Worship as adoration and action: reflections on a Christian way of being-in-the world.

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Worship as Adoration and Action: 
Reflections on a Christian Way of Being-in-the World

MIROSLAV VOLF

One of the most significant accomplishments of the Protestant reformation was overcoming the monastic understanding of the relation between the life of contemplation (vita contemplativa) and life of action (vita activa). Almost five centuries later, some important segments of Protestant Christianity (especially of the evangelical brand) are still caught in the false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular and are operating with a pre-reformation understanding of the relation between (what they term) spiritual worship and secular work. In the context of the reflection on the Christian understanding of worship, it is important therefore to recall Luther's rediscovery of the Christian calling to active service of God in the world and to reflect on its biblical roots.

The monastic understanding of the relationship between contemplation and action is rooted in the Greek philosophical tradition. Contemplation of the unchangeable order of things and of its divine origin was the highest possible human activity; it was considered the activity of the divine in human beings. Practical involvement in the world, though important, was inferior to contemplation. The influences of Greek reflection on this issue on Christian spirituality and theology were strong and are easily observable, for instance, in Thomas Aquinas (though he was not the Christian theologian who adhered most slavishly to the Greek tradition on this point). For him, practical involvement in the world had no intrinsic value. The ultimate reason for secular work lies in making the contemplation of God possible. Work keeps people alive by providing 'for the necessities of the present life' so that they are able to contemplate God and it 'quiets' and 'directs' the internal passions of the soul thus making human beings more 'apt for contemplation'. Like Mary, those who can devote themselves to a life of contemplation of God (monks and nuns) have chosen 'the good portion'; like Martha, the rest who work for the maintenance of earthly existence must settle for the second best.
Martha's work is not bad because it is a means to a good end. But Mary's contemplation is much better, because it is good in and of itself.

Together with the discovery of the merciful God who justifies sinners through faith alone, Luther overcame the medieval bias in favour of the contemplative life. This can be best seen in his views on Christian vocation. He came to believe that all Christians (and not only monks as was thought before him) have a vocation and that this vocation is twofold. The one vocation he called spiritual. It consists of the call of God through the proclamation of the gospel to enter the kingdom of God. The other vocation he called external. It consists in the call of God to serve God and fellow human beings in the world. For Luther, work in every profession - growing potatoes, proclaiming the gospel, governing a state - rests on a divine call. And if God calls to every type of work, there can be no hierarchy of human activities. Contemplation and action are fundamentally of equal value, because God calls to both. Once Luther dismantled the hierarchy of activities, the way was open for the belief that one can equally honour God in all dimensions of one's life, provided that one obediently does the will of God.

Luther's understanding of Christians' active life in the world is no less biblical than his teaching on justification by faith. He acquired both beliefs in the school of the Apostle Paul. On the basis of his message of justification by faith, Paul wrote in Rom 12:1f: 'Therefore I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.' As J. D. G. Dunn points out, Paul here transports the notion of worship 'across a double line from cultic ritual to everyday life, from previous epoch characterized by daily offering of animals to one characterized by a whole-person commitment lived out in daily existence'. There is no space in which worship should not take place, no time when it should not occur, and no activity through which it should not happen. All dimensions of human life are the 'temples' in which Christians should honour their God - the God who created the whole reality, and the God who desires to redeem it. In his essay in this book David Peterson has rightly emphasized that the understanding of worship as 'daily obedience or service to God in every sphere of life' is not peculiar to Paul but permeates the whole New Testament.

The liberation of worship from the cultic constraints of sacred space and time was, of course, not an accomplishment of the New Testament writers. They inherited and radicalized the Old Testament perspectives on worship in the light of the salvific work of Jesus Christ. As is well known, Hebrew has a single word to denote activities we have come to designate as work, service, and worship. In the first chapters of Genesis we read that God created human beings in order for them to serve God, not simply in the realm of the cult, but explicitly in the realm of the culture. Human beings serve God by doing 'worldly' things, like tilling and keeping the garden of Eden (see Gen. 2:15). Correspondingly in the proclamation of the prophets we encounter the stress on worship in the sphere of ethical responsibility. They stressed that...
the true worship consists not simply in the participation in cultic activities but
in doing justice: 'Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the
chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free
and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry, and to
provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe
him, and not to run away from your own flesh and blood?' (Isa. 58:6–7; see
Amos 5:21–24; James 1:27).

