

Martin D. Stringer**A Sociological History of Christian Worship**

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In this ambitious project, Martin Stringer attempts to chart the developmental course of Christian liturgical practices from their formative origins in the primitive Church all the way through to the contemporary period. As if a temporal expanse of nearly 2000 years of history did not pose sufficient challenges, Stringer endeavours to provide balanced regional coverage as well, offering a number of brief surveys that highlight patterns of worship prevailing in such diverse settings as the Byzantine empire, ancient Armenia, the Frankish kingdoms, Moravia, the kingdom of Rus, medieval England, Aksumite Ethiopia, South India, early modern Spain, Reformation Europe, and contemporary Tanzania. Completed within the economical compass of 240 pages of text, it follows that this book is necessarily compressed and selective in its attentiveness: an episodic rather than continuous or connected temporality underpins the ordering of its materials, and forays into the particularities of chosen locales are generally limited to broad strokes rather than detailed mappings. Even so, Stringer has read both widely and deeply in what is a dauntingly rich, dense, and overwhelming secondary literature. The information he has carefully distilled and ordered is to be welcomed not only for the insights on offer, but also for the stimulus such an arching overview will provide for future explorations.

Stringer's express purpose is to bring a more rigorous sociological approach to the study of Christian liturgical practices and worship, a field hitherto markedly informed by theological interests. Uneasy with the conventional anthropological concept of 'culture,' which he regards as too "all-encompassing" and "fundamentally static" (p. 7), and likewise troubled by the category of 'religion,' a catch-all rubric that "carries associations of continuity and coherence that make it difficult to use in a historical context," (p. 9), Stringer believes he has found in the writings of Michel Foucault a more serviceable theoretical framework. In particular, the Foucauldian category of 'discourse' becomes Stringer's master analytical key, as he utilizes this notion to reconceptualize Christian liturgical practices as forms of discourse that operate within and against shifting discursive fields and rival worldviews (such as "paganism" in the early centuries, "humanism" in the later). The extensive criticisms that Foucault's work has received, most notably the reification problems attending his structuralist conceptualization of highly restrictive discursive formations and of rupturing epistemes ("movement by a succession of immobilities," as Sartre memorably put it), and the accompanying occlusions of human agency, are not registered by Stringer. It needs noting, however, that Stringer feels compelled to widen the category of discourse — conventionally tied to speech utterances and textual communications — to include the actions, images, and settings that are co-constitutive of the praxis of worship. This broadening move would appear to go a long way back to the banished concept of 'culture,' and admirers of Geertz, Sahlins, and the Comaroffs might question the view that anthropological inquiries are incapable of linking cultures, structures, and agency in historically dynamic explanatory accounts.

Stringer's attempt to specify the "core elements" that inform Christian discourses throughout the ages actually discloses the ahistorical inflection that commonly surfaces in Foucauldian projects, which are often selective in their handling of source materials (the anomalous or striking taking precedence over the more representative or commonplace) and rather loose in securing sound periodizations. Here Stringer singles out four defining features of Christian discourses: (i) a linear

