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HOW SHOULD WE THEN BE FORMED?

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Terrorism and the Politics of Worship

Matthew Kaemingk

Dr. Matthew Kaemingk teaches theology, ethics, and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary. He is a newly appointed Fellow at the Center for Public Justice and author of the recently released book *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear*.

September 11 fell on a Tuesday. Five days later, on Sunday, September 16, millions of American Christians, shocked, angry, and grieving, filed into church.

The music began to play. Some were invited into the defiant and militant melodies of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “God Bless America.” Some were invited into a time of mournful silence, prayer, and reflection. Others just sang the same old songs as if nothing had changed at all.

Though things clearly had.

In the coming weeks, there were more than 700 violent crimes against Arab Americans.ⁱ Nearly 1,200 immigrants from Muslim countries were arrested.ⁱⁱ In the year following the attack, there were more than 1,717 documented acts of discrimination against Muslims—many more, of course, went undocumented.ⁱⁱⁱ In November 2001, Attorney General John Ashcroft announced that the government would conduct investigations of nearly 5,000 foreign Muslims living on American soil. By the end of 2002, more than 3,000 additional investigations had been announced.^{iv} In a 2002 poll of American Arabs and Muslims “Sixty-six percent reported being worried about their future in this country... 81 percent thought they were being profiled.”^v One quarter of American Muslims reported being the victims of discrimination.^{vi}

By 2006, 39 percent of Americans were in favor of requiring Muslims in the United States, including American citizens, to carry special identification.^{vii} “Thirty-nine percent of Americans believed

Muslims were not loyal to the United States, and a full third said that Muslims living in the United States were sympathetic to al-Qaeda.”^{viii}

A Failure of Preparation

Something had indeed changed in America. Were Christian citizens prepared? Were they ready to respond to these horrific acts in a faithful, wise, and Christ-like manner? In hindsight, the answer is clearly no. Christian citizens were complicit in many of these individual and institutional acts of discrimination, harassment, violence, and interrogation against Muslims. The church was not at all prepared for the trauma of 9/11—and it showed.

So, whose fault is this? It’s a complex question requiring a complex answer; many Christian leaders and institutions share the blame. However, for the purposes of this article, I want to point my finger at one rather unassuming group—*those called to plan and lead Sunday morning worship*. I don’t do this to be simplistic or cruel—my wife, a worship leader herself, would not permit it. No, I point a single finger to make a single point: *what Christians do together in worship has real political consequences*.

The political nature of worship is at the heart of James K. A. Smith’s excellent new book *Awaiting the King*, and this particular article is part of this larger series of articles responding to and expanding on his reflections regarding the formation of Christian citizens. My own work on Muslim immigration and Christian politics has been greatly impacted by Smith’s insights on this.^{ix} I will explore the formal connection between politics and worship in a moment, but first we should look at what is happening in American democratic culture right now.

The Cracking of American Democracy

“A healthy, pluralistic society requires more than simply... getting law and policy right... it also requires attention to the formation of agents and actors.”^x

- James K A Smith

The racist march and violent attack in Charlottesville this past year was yet another traumatic act of terror that struck at the heart of American democracy. That night, communities of color were terrorized by the public rage and later violence of white supremacy. The events in Charlottesville furthered solidified an already deep political and psychological divide between white conservatives and communities of color.

Whether it is 9/11 or Charlottesville, these and many other traumatic events in America speak to a growing sense that our democratic culture is beginning to crack—even crumble. Whether our differences are racial or religious, cultural or economic, those differences are beginning to overwhelm

us. In short, it is becoming harder and harder for American citizens to imagine, practice, or even desire a common democratic life together.

This crumbling of democratic culture has not escaped the attention of social and political theorists. In their book *Rethinking Pluralism: Ritual, Experience, and Ambiguity*, Adam Seligman and Robert Weller argue that modern liberal democracies are failing to properly prepare citizens for the challenges of life in diverse and divided political communities.^{xi}

The authors explain that, historically speaking, western democracies have always operated under the modernist assumption that national divisions and traumas can be fully understood and overcome through social-scientific study, impartial legal structures, and generous government programs.

Stepping back, the authors conclude that this modernist strategy for dealing with deep social divisions and traumas has fundamentally failed to respond to the raw complexity, mystery, and contingency of a life lived in a divided nation.

In short, there is no modern law, label, or governmental program that can help an American citizen fully comprehend or process the horror of 9/11 or Charlottesville.

