perspectives of worship writings. What is still needed for the vitality of worship is more voices at the table, of both scholars and practitioners, and a commitment to remain in vigorous dialogue.