conception of time, as marked by “before and after Christ,” “resurrection and judgement” signifiers; (ii) intimacy with the divine, as conveyed by a personal love of God, of Jesus his divine son, of Mary, the saints, and the Holy Spirit; (iii) charity, as signaled by injunctions to “love thy neighbour” and to care for “the poor, the widowed and the sick”; and (iv) a scriptural basis for Christian truths, the incompleteness and ambiguities of which allow for some flexibility in exegetical interpretation (pp.19-23). Though not an arbitrary assemblage, Stringer’s claim that these four core elements “set Christian discourses apart from those of paganism, humanism or other religious discourses” (p.23), is historically and sociologically misleading. A “linear cosmology” is a shared perspective among the three major monotheistic faiths, and can also be found within Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism. As for “personal intimacy with the divine,” this is a feature prominent in many religious traditions, such as the Bhakti movements within Hinduism, the soteriological sects of Mahayana Buddhism, the Sufi orders of Islam, and it can even be found in several of the mystery-cults of Hellenistic and Roman paganism. Christian charity is unquestionably important in principle and practice, but the prophets of ancient Israel were among the first to articulate the ideal, and Jain and Buddhist traditions of non-violence and compassion surely entail strong charitable impulses. Nor can it be maintained that the corpus of Christian scriptures poses altogether unique challenges and opportunities in the discernment of sacred truths, as contested exegesis is the hallmark of all religious traditions that are founded upon and conveyed by written texts. One might also question the sociological utility of Stringer’s tetradic model of Christian discourse on the grounds that it is somewhat ill-suited for tracking developments over the course of two millennia and across many societies and cultures. In the case of Christian origins, for example, it would be difficult deny that a pronounced cosmic demonology — wherein the ancestral gods and goddesses of polytheism were openly denounced as malefic minions of Satan — loomed particularly large in Christian discourse and practice, and likewise a marked ascetic strain that often extended into opposition to sexuality and the corporeal more generally. Rather than posit or infer a discursive formation of abiding consistency, a more cautious analytical strategy would begin with recognition that religious discourses and ideologies are shifting and internally contested complexes of ideas, values, and norms, such that “orthodoxies” or “core traditions” are continuously being refashioned as changing social conditions and power constellations call forth adjustments and accommodative innovations.

Following the theoretical preliminaries of the Introduction, Stringer offers up seven substantive chapters that relate “texts and contexts” in the broad developmental history of Christian forms of worship. Somewhat oddly organized in terms of tri-centuriate blocks of time (origins to AD 300, 300-600, 600-900, and so on, up to modernity, a shortened 1800-2000), Stringer nonetheless manages to capture many of the salient features of devotional practice within each period and region surveyed. Worship in the early phase of Christian expansion is centered on the nucleated house-churches, with spirit-filled ecstatic practices, the sharing of a sacred meal, collective singing and prayer, all of which become increasingly routinized and regulated with the rise of a more formal clerical order, led by bishops. Following the conversion of Constantine, Christianity gradually assumes a more conspicuous public presence, its symbols and imagery finding prominent representation in basilicas and martyr shrines, as well as in commemorative processions. Under the double aegis of Byzantine dominance in the East and of Carolingian rule in the West, Christian discourse takes on a “hegemonic” role, eventually issuing in what Stringer calls a “cosmological Christianity,” wherein the entire world order — heaven, hell, and earth — is conceptualized in Christian terms, as orchestrated by a clerical elite in the service of the Godhead and the terrestrial rulers so anointed. A counter-movement against political and ecclesial manipulations gathers popular momentum, and “demotic” forms of worship come increasingly to the fore, setting the stage for a Protestant Reformation that presses for a return to the egalitarian and direct forms of piety that

characterized the early days of the faith. With the coming of modernity — capitalism, science, nation-states — a “de-christianizing” or secularizing dynamic is unleashed, resulting in a dialectical encounter with the emerging discourse of “humanism,” which challenges and partially displaces the theocentric cosmology of Christianity. Presently caught up in a dizzying whirl of “globalization,” Christian communities are dealing with competing conservative and reformist currents, variously reaffirming conventional practices or revising and adapting their liturgies (as with the Second Vatican Council) to the new realities of worldwide communication and mobility.

Factual infelicities are of course difficult to avoid when attempting such a sweeping, multi-faceted engagement, and no generalizing author can be expected to command a mastery over the source materials that goes with a specialist’s focus. That Stringer misrenders bishop Ignatius’s characterization of the eucharist as “medicine for the soul,” rather than “for immortality” (*pharmakon athanasias*), and neglects entirely the important early third-century text, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (which is available in a superbly annotated English translation), are points to be noted; they will doubtless be added to by zealous authorities in other areas. But critical observations of this sort are more amendatory than confuting, and are unlikely to destabilize the synoptic synthesis he has provided, and graciously invites us to debate.

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