Seligman and Weller argue the real citizens experiencing real division and trauma require something *more*. Rather than turning to a new idea, they return to something rather old, namely “ritual and shared experience.” Well-versed in the rituals of ancient Israel and ancient China, the two scholars explore a number of ways in which these pre-modern civilizations used both ritual and shared experience to navigate the challenges of deep national difference, division, and trauma.

Turning to contemporary democracy, they suggest that modern citizens increase their participation in a variety of shared public rituals, traditions, and experiences, so that they too may slowly begin to practice a common life together.

But, can the shared rituals of a city parade, a football game, a national holiday, or neighborhood block party really help divided citizens imagine a common life together? Taken on their own, I’m doubtful these rituals will have much of an impact. Taken together, I’m only slightly more hopeful.

But that is not the point. The larger point is this: democratic nations require thick and resilient democratic cultures—ways of life that can handle deep differences and weather deep traumas. But these thick democratic cultures do not just appear *ex nihilo*, they are slowly cultivated through a diverse and disconnected array of small experiences, rituals, and practices through which we can begin to imagine a life together.

The paradox is this: divided nations cannot manufacture the many practices, rituals, and experiences they need to overcome their divisions and traumas.

Smith states it this way. “In short, liberalism needs to face some difficult questions: Where does a generic, ‘secular’ liberalism provide... a space for citizens to acquire the dispositions of tolerance, humility, and patience?... Does a liberal pluralist society have what it needs to be what it wants to be?”^{xii}

The Politics of Worship

So, if not from the government, from whence will these small democratic experiences, practices, and desires come? How can we begin in small ways to imagine and practice a life together?

As a Christian, my mind cannot help but turn to worship and the ancient spiritual disciplines of the church. For 2,000 years, these are the ways in which Christians have been preparing themselves for a life amidst a world of pain, strife, and death. The sanctuary has historically functioned as a sort of gymnasium for the soul—a place in which a Christian’s heart is humbled and heartened, chastened and formed, strengthened and sent. As the early church argued, wise and mature Christians are not born, they’re made.

I should note that worship has been and can be used to deform Christian citizens. Over the past 2,000 years, Christian worship has prepared Christians for nationalism and war, racism and segregation, consumerism and selfishness. However, while the destructive and deformative potential of worship is a critical phenomenon to examine, I’d like to reflect on the constructive and formative potential of worship *over time*.

A mature and wise Christian heart, one that can respond well to the national traumas of 9/11 and Charlottesville, is not one that is created overnight. Such formation takes time. It takes practice. *It takes worship*. Through the thoughtful design of weekly worship, Christian citizens can be trained to resist the politics of fear, to humble their political agendas, to respond well to trauma, to reach across divides, and to seek and pray for the flourishing of their diverse and divided neighbors. This is what James K A Smith means when he argues that the sanctuary can be a place “where we learn what a *polis* should look like.”^{xiii}

How can worship do this? I offer these six ways.^{xiv}

1. **Intercessory Prayer:** In times of national trauma and division, citizens are often tempted to seek first their own security and welfare. Intercessory prayer offers worshippers a weekly opportunity to reach beyond themselves to intercede with God for the healing and flourishing of their neighbors—even their (perceived) enemies. Week after week, this practice can slowly help worshippers

see that *they too* must join God in reaching out, healing, and blessing across those divisions and traumas.

2. **Bodily Action:** National traumas and divisions often inspire a bodily posture that is closed off to difference and danger. Such a world can train us to assume a fighting stance, arms folded, hands clinched, eyes narrowed, chin up in pride, or hung in shame. Congregations can begin to train bodies with a different posture for living in a divided and dangerous world. Worship asks us to open our fists to receive, open our arms to embrace, bow our head in humility, and raise our head in dignity and hope.
3. **Language Training:** National traumas and divisions teach us to use words as weapons, to blame, label, divide, attack, and degrade. Congregational worship can train us to use words that humble us, that ask for help, that seek understanding, that wrestle with pain and mystery, that thirst for reconciliation and hope.
4. **Illumination:** In a divided and fast-paced political culture, there is an urgency to shout out the answer, to be the one who knows. In the prayer of illumination, worshippers are forced to admit that we don't know everything, that we see through a glass darkly. Here, Smith notes, we "are training ourselves in a stance of reception and dependence, of epistemic humility. This position recognizes that in order to see things for what they really are... we are dependent on a teacher outside of ourselves (1 John 2:27)."^{xv}
5. **Confession:** Identity politics is currently the order of the day. At its best, it is a tool for the oppressed to insist on their humanity and worth in the face of crushing dehumanization. At its worst, identity politics mutates into a divisive wall that blocks out dialogue and assumes that one's own identity, pain, power, and independence are the only things that matter. The Sunday practice of confession scandalously and disruptively decenters our identities. It reminds us that while we have placed our identity, our pain, and our power at the center of the universe this week, God alone belongs there.
6. **Benediction:** The final benediction is both a blessing and a charge. "You are blessed," we say, Christ is in you, with you, for you, behind you and before you. Therefore, *because of this blessing*, you are charged to go out and live in a way that honors Christ, you are charged to go into the traumas and divisions of the world in the spirit of Christ's love, grace, and mercy.

