

## What is Ecumenical Worship? (Part II)

When I interviewed at Yale Divinity School, the then dean, Rebecca Chopp, told me that she was looking for someone who would run Marquand Chapel as a laboratory. I told her in that case I was not the person for the job. I had participated in worship in various chapels that described themselves as “laboratories” and their rituals as “experiments”, and I felt they had insufficient regard for the checks and balances that traditions imply. The problem was that things could be tried without needing to be accountable to any community external to the school (whether conceived as a particular group of people or a heritage of practices or a set doctrines) and it seemed to me that, in theological education, students were meant to be formed for service in specific communities, with specific needs and histories. Without reference to those communities in chapel, how would students integrate their learnings in the chapel with church life once they graduated? How would they write theologies in ways that spoke to the shapes of the church?

While appreciating that part of the role of chapels in seminaries was to give students a space in which they were “free to fail”, meaning to learn how to plan and lead worship without the need for it to be perfect first time round (so, for example, learning which hymn to sing when, or learning how a presider’s body language affects everything – so don’t fold your arms while you’re inviting!), I did not think the laboratory analogy helped to convey that role. Indeed, I thought the laboratory analogy conveyed a different sense: it implied that there was never really a “wrong” way of doing things, only new ways, and I do believe that there are wrong ways of doing things in worship and that part of the job of a seminary chapel is to teach about them.

Of course, the “laboratory” metaphor is designed to highlight how there are many potentially wonderful ways of doing things that have yet to be discovered in Christian worship and I obviously agree with that. But I had too often heard it used to mean that chapel was a space in which worship was invented, where new things were tried out for the first time in a “let’s put *x* and *y* together and see what happens” way, and not in a “how can this serve the people in my church” way. New things must be tried in seminary chapels, just as they must in every congregation in the world, but if they are done free from the ties of heritage, without the checks of communal accountability, or without a shared sense that some things should not be done, they are not good training for church life, and this is why I did not relate to the word “laboratory”.

I also felt that a laboratory was not an appropriate model for a chapel in an ecumenical setting. As discussed in last week’s Reader, the sort of ecumenical engagement we are fostering in Marquand is not about liturgical innovation *per se*: it does not encourage people to pull something from nowhere and share it because it is new. It is not a carnival of liturgical practices, nor a smörgasbord of worship options, nor a place where the new is explored out of curiosity

about practices alone. It demands that leaders research their own traditions, choose a set of ritual practices from that tradition and then, in leading, open those practices up (usually just in the way they are performed, but sometimes by developing or adapting them) so that people who are not from their own tradition can participate in it or, at least, remark their points of tension with them.

This model is based on the wager that if Christians *do* more together, we will open up the possibilities for us to think more together. Often, indeed for most of its history, the direction of ecumenical change has been envisaged as moving in the opposite direction: *from* doctrine *to* practice.<sup>1</sup> However, as recent studies in liturgical theology have challenged us to assess, there is evidence in the early histories of the church east and west for moving *from* practice *to* doctrine, and the question has been asked whether and to what extent World Council of Churches might start exploring the doing of ecumenical worship as a resource for doing theology.<sup>2</sup>

Such a shift in momentum would require us to cease believing that we have to get all the thinking straight before we can do any action, and to start seeing thought and action, or doctrine and practice, as symbiotic. This means, of course, that adjustments will need to be made along the way: show me the Christian movement in thought or practice that got things right first time round? The peculiarity of an ecumenical chapel in theological education is that it can both teach the status quo (i.e.: this is where the various churches are on any issue doctrinally) while at the same time worshipping in the light of those doctrines in ways that have not necessarily been tried before. In this chapel, therefore, we are adjusting practices, not inventing them.

My brother Owen has worked in a laboratory all his life as a chemical engineer. He works for the “green” end of a multinational chemical corporation and over the past twenty years has helped to find the industrial substitutes for coolants and super-heaters. Now he is looking into paint and how its production could be less toxic. Listening to him talk this summer about the twenty-year long scope of his laboratory’s last project on thermals, and the projected scope of its next one on paint, it dawned on me that the colloquial use of the word “laboratory”, including in theological education, belies a profound misunderstanding of how real laboratories work.

The image of a laboratory as a large white room containing an individual person in a white coat endlessly experimenting by gleefully adding substance *a* to substance *b* to create the new substance *c* in a bubbling test tube is not only false, but is almost antithetical to how real laboratories work. Not unlike what we do in Marquand, real laboratories have very long time frames for accomplishing change, they are under constant scrutiny by the people who sponsor

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of how ecumenical dialogue has been dominated by such a projection, see William G. Rusch, *Ecumenical Reception: Its Challenge and Opportunity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 62f.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Teresa Berger, “Unity in and through Doxology? Reflections on Worship Studies in the World Council of Churches” in *Studia Liturgica* 16 (1986/87) 1 – 12. © Siobhán Garrigan, 2007

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them and to whom they are accountable (what they are producing has to be an accurate match for the need, and has to work when it is produced), they are environments in which risks must be taken but only with an extraordinary number of safety checks in place, and for any progress to be made they have to be constantly sharing their research with numerous other labs engaged in similar projects. They are collectives, and most of the day is spent in various rounds of communication with one's colleagues.

With this in mind, were I now asked to run a chapel as a laboratory, I would probably agree to do so, because Owen's multi-national green chemicals laboratory seems to me to be a fairly exact analogy for the ways ecumenical worship proceeds in the world.