

“Does Holiness Theology Have a Future?”  
Henry Spaulding

## Response

by

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Once there was no secular. This is the startling statement of Jeffery Milbank, the theologian who leads the movement known as “radical orthodoxy.” What he means is quite simple; and it underlies Dr. Spaulding’s fine paper. Once Praise ruled the world. Once we had a hope, an ever-present teacher and friend, that inspired us actually to live as though Praise ruled the world and we were on a fantastic journey to the end of the world. Once we were caught up in the drama of Revelation 5; and we endured, occasionally even enjoying ourselves.

Now, unfortunately, praise is only the sidekick of a religious music publishing movement. Once praise reigned. It was subservient to none. It set the agenda for the world and was the master of all it surveyed; and so were its servants.

The thrust of Spaulding’s paper is an important footnote to Milbank’s work. Milbank notes that today theology is tragically all too serious, signaling how far it has fallen. With the end of the reign of Praise, theology ceased to be the fun God intended. We have lost the happy task of being pastors and theologians — world creators authoritatively speaking gospel truth and love into the present. Now we are at war — with worship, with ourselves, with our doctrine, and with our God. The first step in any cure is to acknowledge the dis-ease. Before we begin our journey to wholeness, we must cross some unfamiliar terrain.

Worship is the human response to the divine (Underhill), the fountainhead of all things theological and the end of all things, the rendering of ultimate worth to God. But more adequately, Christian worship is the re-presentation of our Lord Christ Jesus to the gathered faithful for a re-counting and re-rendering of all things. Worship is assembling for prayer, preaching, singing, eating, and bathing in Jesus’ name so that we may learn what is ultimately significant. Thus, worship has recognizable and repeatable forms that make it worship and not something else.

Worship makes theological reflection inevitable. The nature and character of God compel us to ask certain questions: What does this mean? What are the patterns and structures, the ordering of all this? Why do people gather from disparate places? Why are biblical texts read and enacted? Why do people sometimes bathe and at other times do not? Why is a meal given; and why does it seem only a fragment? Why do we do these things in the same space? How do the patterns of these things, repeatable and sacred, ritualistic and holy, make sense? What do these strange words have to do with us — anamnesis, epiclesis, oblation, amen? What is this all about? What do these things do; what are they good for? And what do they have to do with Jesus and ruling the world?

These are the questions theology asks. It inquires into the meaning of the liturgy — not scripted worship, but the work a congregation does to participate in a service, exercising their royal priesthood. Christian theology recalls the ultimate nature of Christianity, asking whether worship says something reliable about God. It elucidates the meaning of Trinity, holiness, worship, gestures, and ideas appropriate to the nature of God — what is fitting and right, doctrinally and doxologically for the ordered praise of God. Worship is hardly merely antiquarian inquiry. If it is true, theology is a call to worship, not just talking about worship; it is the sheer joy of praising God.

If the premise is true, then all who worship are theologians. Unfortunately, many are bad ones. This is why theology is tragically all too serious these days; and it is not the fault of theology or God! So we must acquire and hone the skills to interpret worship and, hence, life as the prayer and praise of God. And we must do so pastorally, so that we might re-create the world in which salvation is a present possibility for all who seek God.

The difficulty is that, although worship is relational, it has become crassly individualistic. We shop for a church to meet our needs. Like good consumers we seek to push all things toward their output and accumulation. This is sinful in Milbank's view because such activity necessarily detaches worship from its origins and aims. Worship is intensely personal, but if the personal exists only to enfold our pitiful little lives into the great adventure that is God, we become guilty of idolatry.

Is there any way out, any way past the wars? The answer is, of course, Yes. Hope is found in outward forms and old stories, rituals done for the sheer fun of it—to continue something that makes life worth living, to marvel, to get past explaining to the sheer joy of it all. The Gospels tell the story of a scandalous woman who had discovered the secret. Not counting the cost of her love, she poured money down the drain, bleeding perfume on Jesus' feet. She was roundly scolded for her lack of decorum, her inability to understand what it meant to do something really meaningful, like giving the poor some money. Jesus saw some vestige of God's extravagant future in her simple gestures — kneeling, loving, caring, bowing, adoring, worshipping; and he scolded those who had turned on her. Jesus, who was preparing to do something really extravagant for the poor, saw in her worship a nervy statement about God — real theology. Wherever and whenever worship occurs there is true blessedness. Once there was no secular.