

What's Needed at Christmas and in Every Other Season

Early in his career, the great American Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, spent 13 years as a parish minister. Then and thereafter, he often wrote about the state of worship in American churches. Any parish minister would be well advised to read his “Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic” and the relevant essays in “Applied Christianity.”

Once after attending Christmas services Niebuhr commented at length on his experience and impressions. Here's part of what he wrote: “I believe in the Christmas story. It expresses the idea that the great God of the universe has purposes which are relevant to [human] purposes. That is very difficult to believe. There is, as a matter of fact, a note of rational absurdity in the belief. Human values must achieve cosmic validity if any religion is to live. Yet there must be in this belief some suggestion of the mystery of life and of the majesty of the divine which transcends human life. True religion must therefore be conscious of the difficulty and the absurdity of the human claiming kinship with the divine. . . . If the divine is made relevant to the human it must transvalue our values and enter the human at the point where [we are] lowly rather than proud and where [we are] weak rather than strong.”

After celebrating the poetic truth of the Christmas story, Niebuhr expounds on the sermon given that day with comments characteristic of his thoughts about Christian worship more generally: “The world is in moral confusion partly because religion is not fulfilling its task of helping people to know themselves. How can we know ourselves if we do not scrutinize ourselves from the perspective of the absolute? That is how we learn how selfish we are. . . . We would know that to the end of history selfishness will clash with selfishness. Knowing that, we might be more ready for political programs which place a social restraint upon human egoism and we might also be more ready for a religion which plumbed the depths of life, and ceased to move merely upon the surfaces.”

Read more of Niebuhr to appreciate fully what vexed him most about Christian services. Were he alive today, he would likely be even more vexed. In this, Niebuhr knew that he was prone to arrogance, but he also understood that true worship requires humility.

I venture this summation of what Niebuhr found objectionable about so many worship services: they lacked the sense of worship. They were hardly what they purported to be. They were moralistic or platitudinous, self-congratulatory, incoherent, or merely trivial. Thus they failed to evoke the sense of awe, reverence, and humility that comes with seeing oneself in true perspective, in a world filled with a mystery and majesty for which there is no word save God – however one fumbles in giving definition or finding meaning for all that word may apprehend.

At its most profound, worship is acknowledgment and response, not self-generated but elicited, to what is recognized to be worthy of reverence, honor, or devotion. To worship is to give oneself over to a Goodness not our own – not in mindless sentimentality or irrational emotionality, not simply out of fear or guilt or shame, but because the ground on which one stands, or the pew in which one sits, or the place in which one has gathered with others, has become holy.

The Christmas story may be so presented that it moves us to such worship, and there are many forms of religious gathering that may do that, but in truth it doesn't happen nearly as often as we need.

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