

A Critique of Contemporary Worship Music:  
Virtual Community in the Time of COVID-19

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## Introduction

The only way that human beings can access the world is through language. We need it to comprehend our experiences, to seek understanding of the unknown, and to play within our world; language is our interpretive framework. Language is that with which we build the world and dwell inside it. The history of language has been the focus of contemporary philosophy as scholars aim to re-embodiment an entire history of Western philosophy, which has split the essence of human being and taken it outside of its body. Philosophers of language ask questions about self, others, power structures, and for certain individuals, the Divine--whether that is God or some other mystical being. Our language attempts to capture the essence of being. If I asked you, "who or what your understanding of God is," how would you respond? Would it be a feeling? An old white man? Maybe "water" or "light"? The way we use our language to name our reality is helpful to some extent, but in the sense of describing the reality of God, it can be "an attempt to domesticate" (Marion xii). For Jean-Luc Marion, a philosopher who dissects the ways that people describe God, "true theology, focused iconically on God's excessive self-revelation as Love, needs to abandon all the metaphysics of the subject which have defined modernity" (Marion xiii). Modernity brought a theological disposition that has emphasized a human understanding of the divine. Marion is arguing that the way that thinkers at the time approached these ontological questions was from a stance that was too focused on details that it lost its grasp on the purpose of Christianity: liberation. A prominent example of this transition is the pretty established view at this point that scripture is inerrant--a theological interpretation that is assumed in many contemporary churches. Those committed to the inerrancy of scripture have, over time, engaged in meticulous accounting and recounting of the stories and people in the

Bible to try to uncover everything they might find about God. While this attention to Scripture can be a good thing, we run the risk of losing the mystery of God and of misusing and misunderstanding scripture. This overaccounting limits our understanding of what we've arbitrarily named "normal spiritual" encounters. If we do accept that language is our means of understanding, why does our language impose boundaries of containment and predictability on God? How can we shift our language to facilitate and encourage awe and an expansive and ever-evolving dynamism of God while still remaining committed to the character of God?

In a study conducted at the end of last year, researchers asked Christian Evangelicals to read specific emotional sections of the lyrics to five popular worship songs. They had to answer questions regarding how they felt on a Likert-type scale that allows the participant to rank their response on a spectrum from one to five: one meaning "strongly agree," and five meaning "strongly disagree." The study posed questions that asked how the lyrics of the song made the participants think about God, self, and others, and whether or not they felt positively or negatively about the lyrics. The results of this study proved that when individuals are left to traditional ways of generic and unspecified beliefs, that "worshippers may pursue spiritual feelings, creating idiosyncratic meaning and decreasing the group-level benefits of orthodoxy" (Mrowka). The more that people are left to interpret songs or different aspects of theology, the more individualistic and less communally minded they become.

This is the context out of which this project was born. By using the liturgical calendar, I will be discussing the ways in which we can facilitate spaces for congregations to notice God. However the point of worship is not only to gather, but is as well one that sends people out into the world as they live lives of love towards others. Moreover, this project serves to reveal the

inadequacy of our current language that we use to describe God and suggest a different way that we can discuss the character of God. Language is not only a tool, but also is a gift. We are not always in control of the different ways that language encounters and changes us. The modernist understanding of language grasps supposedly concrete notions of God, giving a sense of satisfaction in the clutching and control of language. However, there is a discourse that cultivates us in another way: one of mystery and icon. Our language should open up to the gift and impact of a transcendent God, taking the control away from ourselves, and allowing liturgy to shape us (Ross). This is how we can continue to create a community with our neighbors in a time where it is illegal to be in physical proximity to them. In this season of global pandemic, as a Church we will have to continue our pursuit of sacrificial love, fighting injustice, supporting grief and loss, and navigating trauma in new ways and with new liturgy to guide us.

### **Music and Awe**

I was in a room of college spiritual leaders when we were asked, “where or how they feel the presence of God the most,” the majority of them said it was when they were either singing or listening to worship music. This makes sense as music has a way of disarming people and drawing them in. In the same vein of critiquing any powerful aspect, since music is influential on people, we must be careful with the ways that we write lyrics. If people are placing worship as a significant role in their spirituality, the theology within those songs needs to be equally formative, if not more, as a sermon. Many songs from contemporary worship seek to emphasize an emotional response. These emotions paired with lyrics that are not always theologically orthodox and can manipulate Christians to come to certain beliefs due to the familiarity of what they’re singing about. The faux-God that they are singing to does not exist underneath the

dazzling lights. Marion would consider this to be an idol, reflecting back unto ourselves shallow praise, reifying our own politics, behaviors, nationalism, functioning as an echochamber of beliefs not providing anything substantial for people to connect to the nature of God (Marion 12).

