

Berakah Response

Liturgical Studies on a Planet in Peril: Reconceiving the “Cosmic” in Worship

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Thank you, Nathan, for your lovely introduction.¹ Thank you, North American Academy of Liturgy and especially NAAL President Kimberly Belcher, for this Berakah Award. Thank you, all of you, for being here. And a particular thank you to those colleagues who traveled across the Atlantic for this NAAL annual meeting.

I wish to acknowledge, before delving into this Berakah Address, that I have long considered after-dinner speeches to be a lofty form of academic torture. In case you share this view, I have embraced three strategies for tonight to help alleviate feelings of affliction. First, I aim to limit my time to no more than half an hour of speaking. Second, I will not read to you, since this would come too close to the performance of bedtime reading. Instead, I will speak more freely, from notes. Third, my accompanying PowerPoint is less focused on information, and instead aims to be a visual invitation. Many of the images you will see invite you to encounter members of my primary worshipping community. This primary worshipping community encompasses everything created within the Quinnipiac River Watershed, home of the Quinnipiac and other Algonquian-speaking peoples, a region now known as the State of Connecticut. Think of the images you will see on the screen as akin to a visual congregational roll call. Fittingly, this congregational roll of all creation as it surrounds me in my specific location begins with a photo of a praying mantis, one of my favorite fellow worshippers.

With that, I am already in the heart of my presentation tonight, which centers on the epistemic transformation required as we both worship and practice the schol-

1. I wish to acknowledge here what I did not think appropriate to acknowledge publicly at the Berakah Award dinner itself on January 4, 2025, namely, the immense gift that Nathan's Introduction was to me. I knew that Nathan had had to videotape his message in a hospital room (with all that that meant), and he was already visibly marked by the illness that would take his life only eight weeks after the Berakah Award night. I will forever treasure the fact that Nathan took on the labor of introducing me, and the deep thoughtfulness, profound generosity, and delightful wit with which he fulfilled this task.

arly labor of liturgical studies on a planet now clearly in peril. My particular focus, for this epistemic transformation, will be on the need to re-conceive the vision of who constitutes the worshipping assembly. To put the argument as succinctly as possible: We must widen our vision, as scholars of liturgy, beyond the ritual lives of human earthlings. Essentially, this will mean to reconceive worship within a vast, multi-creaturely assembly of everything called into being by the Creator who alone is God. This multi-creaturely assembly of everything created is the only true ground of a cosmic vision of worship—a vision that in liturgical studies has often been thought of primarily as a human-and-angelic endeavor.

How to get to such a reconception of what is “cosmic” in worship? How to render my claim intelligible, and legible within the knowledge protocols of liturgical studies? I begin the attempt at an answer with where liturgical studies has often begun, namely with a liturgical text. In this case, it is a text—and a theology of worship in it!—proclaimed whenever Eucharistic Prayer III is prayed at a Roman Catholic Mass today: “All you have created rightly gives you praise.”² The priest-presider addresses God with these words upon the conclusion of the *Sanctus*, which, as scholars of liturgy love to stress, situates the gathered assembly in a grand communion with heavenly powers, angelic hosts, and all the saints. Not infrequently, this claim is couched in the language of a cosmic dimension of worship. The prayerful affirmation that follows the *Sanctus* in Eucharistic Prayer III, however, vastly expands this (supposedly cosmic) communion beyond the heavenly and human realms, into a truly cosmic, that is, an all-encompassing vision: “*All* you have created rightly gives you praise.”³ In other words, everything created—“*omnis a te condita creatura*” (as the Latin original has it)—constitutes the primary and ultimate worshipping assembly. This is a challenging theology of worship indeed, challenging because if we follow its lead, any human gathering for worship must be envisioned within this larger assembly of everything created, that is, within the whole cosmos. Concretely this means, for example, that the *ecclesia orans*, the praying church, beloved subject of the 20th-century Liturgical Movement, must be reconceived as a part of, and indeed embedded in the primordial worship of God by all that exists. Worship here comes to be understood as a posture of all creation, and of human beings as creaturely kin with everything that is. Obviously, such a vision of worship puts pressure on what human worshippers—never mind scholars of liturgy!—typically think of as worship, or of what it means to “go to church.”