II

Luther's rejection of the monastic hierarchy of contemplative and active life
was a result of a profound spiritual and theological insight. The new
perspectives on involvement in the world were, however, not acquired in a
social vacuum but were closely tied to a larger cultural movement of his time.
It will suffice for my purposes here to enumerate some of the striking features
of this transitional period in European history (without analyzing in detail
each of them separately and their interrelations). In economic life, feudalism
was in a state of collapse and a new, much more dynamic social order was
being formed in which craftsmen and merchants would play the dominant
role. In the political arena, the givenness of social structures was being called
into question and the insight was emerging that these structures had been
made by human beings and could therefore be altered by them. In relation to
general culture, the Renaissance humanists were closing the gap between the
sacred and the profane. In the sphere of intellectual pursuits, philosophers
had boldly proclaimed the new experimental philosophy in which the
researcher, who actively forced nature to reveal its truths, replaced the
speculative scholar, who was satisfied to contemplate the truth. Together
with the affirmations of sola scriptura and of the priesthood of all believers,
Luther's critique of monastic contemplative life and the rediscovery that
God's calling pertains also to secular forms of activity is part and parcel of the
one cultural movement infecting economics, politics, science, and theology
alike. The movement marked the birth of modernity.

There is much talk today about the economically developed societies
entering into a phase of post-modernity. The future will decide whether an
epoch-making cultural shift is in fact taking place. In any case, activistic
modernity still has a firm grip on our social and private lives. Despite a chorus
of voices critical of Western culture the dominant goal of this culture still
remains 'to know everything in order to predict everything in order to control
everything.' And although we are increasingly aware that technological
rationality is incapable of steering the powers unleashed by technological
advances, our technological successes ensure that the altar flame in honour of
the god of technology is kept burning.

In this situation, it is increasingly difficult for Christians to hold seriously to
the belief that God governs history and that the salvation of the world can, let
alone must, come from God. And the more God is pushed out of our world —
out of the spheres of nature, of society, and of individual human beings — the
more difficult it will be to address this loving God in prayer and thanksgiving,
and to stand before this holy God in awe and reverence. 'When the modernizing reason has harnessed all the facts, figures and forces... prayer, worship and reliance on the Holy Spirit, along with humility and the sanctity of things, are out of place. Technique is all.' Technological culture does not deny God (it is not atheistic), but it makes God superfluous (it is a-theistic) and thus cuts off the worship of God at its roots. For adoration of a superfluous God is a religious impossibility. Where technique reigns, talking to God gives way to talking about God (or even to talking about talking about God!), reverence is replaced by manipulation, and joyous celebration of God's acts and God's character degenerates either into self-congratulatory praises of human vain-glory or into oppressive demands for better and greater deeds.

Some modern theologians seem to think that it is their task to make a virtue out of our cultural predicaments. It is to be expected that the modern suppression of the contemplative life would be given a theological version too. Summarizing the argument developed in *Marx and the Bible*, J. P. Miranda — who is in this respect not typical of liberation theologians — claims that 'God can only be known and approached through moral conscience.' This is the case, claims Miranda, because 'God is God solely in the nonobjectifiable interpellation through which God's commandment is enjoined.' To claim to know or to be able to approach God directly would mean reducing God to an object. From this it seems to follow that every supplication and every thanksgiving turns God into an idol, that every liturgy is idolatry. Miranda absolutizes the prophetic critique of the cult, and proclaims the ethically responsible (social) action as the only true worship of God. The monastic hierarchy in the relation between contemplation and action has been inverted: the subordination of the active life to the contemplative life has given way to a total suppression of the contemplative life by the active life.

There is an important truth in Miranda's position. A person cannot worship God and oppress his/her neighbour at the same time. Cult without justice is no worship of the true God but detestable idolatry (see Isa. 1:11–17); true worship is impossible without doing justice, indeed it consists partly in doing justice. But can worship be reduced to action — whether that action is ethical, evangelistic or both? The biblical tradition affirms clearly the independent significance of adoration of God as a form of worship. I am not thinking here so much of the fact that the prophets do not call into question the cult as such but its misuse as justification of social oppression. For Christian theology this is of limited significance, because the New Testament clearly states that the ministry of Christ is the fulfilment of the priesthood and cult associated with the old covenant. But the songs of exuberant praise to God in the Psalter are certainly a model for Christian worship. The hymnal of the old covenant people of God remained the hymnal of the Christian church. As Hattori states, the grand symphony of praise to God in Psalm 150 is a very appropriate finale for all the praises of God in the whole Psalter. The Psalm is the call to the whole creation — to everything that has breath — to give praise to God for God's mighty deeds and exceeding greatness.