Part of the reason for the theological impact that worship music has on people is due to the repetition of lyrics. Most Churches have a selection of songs that they rotate through so that people grow familiar with them. For example, in several cases I have heard people describe situations in their life using metaphors from worship songs demonstrating the significance that these songs have in people's lives. Current aesthetic stage presentations can help create a beautiful way of intersecting visual and media and music into a time of worship, but it can also distract from or even distort lyrics or emotions behind them. An alternative to the idol's distraction from God is to facilitate opportunities for people to experience the awe, wonder, and mystery of a God who is bigger than our imaginations.

Shiota and Keltner in their study "The Nature of Awe: Elicitors, Appraisals, and Effects on Self-Concept" examine how people experienced "awe." Something that they noticed in their study was that "awe" is a hard term to clearly define due to the variability of people's experience with it. For some, they experience it in nature, for others in solitude, others experience it in works of art, others in rest, and others in their religious or liturgical practices. However, the definition that best encapsulates the experiences of their participants is a feeling that makes the individual feel a part of something larger than themselves. Shiota and Keltner continue by examining the differences between the participant's experience by concluding that:

If the state experience of awe is associated with state need for cognitive accommodation, then individuals who experience awe relatively often and/or intensely should also show

greater than average schema change. Dispositional awe-proneness should thus be associated with other measures of willingness to modify mental structures, whereas disposition to experience other positive emotions should not show this association. (946)

What is fascinating about this study is how it pushes back against the mindset of modernity that has infiltrated the Church, one of clear answers on tough questions, and codes of conduct for our behavior. This research suggests that the more we continue to open ourselves to change, continue to ask questions, and are actively learning and engaging, the more likely we are able to experience “awe” (946). Not only should our language throughout sermons be one that is continuing to push the congregation to reflect, ask hard questions, but the whole service should be modeling a posture of adaptability and growth. Thinking about how the notion of “awe” takes people outside of themselves, and helps them recognize their responsibility within the larger universe to care for others, it is important also that we write worship songs accordingly.

### **Church and Trauma**

As I am writing this, the United States and much of the world has been in over a month of federal lockdown due to the COVID-19 global outbreak. Unemployment has skyrocketed as businesses have had to close, and the vast majority of people are waiting for some hopeful news to break. Notions of freedom are being challenged by people denying the severity of the situation, and the emotional and physical wellbeing of many are fully dependent on a government that seems to be underreacting to the desperate cries for social aid. It is weighty processing the fear of loss, or the entirety of loss in our security, livelihood, and relationships. The questions that the Church must be asking during this time is how to care for masses of people who are experiencing fear, trauma, sickness, isolation, and death. Theologian, Brain

Bantum writes about the way that God is dynamically involved in unfolding times. He describes God not as “love” but as “loving,” emphasizing the constant and ongoing enactment of love that is the “rhythmic pulse” that moves around us. His argument can assist us as we are in a time of unknown territory. The ways in which we have previously engaged in the community, by necessity, must be changed in order for us to remain connected (Bantum).

Bantum argues, along with Marion theology, that “[a]nytime we have a rule definite to us, we slip into idolatry” (Bantum). Historically, the Church has been associated with horrible events as it has veered farther and farther away from the message of Jesus into one consumed by political gain, wealth, and power. Michel Foucault writes about structural power and the importance of naming how power oppresses individuals in some ways, For Foucault, it is through our rhetoric that creates structures of power that seek to individualize and separate human beings. The purpose of this is to strip our bodies of power and create "docile" people. (Foucault 137). The point of this work is not to solve how we can become the best form of Church, but to continue to recreate the ways we are the body of Christ so that we are supporting the people in their entirety so that the structure never masks the divine found in our bodies. Daniel L. Migliore, professor emeritus of Systematic Theology at Princeton University, wrote *Faith Seeking Understanding* over forty years ago spurring readers to continue to actively be engaged with their faith:

If we believe in God, we must expect that our old ways of thinking and living will be continually shaken to the foundations. If we believe in God, we will have to become seekers, pilgrims, pioneers, with no permanent residence. We will no longer be satisfied with the unexamined beliefs and practices of our everyday lives. If we believe in God, we

will necessarily question the gods of power, wealth, nationality, and race that clamor for our allegiance. Christian faith is not blind faith but ‘thinking faith’; Christian hope is not superficial optimism but ‘well-founded hope’; Christian love is not romantic naivete but ‘open-eyed love.’ (Migliore, 5)

Our global community and the Christian congregation must empathize with one another in the unpredictable waiting empathy as a way of resisting the isolation : the former waiting for the return of lives they've built and the latter waiting for the return of Jesus Christ. We must continue to notice God in our everyday reality within and among those who inhabit the world of what it means to be alive in this particular time, and help others do the same. Bantum says that “God is not truth, but is true.” (Bantum). As Christians, we are not participating in a stagnant and unchanging religion, but a one that has timeless flexibility in our ordinary experience. Our language must be purposeful, but not so limiting to confine the expansiveness of God. If we learn from Marion’s understanding, the icon *reveals* God. It is through encountering our neighbor as one to be loved and thus, as a gift from God, that we are met by God. Our language should be first and foremost a way of listening for what God has to say and to whom God is directing our ears, eyes, bodies and very lives towards the faces of human beings. What it means to be the Church is to be bursting with the abundant love of God which will naturally take place as people reveal God to each other. It is in this space that we are reenacting the life of Jesus as the full icon of God (Ross). What would have taken place all under one roof has now had to change because of the current times. Due to technology, we are able to experience in differing ways, the love of God in those around us. As we are in a time of global trauma, hope cannot be found in a nostalgic return to old systems. But the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity for the Church to



continue to remake and recreate the ways in which we support one another, speak to pain, and to describe the movements of God. So that the Church can continue to be adapting towards the call to uplift and care for humanity.

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On April thirteenth, Amanda and Keaton, two of my best friends, decided to live stream their wedding from their living room via Zoom. I was Amanda's maid of honor and when I heard they had decided to get married on that Wednesday I quickly went to put on my dress, and grabbed a potted plant as a makeshift bouquet. I logged on to see half of the people in fancy wedding garb, some of them with church sanctuaries set as their background, and the other half in sweatpants. It was a whimsical and different experience as grandparents struggled with muting and unmuting themselves, starting the camera, and at one point in the middle of the ceremony, one of them was yelling at their dog. I laughed so hard at this sacred makeshift-wedding in their living room. I cried with them and cheered as they kissed at the end of the ceremony. The following virtual-reception had some chit chat across Zoom. One of Amanda's brothers in the background was appropriately wearing a button-down shirt and pajama pants. The reception ended with one of her brothers doing impressive triple flipped crepes for the remaining wedding party. Everything about this casual and celebratory service felt incredibly beautiful and intimate. I was pulled back into the sacredness of the sacraments that reveal the heart behind ceremonies like weddings. Due to the fact that the usually expected wedding traditions like cakes, decorations, venues, and elaborate speeches could not happen, it welcomed authenticity, intimacy, and a holy moment.

As we are still in the time of social distancing and shelter-in-place, what it means to be a community has changed. We can no longer walk into spaces and stumble upon a community; we must remain intentional and work hard to keep up with those around us. Even if this has not been the case in someone's church before, bringing stories of grief, anger, and loss to the table can enrich and support congregants as we are in this difficult time of life collectively. In a time of deep sorrow and confusion, let us be speakers of hope as we continue to notice divine interaction around us. But also, let us be those who do not have to shy away from naming the suffering. Migliore argues that "...the starting point of inquiry for the Christian is not self-consciousness but awareness of the reality of God, who is creator and redeemer of all things. Not, 'I think therefore I am,' but 'God is, therefore we are'" (Migliore 5). It is in the openness to the movement of God that we can find how we ought to be living in our continual uplifting of our neighbors.