The benediction speaks to the profoundly political nature of the entire worship service. It declares that what the congregation has sung, practiced, declared, embodied, confessed, prayed, and learned now has a profound public consequence for their lives. "Go!" we are told. Go and bind up the wounded, bridge the divides, heal the trauma, and weather the storm—not by your power but by the power that lives in you.

But we must have patience. Worship works on us slowly—very slowly. A congregation’s response to falling skyscrapers and marching racists will be determined much more by the three thousand prayers they prayed before the trauma than by three they offer after it has already happened. The failure of American Christianity to respond well to the trauma of September 11 was not the result of poor worship planning on September 16. It was the result of poor worship planning for the entire decade that preceded 9/11. Worship leaders in the 1990s failed to ready their people to face division, hatred, and fear well. Instead, they fed Christians a lethal cocktail of sugary sentimentality, individualistic spirituality, and self-help songs and self-empowerment songs. It is no surprise that Christians were incapable of treating their Muslim neighbors with the grace, mercy, and love of Jesus Christ; they weren’t trained on Sunday to do so.

Worship leaders, therefore, have a critical public and political responsibility. They do not tell people how to vote the night before an election. They play the long game. Over years and years, they play a critical role in preparing disciples to follow Jesus into a divided and traumatized world.

Those people sitting in the pews are not simply vague and abstract “worshippers.” Within twenty-four hours, they will enter a divided and traumatized *polis* serving as teachers and lawyers, doctors and managers, activists and academics, police officers and politicians. These worshipping citizens need songs, prayers, and postures that they can bring with them into dark and divided spaces, liturgical rhythms that will stick with them as an ever-present reminder that God’s justice, hope, and healing is more real than the darkness that surrounds.

Conclusion

So, how will our democratic culture be sustained? How will it endure these divisions and traumas? The secular political theorist Jeffrey Stout hopes that democracy will be renewed as citizens engage in practices of democratic dialogue and exchange. For Stout insists that the life-giving springs and streams of democracy and solidarity “are in us and of us.” *We the people*, he argues, can nourish ourselves. *By ourselves*, we can replenish and renew our democratic solidarity “as we engage in our democratic practices.”^{xvi}

Those who enter the Christian sanctuary speak differently. They speak of a thirst they cannot quench. They speak of a flowing stream they do not control—a life-giving spring that has overcome the power of death and division. Raising Christ’s cup, they drink from a spring that does not originate from within—but from without. This spring flows strong, not with water, but with the blood of Christ.

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ⁱ Charles Kimball, "The War on Terror and Its Effects on American Muslims," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Islam* eds. Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (Oxford University Press, 2015): 501.

ⁱⁱ Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2004), 38.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2004), 38.

^{iv} Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2004), 38.

^v Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 364.

^{vi} Liyakat Takim, "The Ground Zero Mosque Controversy: Implications for American Islam" *Religions* 2, (2011), 135.

^{vii} Liyakat Takim, "The Ground Zero Mosque Controversy: Implications for American Islam" *Religions* 2, (2011), 135.

^{viii} Christian Joppke and John Torpey, *Legal Integration of Islam: A Transatlantic Comparison* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 123.

^{ix} James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting The King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017). A much more comprehensive exploration of these issues can be found in "Worship and Pluralism" a chapter in my new book *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in An Age of Fear*. Matthew Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018). Both there and here I draw heavily on the groundbreaking work of Nicholas Wolterstorff, Richard Mouw, John Witvliet, and James K A Smith.

^x James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting The King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 145.

^{xi} Adam Seligman and Robert Weller, *Rethinking Pluralism: Ritual, Experience, and Ambiguity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

^{xii} James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting The King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 146.

^{xiii} James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting The King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 148.

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^{xv} James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 194.

^{xvi} Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). 308.