In the New Testament we find the new people of God adoring God with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (see Eph. 5:18f.). The early Christians worshipped God not only through their obedient service in the church and the...
world, but by their celebration in response to God’s mighty deeds of salvation as well. Luke portrays the earliest Christian community as full of joy, with lips full of praises to God (see Lk 24:52–53; Acts 2:26–47). Throughout the Revelation the heavenly beings and the heavenly church are portrayed as worshipping God and the Lamb (Rev. 4:8ff.; 5:9–10; 7:10; 15:3ff.; 16:5–7; 19:1–9). The different aspects of worship mentioned in Revelation – ‘rejoicing in God, giving him the glory and praising him’ – are clearly meant to be paradigmatic for the churches on the earth as they are facing godless economic and political powers desiring to crush them.

III

Christian worship consists both in obedient service to God and in the joyful praise of God. Both of these elements are brought together in Hebrews 13:15–16, a passage that comes close to giving a definition of Christian worship: ‘Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.’ The sacrifice of praise and the sacrifice of good works are two fundamental aspects of the Christian way of being-in-the-world. They are at the same time the two constitutive elements of Christian worship: authentic Christian worship takes place in a rhythm of adoration and action.

Why does Christian worship need to branch out into action and adoration? What is the reason for this biformity of worship? In what follows I will try to answer these questions.

First, why cannot worship consist simply in active life in the world? Why does adoration need to take place as a distinct activity beside action? Because God did not create human beings to be merely God’s servants but above all to be God’s children and friends. As much as they need to do God’s will in the world, they also need to enjoy God’s presence. The centre of Christian life consists in personal fellowship of human beings with the Son of God through faith. Adoration is a time when this personal fellowship, which determines the whole life of Christians – their relation to themselves, to their neighbours and nature – is nurtured, either privately or corporately. This is the reason why human beings ‘need periodic moments of time in which God’s commands concerning their work will disappear from the forefront of their consciousness as they adore the God of loving holiness and to thank and pray to the God of holy love.’

Second, why can we not make the adoration of God our supreme goal, and be satisfied to consider action in the world simply a necessary consequence of adoration? Because the world is God’s creation and the object of God’s redemptive purposes. Christian hope is not for the liberation of souls from the evil world, but for the redemption of human beings together with the world with which they comprise the good creation of God. The material creation is not a scaffolding that will be discarded once it has helped in the construction of the pure spiritual community of souls with one another and with their God; material creation represents the building materials from which, after they are transfigured, the glorified world will be made. This is why worship can never
be an event taking place simply between the naked soul and its God. It must always include active striving to bring the eschatological new creation to bear on this world through proclamation of the good news, nurture of the community of faith and socio-economic action. Fellowship with God is not possible without cooperation with God in the world; indeed cooperation with God is a dimension of fellowship with God.

As Christians worship God in adoration and action they anticipate the conditions of this world as God's new creation. Through action they seek to anticipate a world in which Satan will no longer 'deceive the nations', a world in which God will 'wipe away every tear' from the eyes of God's people, a world in which peace will reign between human beings and nature. Through their adoration they anticipate the enjoyment of God in the new creation where they will communally dwell in the triune God and the triune God will dwell among them (see Rev. 21-22). The eschatological bliss of God's people in the presence of their God and the eschatological shalom of God's world are two inseparable dimensions of Christian eschatological hope. It is this two-dimensional hope that makes Christian worship into a two-dimensional reality.

Adoration and action are two distinct aspects of Christian worship, each of which is valuable in its own right. The purpose of action is not merely to provide material support for the life of adoration. The purpose of adoration is not simply to provide spiritual strength for the life of action. When we adore God, we worship God by enjoying God's presence and by celebrating God's mighty deeds of liberation. When we are involved in the world, we worship God by announcing God's liberation, and we cooperate with God by the power of the Spirit through loving action.

Christian worship is bivalent. But do its two components stand merely side by side or are they also positively related to one another? I will return to this question after I consider the relation between adoration of God and seclusion from the world.