### **Seasons**

Church history is rich with different seasons within the cyclical liturgical calendar and it reminds us of the transition and change that continually happens within the year and with the passage of time. There are seasons for grief, for celebration, for remembrance, for anticipation and for the everydayness of life. Many contemporary churches have left the roots of using a lectionary in preaching or exclusively celebrate Easter and Christmas. But the danger of only having celebratory events is that you miss the Advents, the Lents, and Good Fridays. When we have a church that chooses to engage holidays and seasons that embrace the sorrow of life, those which are crying in desperation for God to come, we are welcoming a fuller understanding of human existence to enter into our church doors. There is not an expectation by any means of

perfection, but a life, like the church calendar of rises and falls, celebration, and utter hopelessness. There is space for every person.

### Lent

Similar to the lack of worship songs, I had a difficult time finding liturgy that had language that was justice-oriented. I continued to find lent confessionals that were more focused on particular and individual shortcomings rather than one that aimed at confessing corporate sin like neglect of neighbor, destruction of the earth, patriarchy, and many more. What my understanding of “Lent” comes from is a sermon by Pastor Brent Ross on Isaiah 58: 6-9 which talks about fasting in a different way that most people discuss Lent:

6 Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

and your healing shall spring up quickly;

your vindicator shall go before you,

the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. (*New Revised Standard Version*, Is.  
58.6-9)

The focus of Lent that I wanted to emphasize was one of sharing resources, in which fasting can mean fasting excess or comfort. The call for every day, but especially in Lent, is to realize the common humanness, the inevitable death that joins us together. Remembering that we are finite beings with an ongoing dedication to serve, care for others, and work to help liberate our neighbors from oppression (Ross, B.).

### Easter

The entire project began because I noticed that the majority of worship songs are written from a penal substitutionary atonement understanding of the cross. One which I believe is not sufficient if the goal is to cultivate a Christian culture of asking questions and exploration. German philosopher, Martin Heidegger believes that whenever we read, the text is always unfolding to us. The reality of God continues to reveal to us in new daily moments. The same is true of a foundation of faith, like the cross. The impact of the cross can change depending on the individual encountering it. For example, it wasn't until college that I learned that there are several different ways of interpreting the events of the cross. The one that speaks most to me, and what the church needs more songs representing, is found in the most influential theologian in my life, James Cone, who connects the cross with lynchings. Both Jesus and thousands of black men, women, and children died by mobs and were hung naked on a tree. The power of the cross for Cone is that Jesus is absolutely necessary for finding God in a time of loss, grief (Cone). It is here that God is in solidarity with those who suffer or who exist as forsaken ones (Ross). How

can someone reconcile faith when those who were professing “Christianity” were murdering human beings after their Sunday services? If we force the cross to be one fully mapped statement of faith, then the possible impact on lives is stunted. Who knows how the significance of the cross will continue to evolve in future historical events. If Cone had not connected those dots between Jesus being the first lynched man, if Howard Thurman had not reminded us of Jesus’ poor, incarcerated, non-citizen status, there would be fewer people aware of the possibility for space for them. They provide a helpful redirection to adopt the narrative of Jesus, who he was, and the implications of his life and death. Cone says in his introduction of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, “I believe this is a challenge we must face. What is at stake is the credibility and the promise of the Christian gospel and the hope that we may heal the wounds of racial violence that continue to divide our churches” (Cone xiii-xiv). Jesus is both a personal God who encounters us in our deepest pain, having experienced the full extent of suffering, and also calls us to pick up our own cross, journey in suffering, and bear each other’s burdens. This is the significance of the life and death of Jesus.

### Ordinary Times

Ordinary Times happens twice in the liturgical calendar year. Once right after Christmas until Lent, and the other after Easter until Advent. This is the largest portion of the year. I approached this season from a Heideggerian and Derridian lens, challenging people to live in daily, purposed life celebrating the Other. Within this season, the call should be to work towards liberation for all people. It is our life’s purpose on this earth; no matter what we do there is always more work to do. Let us celebrate in the unique particularities that each of us brings to

the table, recognizing the gift of one another, and work to open the doors and empower all who come in.

### Advent

Talking to a group of pastors at a liturgical retreat in the fall, I heard them mention several times that there are not enough songs about Advent. A song that has space to linger in the desperate need for a savior in a time of darkness. In Advent, we are reminded of the hope for us as we long for the second coming of Christ, so that when he returns everything will be made whole.

### Invitation

This is only the beginning of a conversation of flexibility and openness that Churches need to be having in order to continue to be a place of safety and significance for people. The following lyric book and four songs are my attempts at putting this into practice.

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