2. *The Roman Missal: English Translation according to the Third Typical Edition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 650. The (failed) 1998 English Missal translation rendered the Latin phrase as “all creation rightly gives you praise,” simply following the earlier translation of the 1975 edition of the Sacramentary for Mass. The 2011 English-language Missal with its decidedly Latinate style followed the original Latin text more closely. In the Spanish-language Missal for the U.S. Church, *Misal Romano, tercera edición*, the text reads “y con razón te alaban todas tus criaturas.”

3. Emphasis mine.

With this challenge before us, I want to do two things in the time that remains. First, I will offer some glimpses from within the (Catholic) liturgical tradition of this theme. Secondly, I will ponder why liturgical studies has not foregrounded this theme more strongly, or, to put this differently, why both our practices of worship and our scholarly field have been so deeply anthropocentric in modern times.

A clarification is necessary to begin with. The desire to unearth a cosmic, primordial view of worship certainly is called forth at least in part by contemporary realities, namely life and worship on a planet in peril. This peril is human-made, no less. In light of this reality, I consider it critically important today to re-center worship in a reality that did not emerge only when *Homo sapiens* evolved from hominid predecessors around 300,000 years ago. Such a narrow vision of worship as a dialogue primarily between God and human beings seems deeply troubling given the world we live in. Equally troubling is the fact that we, gathering as liturgical scholars and practitioners, do so in the United States of America, the biggest carbon polluter in history.⁴ This country pumps more crude oil than any other country in history. And it continues to be the largest perpetrator of greenhouse gas emissions, when measured per capita. Worst of all, ecological steps in the right direction over the previous four years are currently being undone, and that at a truly atrocious pace. As scholars of liturgy mostly based in the U.S., we cannot and must not greenwash the location in which we live and work, but rather name it, own it as a part of our social location, and lament. One way, as scholars, to name and own our location is to re-think, intentionally, the origin story of worship we tell today, and to begin again *in principio*, with the dawn of time, when the morning stars began to sing.⁵ And lo' and behold, as we seek to re-tell this origin story of worship, we encounter Christians of pre-modern centuries who knew this origin story quite well. It is our "modern" worldview that has forgotten much of this story.

Here are some glimpses of a genealogy of a vision of worship in communion with everything created. This vision is traceable in Jewish and Christian sources since earliest times. The conviction that everything created worships the Creator God is clearly present in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., in Gen 1, where the cosmos is imaged as sanctuary; in Gen 2, where the garden of Eden appears as a holy place; in Psalm 148 where all creatures form a double choir praising the Creator; and in the creation story embedded in Job 38). The same conviction also comes into sharp view in the New Testament in the hymns embedded in the book of Revelation (Rev 4-5). The vision of worship in communion with everything created is expressed at length and with particular power in a text found in the Greek additions to the book of Daniel (Dan 3:57-90). This text comes to be known in the Christian tradition

4. Details, for example, in this article in the *New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/01/climate/us-biggest-carbon-polluter-in-history-will-it-walk-away-from-the-paris-climate-deal.html>.

5. See the third creation story of the Hebrew Bible, embedded in Job 38.

as a prominent liturgical text, the *Benedicite*. I here highlight the *Benedicite* in particular, not only because I cherish this text but also because not everybody may be familiar with its stunning invitation to praise. The text, after all, is relegated to the so-called Apocrypha in other than Catholic and Orthodox Bibles.

The *Benedicite* opens by calling on everything created, the “works of the Lord,” to bless the Creator God: *Benedicite, omnia opera Domini, Domino*—“Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord” (Dan 3:57).⁶ In the book of Daniel, this clarion call to worship issued to all creation does not emerge from within a sanctuary or even a beautiful garden, but rather from within a fiery furnace, human-built to devour and to destroy. It is hard not to see resonances here with the contemporary ecological crisis. Planet Earth, after all, is warming rapidly around the globe, and this global warming is fueled by human activity, above all by intensified carbon dioxide emissions. But back to the ancient text. Here is a quick look at the multi-creaturely round of worshippers called upon to praise God in the *Benedicite*’s congregational roll call:

The heavens; and the angels of the Lord
the waters that are above the heavens
sun and moon; and stars of heaven
every shower and dew; and all winds
fire and heat; cold and chill
dews and hoar frosts; frost and cold
ice and snow; nights and days
light and darkness; lightning and clouds
the earth
mountains and hills; everything growing from the earth
seas and rivers; fountains
whales and all that move in the waters; fowls of the air
beasts and cattle; human beings
Israel; priests of the Lord, servants of the Lord; spirits and souls of the just; holy men
of humble heart; Ananias, Azaria, and Misael.