IV

I have argued that adoration is an activity distinct from involvement in the world. It would seem that as a distinct activity adoration requires distinct space and distinct time. If that is the case, are we not then back at the notions of sacred space and sacred time, which I have discarded earlier?

Does adoration need to take place in seclusion from the world? The answer to this question depends on where God is to be found. It is a consistent teaching of the Bible that God's presence is not limited to a particular locale. God is present in the whole created reality. No segment of it is secular in the sense that the transcendent God is absent from it. All dimensions of life in the world have what one might call a sacramental dimension: they can be places of meeting God in gratitude and adoration. This is why the New Testament can ascribe redemptive significance to such an ordinary event as the table fellowship amongst Jesus' disciples: a meal can be an occasion for an encounter with the risen Lord. Furthermore, if God is present in all of the created reality, then the soul ceases to be the privileged place for meeting
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God. We do not need to turn away from the world and search into the depths of our soul to find God there. Adoration does not require seclusion; indeed it is provoked by the apprehension of God's presence and activity in the world.

Still the New Testament does speak of taking time to go to a 'secret' place (Matt. 6:6). The 'secret' place should not be confused with 'sacred space', however. It stands for the cessation of active involvement in the world, not for the exclusion of the profane reality. Every place can be a 'secret space', and every moment a time reserved for God. But if we want to escape the tendency to dissolve the holy into the secular, which seems to be the danger of affirmation that the holy is not restricted to particular places, then we need to reserve special time for the adoration of God, whether it means going to the 'secret place' (as Jesus advised), spending a night in the mountains (as Jesus practiced), or gathering together in Jesus' name as a community of believers. The point of the talk about the rhythm of adoration and action is to preserve profane reality as a meeting-place with the holy God, not to reintroduce the division between the sacred and the profane.

But does not the very act of adoring God, wherever it takes place, involve turning away from the world toward God? Even if we affirm the possibility of meeting God in the profane reality, do we not reduce this reality to a mere vehicle for encountering God? I will start answering these questions by noting the distinction between adoration and contemplation. As distinct from the modern way of knowing by which we manipulate things in order to grasp them, contemplation is a passive way of knowing by which we behold things as they present themselves to us (theoria). Its passivity notwithstanding, contemplation is a way of knowing things and truths, not persons. You can contemplate the works of a person, but you do not contemplate persons themselves; you know them by talking to them and letting them talk to you, by doing things with them. Seeing the persons (and touching them) is important, but only as a part of this conversation and cooperation which constitute our common history.

Since God is neither an a-personal truth nor anaesthetic shape, contemplation is not appropriate as a way of relating to God. Adoration is. To adore God is not simply to behold the truth, goodness, and beauty of God in a disinterested way, but to affirm one's allegiance to God by praising God for his deeds in creation and redemption. The contemplation of God's works (like beholding the grandeur of creation or meditating on the passion of Christ) is a presupposition of adoration. But to adore is not to look at God, but to talk about God and to God inspired by God's works in the world. This, however, means that turning to God in adoration does not entail turning away from the world; it entails perceiving God in relation to the world and the world in relation to God. The songs of praise to God are at the same time the songs about the world as God's creation and a place which God will transform into a new creation. And the songs about creation and redemption can be nothing else but songs about God the Creator and Redeemer.

Authentic Christian adoration cannot take place in isolation from the world. Because the God Christians adore is engaged in the world, adoration of God leads to action in the world and action in the world leads to adoration of God. Adoration and action are distinct, but nevertheless interdependent activities. So we need to investigate further the positive relationship they have to each other.
What is the significance of adoration of God for action in the world? We can answer this question best if we reflect on the nature of doxological language. At one level, in adoration a person is stating what is the case; he or she is describing God's action (e.g. 'he has condemned the great prostitute [economic and political power of Babylon] who corrupted the earth by her adulteries') and God's character (e.g. 'true and just are his judgments' [Rev. 19: 2]). There is no adoration without such description. But the actual point of adoration lies deeper than description. In thanking, blessing or praising God, a person expresses his or own relation toward the God he or she is adoring: joyous gratitude for what God has done and reverent alignment with God's character from which God's actions spring forth.

