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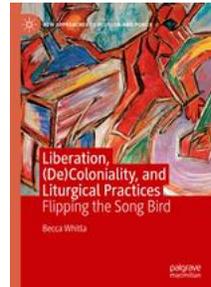
Book Review

Liberation, (De)Coloniality, and Liturgical Practices: Flipping the Song Bird

Becca Whitla

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

What we sing matters. So does how we sing it. Our denominational hymnals bear witness to more than two thousand years of people singing their faith, in a range of cultures and contexts. But in the course of this history, it is possible for us to lose sight of musical meaning, to forget the reasons why people sang in the first place and the way this impacts why we sing today. Such is the reason for *Liberation, (De)Coloniality, and Liturgical Practices: Flipping the Song Bird* by Becca Whitla. A practical theologian, Whitla is currently Professor of Pastoral Studies at St. Andrew's College in Saskatoon, where her work engages not only music, but liturgy, preaching, and religious education. In this book, Whitla draws extensively on her own experience as a liturgist and song leader over the course of more than four decades to understand the ways in which congregational singing can embody a liberating praxis of liturgy — and the many ways in which it so often falls short. Laid out in eight chapters across two hundred and sixty-four pages, *Liberation, (De)Coloniality, and Liturgical Practices* covers a great deal of ground. It is founded primarily on Whitla's practical experiences. As a result, her methodology is heavily influenced by liberation theology. She calls it a “liberating praxis”: action and reflection *for* transformation (p. 6), using it along with decolonial and postcolonial frameworks in order to develop her analysis and argument.



Following an introductory chapter, Whitla lays out three seminary chapel services in which she participated that illustrate the challenges with enacting a liberating model of congregational singing. The strengths and weaknesses of these services serve as a reference point for the subsequent analysis in which she reflects on song and song leading, calling for them to be “contextual, accountable, and liberating” (p. 17) in the subsequent three chapters. First, Whitla reflects on her own story and context, locating herself within both the Canadian colonial legacy and contemporary enactment of coloniality. This first step frames the entirety of the book, as she constantly reminds us that singing can and should be a *locus theologicus*, a concrete expression of theology. As a result, Whitla calls again and again for individual and communal interrogation, to untangle the stories and embrace what has been forgotten — especially those elements of our story that have been willfully cast aside.

Thus, she is especially interested in the ways in which the Victorian British Empire has influenced our hymnody. The fourth chapter provides an extensive description and study of Victorian hymnody, especially in English-Canadian denominations such as the Anglican Church of Canada and The United Church of Canada. Hymns such as “Jesus Shall Reign,” “Onward Christian Soldiers,” and “Lift High the Cross” — hymns that are still sung today — bear the unmistakable stain of British imperialism. Though many of these hymns have been “sanitized” for our singing today, their histories have not been unmasked, such that many of us remain unaware of the harm they have caused, and continue to cause. This lingering and subtle form of colonialism — what Whitla calls “musicocoloniality” (p. 112) — is particularly dangerous to our congregational singing.

Nevertheless, the fifth chapter also reveals the ways in which oppressed communities have sung back against the empire, while suggesting ways in which others can also engage in the struggle. Whitla draws heavily on decolonial and postcolonial notions of mimicry, epistemic disobedience, and hybridity to reveal the ways in which hymns have especially been translated to overturn their original imperial theologies. It is also the opportunity to reflect on how song leaders and communities can enliven other ways of knowing (and singing) to challenge the hegemony of the Protestant Victorian hymn, imbuing liturgy and song with a liberating praxis.

Liberation, (De)Coloniality, and Liturgical Practices does more than simply unmask the empire in hymnody. In fact, Whitla frequently reminds us that she does not advocate the rejection of these hymns outright. Rather, she desires that our consciousness be raised to the issues present in our collective song. By interrogating the contexts and meanings behind our singing, we might yet be able to expand our imaginations to embrace other ways of knowing and encountering the world. A liberating praxis of song takes us to the border places in which we are most at risk of being rendered uncomfortable, but where we have the greatest possibility of encountering the Holy Spirit. Whitla witnesses to the powerful way in which the Spirit provokes us, invites us, and coaxes us “to confront the reality of the world in an eschatological mode; we sing the ‘not yet’ – what is to come – of God’s future while living in the ‘already’ – what is – of our present reality” (p. 159).

Our work of unforgetting our own stories and the stories of our institutions, and our unmasking and dismantling of coloniality, means that we may not only be liberated *from* but also liberated *for* that which God intends (p. 231). Whitla calls us to conversion, as individuals, congregations, and institutions, to embrace “other ways of knowing, being, doing, and feeling” (p. 202). By turning toward the Spirit, we may yet encounter the disruptive, subversive, and wonderful breath of life that leads us beyond the unyielding edges of the Eurocentric norm. Though this book primarily examines congregational singing, it is clear that there are vast implications for this liberating praxis. What are the impacts for liturgical leadership? How will we engage with symbols, vestments, and ritual practices like processions? How will this change our preaching, our teaching, and our hospitality? But especially, how does a reshaping of liturgical practices have an impact on our ministry to and with the world? We can only glimpse answers to these questions in the pages of this book, even as Whitla challenges us to dream of – and sing – the possibilities. For now, Whitla calls us to be transformed and to transform, not only in the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of our singing, but especially in the ‘how.’ So, how will we, as people of faith, gather with one another and sing?

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