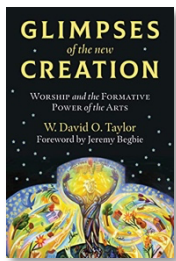


[Review] *Glimpses of the New Creation: Worship and the Formative Power of the Worship Arts*, by W. David O. Taylor



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As a missionary serving at Kyushu Lutheran College in southwestern Japan, my role as the sacred music director for chapel services requires a careful introduction of hymnody. The unusual demographic of our chapel worship attendees—primarily non-Christians—means that any time a traditional instrument with cultural connections to Buddhism or Shinto is considered for incorporation, an important discussion regarding its appropriateness must unfold. At a recent religious affairs meeting, we wrestled with whether to incorporate Japanese *taiko* drumming into our morning chapel worship. Following this meeting, I read W. David O. Taylor's book *Glimpses of the New Creation: Worship and the Formative Power of the Arts* and was pleasantly uplifted and grounded in how to consider my personal query within the wider discussion of global arts and their role(s) in worship.

In *Glimpses*, Taylor draws the reader into a world in which the power of the arts to form humanity into a relationship with the Creator through worship is described from both a 10,000-foot and the eye-to-eye perspective. The primary aims of the book are to examine how the arts inform worship and, more importantly, how engaging with arts forms worshipers. Central to his thesis is that “a Trinitarian theology must always govern our understanding of the liturgical arts,” meaning that “the arts in worship are caught up in the movement of Christ to enable creation to become a dynamic theater of God's glory by the power of his Spirit” (240).

Beginning with the 10,000-foot perspective, Taylor draws from the work of scholars and theologians to establish a framework of worship that provides the stage for his discussion about the particularities of the arts. Recognizing that such a conversation requires sufficient breadth to cross many denominational expressions of Christian worship, Taylor lands on the following parameters:

In worship the faithful bring their whole humanity, alongside the whole people of God, in proclamation, prayer, and praise, before the presence of the whole Godhead for the sake of the whole world. (36)

Believing that “all art in worship should be seen as a vehicle for the formation of God's people in Christ” (47), Taylor generates a discussion about the various ways in which the arts powerfully contribute to that theological formation through aesthetics, logic, language, metaphor, conversations, and senses, among other dimensions. One unique way Taylor frames his discussion is by casting art as an *active participant* in God's work

within the corporate worship experience, rather than as a passive object that is merely a peripheral decoration of a worship experience.

Using the phrase “God’s economy,” Taylor posits that both creation and culture-making play central roles in humanity’s formation, and that it is through a Trinitarian view of culture-making that one can begin to understand the theological affirmations that arts provide. Drawing from the work of academic trailblazers in Protestant missional theology, Taylor synthesizes divergent denominational and missional perspectives into a tightly cinched narrative about the import of arts as servants of the Word.

The primary substance of the book examines six broad categories of arts wherein humanity has the potential to be formed within the context of worship, including the musical arts, visual/architectural arts, and theater arts, as well as the less frequently recognized narrative arts, poetic arts, and kinetic arts. In these chapters, the rich and bold character of Taylor’s research unfolds. Chapters are organized in a consistent format whereby the broad art form is described, followed by theological perspectives and biblical mooring regarding that art form. Taylor then shifts his attention to the minutiae, looking with laser clarity at what he calls the “singular powers of the arts,” how each art form serves corporate worship, and the formative powers of each art form in a worship context. Comparing apples to oranges (or architecture to narrative arts) might seem impossible, but this format allowed the author to show the consistent patterns for understanding the place and role of arts as they serve the Word and help build deep and formative meanings for worshippers.

Supported by quotes from a vast array of theologians and practitioners, Taylor pulls together the wisdom from both historical and contemporary perspectives. With such a range of artistic mediums that are employed throughout the global church, Taylor was wise to use the term *Glimpses* within his title, as it would have been challenging to go very far into the description of one artistic medium without comparatively leaving other areas less well-attended.

While there were no apparent deficiencies or areas that should have been addressed in the book, a few areas might give rise to a second volume or extension of this work. The first area would be *how* church leaders tend to convey representation, metaphor, and meaning when art is a recognized part of worship. For example, Taylor makes a compelling argument that much of art speaks for itself with formative agency through its singular powers. One does not necessarily need to explain how the art should or could augment worship. However, many congregations have limited ideas about what constitutes art, perhaps thinking of art only as beautiful things to look at or music to hear or sing. Worshipers are left to derive their own meaning from these things.

Without a shared understanding of the role of arts and the implied meanings, the sense of collective worship is potentially diminished. Those who are not savvy or experienced in the processes of applying metaphor may miss a great opportunity to experience heightened worship. Gestures used in worship, the poetry of scripture or lyrics, narrative arts, or even the font used in a bulletin or on a projection screen are not widely perceived as art, *per se*. However, the explicit identification of those areas as exerting influence on one’s experience of worship could give ministry teams or worshipers the opportunity to imagine more deeply how God uses the myriad of earthly conduits to serve the Word.

These ideas give rise to an important question: Whose responsibility is it to identify and exegete those artistic expressions that are more nuanced, and what are the best ways to bring those ideas to folks sitting in the

pews of a church? Or perhaps the question needs to be asked about whether one *needs* to explicitly teach about the role of arts in the formation of worshipers, or whether explicit teaching somehow robs an art of its inherently personal nature.

Last, as one who works in Japan with many art forms that could fall within many of the categories that Taylor identifies, I believe a brilliant extension of *Glimpses* would be to reference traditional arts found within the global church that have either already been incorporated or have the potential to be integrated into worship. In Japan, for example, the cultural arts of *ikebana* (flower arranging) and *shuuji* (calligraphy) are easily recruited to serve the Word. But many other cultural treasures of performance narratives, such as *noh* and *kabuki* (stage drama), *koshiki* (recited dramatic performance), and *jojuri* (puppet theater), are not used robustly in worship or Christian education. What specific art forms in other global communities are being recruited to serve the Word, and what potentialities exist? For those serving in areas where Christianity is perceived as a Western import, it is valuable to understand the creative work that occurs in other cultures, as it often informs how we can convey a broader sense of the body of Christ.

Did Taylor answer my question about whether *taiko* can or should be used in a worship service? Not explicitly. However, I do feel better equipped to wrestle with the question. His book is a wonderful contribution to the intersection of arts and worship and is replete with new ideas that ethnodoxologists and worship leaders can consider in their professional spaces. As leaders, we fundamentally understand that “the practice by which the moral imagination is formed, the principal form of discipleship training, is worship” (166). Offering non-Christians an opportunity to participate in worship practices that have been codified over two millennia requires us to consider how best to nurture the cultural identities of the communities we serve. We must balance the extent to which we retain historical identity concomitantly with our desire to bring fresh understandings of God’s creation to our community.