It is here that the significance of adoration for action becomes visible. First, by aligning with God's character and purposes in adoration one aligns oneself also with God's projects in the world. By praising God who renews the face of the earth and redeems the peoples one affirms at the same time one's desire to be a cooperator with God in the world. Adoration is the well-spring of action. Second, in adoration a person names and celebrates the context of meaning that gives significance to his or her action in the world and indicates the highest value that gives that action binding direction. In the pantheon of the modern world, adoration identifies the God in whose name one engages in action. Without adoration action is blind and easily degenerates into a hit-or-miss activism.

The dependence of action in the world on the adoration of God shows that the frequent disjunction found in cerebral and activistic Protestant circles between adoration and edification is inadmissible. As Psalm 119 shows, instruction in Torah could take place in doxological language. For Paul too, psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs were simultaneously expressions of adoration and a means of instruction and admonition. Every authentic adoration is instruction, because it celebrates God's deeds and God's character, and expresses at the same time commitment to the God it celebrates. The inverse is also true. Every authentic Christian instruction is adoration. Instruction in faith which does not include (at least implicitly) adoration is deficient: it communicates knowledge without transmitting corresponding allegiance. Protestant theology (evangelical theology included!) on this point needs to learn from Eastern Orthodoxy which, in addition to maintaining that there is 'no mysticism without theology', has stressed 'above all' that there is 'no theology without mysticism'.

What is the significance of action for adoration? In order to answer this question we need to look briefly at the nature and the purpose of Christian involvement in the world. Christian action is nothing less than cooperation with God. As Genesis 2 vividly portrays, there is a partnership between the creating God and working human beings. Just as in Genesis a farmer is a co-operator of God, so Paul thinks of missionaries as 'fellow workers of God' in God's field (1 Cor. 3:9). Whether it consists in evangelism or mundane work, human activity is a means by which God accomplishes God's purposes in the world. If God's deeds in the world open the hearts and mouths of people to praise God, then human action, which God uses to accomplish God's purposes, must do the same: the purpose of evangelism and good
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works is the well-being of the people and of God's whole creation. And the integral well-being of God's world is the occasion for praise (see 2 Cor. 4:15; Matt. 5:16; 1 Pet. 2:11). Christian action in the world leads to adoration of God. Action establishes conditions in which adoration of God surges out of the human heart.

But there is also another sense in which action is a precondition to adoration. There is something profoundly hypocritical about praising God for God's mighty deeds of salvation and cooperating at the same time with the demons of destruction, whether by neglecting to do good or by actively doing evil. Only those who help the Jews may sing the Gregorian chant, Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly said, in the context of Nazi Germany. Only those who are actively concerned with the victims of economic, political, racial or sexual oppression—who are doing 'the significant something'—can genuinely worship God. Without action in the world, the adoration of God is empty and hypocritical, and degenerates into irresponsible and godless quietism.

VI

The distinction between action and adoration (just like the old distinction between action and contemplation\(^2\)) is not a distinction between activity and passivity, but a distinction between two forms of human activity. Action designates deeds that are directed toward the world, adoration designates words and symbolic actions that are directed toward God. This is why the writer of Hebrews can describe both the action and the adoration as 'sacrifices': the one is a sacrifice of good works, the other a sacrifice of praise (see Heb. 13:15–16). As sacrifices, action and adoration are something human beings give God. This is why both can properly be called 'worship.' For worship is something human beings owe God: in worship they are the givers, and God is the receiver.

But our arms are lifeless and our mouths dumb if God does not give them strength and facility of speech. We can give God only what we have first received from God. Reception is, therefore, a third dimension of Christian life that is even more fundamental than action and adoration. In distinction to the traditional two-dimensional understanding of Christian existence (vita activa and vita contemplativa), Luther rightly stressed that vita passiva is an additional dimension of Christian life, which underlies both Christian theory and practice.\(^3\) At the foundation of Christian life lies passivity. Christians are receivers at the point when the beginning of the rebirth of the whole cosmos takes place in their new birth by the Holy Spirit (see John 3:3; Matt. 19:28; 2 Cor. 5:17). And the new life is sustained and flourishes only if they continue to be receivers throughout their Christian life. The rhythm of adoration and action must be embedded in the larger rhythmic phrase consisting of Christian passivity and activity.

The passivity of Christian existence can be described as receiving the Spirit by faith (which marks the beginning of Christian life: see Gal. 3:2) and being continually filled by the Spirit (which marks its continuation: see Eph. 5:18ff.). The secret of the whole Christian life is passivity in relation to the Spirit of God. For the Spirit is the source both of adoration (5:18–20) and of action (5:21–6:20).