I note that the *Benedicite*’s list of worshippers is clearly ordered. First come the elements above: angels, the heavens, waters above the heavens, powers, sun and moon, and stars of heaven. These are followed by elements that are weather-related and/or time-stamped, e.g., shower, dew, winds, fire and heat, nights and days, light and darkness. The third part of the list turns to all that is on Earth, while the fourth part calls specifically on human beings to find their place in this all-encompassing praise of the Creator. What Richard Bauckham has stressed about Psalm 148 applies to the *Benedicite* too: The fact that human beings are named at the end

6. Biblical references are from the *New American Bible*, Revised Edition (Charlotte, NC: St. Benedict Press, 2008).

of the invitation to praise suggests that there is a cosmic praise of God that human beings are called to enter into and to join.⁷

The knowledge of worship as a multi-creaturely endeavor flows quite naturally from the Jewish into the emerging Christian tradition. Thus, for example, both Psalm 148 and the psalm-like text in Dan 3 occupy places of prominence in early Christian liturgical patterns, in daily prayer as well as in sacramental practices. And witnesses to worship as a multi-creaturely endeavor continue well beyond the reception of biblical texts. Tertullian's *De Oratione*, a treatise on the Lord's Prayer, offers an example from the turn of the third century. At the end of his treatise, Tertullian writes in his succinct Latin: "*orat omnis creatura.*" That is, "all creatures pray," or, "the whole creation prays."⁸ Tertullian, in fact, lifts up the prayer life of animals in order to call his human audience into more consistent and deeper prayer. He emphasizes:

The whole creation prays. Cattle and wild beasts pray, and bend their knees, and in coming forth from their stalls and lairs look up to heaven, their mouth not idle, making the spirit move in their own fashion. Moreover the birds now arising are lifting themselves up to heaven and instead of hands are spreading out the cross of their wings, while saying something which may be supposed to be a prayer.⁹

The same conviction, without Tertullian's implicit shaming of human worshippers, appears in other early Christian texts, e.g., the so-called *Apostolic Tradition*, the Anaphora of St. James, and the baptismal *Catecheses* of Theodore of Mopsoestia. It is sounded again and again in hymnic texts, such as the *Phos Hilaron*. This ancient evening hymn culminates in an acknowledgement of the worship of everything created, although this often ends up lost in translation: "therefore, the cosmos glorifies You" (Διὸ ὁ κόσμος σὲ δοξάζει).¹⁰ To mention only one additional example from the early centuries, and it is a particularly lovable example to me, Ambrose of Milan claims in his *Hexameron* that even dragons give praise to the Lord.¹¹

7. See Richard Bauckham, "Being Human in the Community of Creation: A Biblical Perspective," in *Ecotheology: A Christian Conversation*, ed. Kiara A. Jorgenson and Alan G. Padgett (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 15-47, here 44.

8. Tertullian, *De Oratione* 29. Latin text and English translation in Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Tract on the Prayer* (London: SPCK, 1953), 40f.

9. Tertullian, *De Oratione*, 29.

10. Translation mine. John Keble's well-known translation of the hymn into English, "Hail Gladdening Light," is problematic at that point. The "cosmos" is rendered as merely "all the world." The text is widely available; I quote it here from *The Heart in Pilgrimage: A Prayerbook for Catholic Christians*, ed. Eamon Duffy (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, rev. ed. 2014), 73.

11. See Ambrose of Milan, *Hexameron*, II.4.17. English text in St. Ambrose, *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, transl. John J. Savage, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* 42 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1985).

The theme of worship as a multi-creaturely endeavor continues to be present in the Christian tradition. It is best known of course from the life of St. Francis of Assisi, although the poverello deserves to be rescued from the exceptionalism that is regularly forced upon his creation-attuned spirituality. The attention given to St. Francis' creation-attuned spirituality also often occludes the doxological thrust of this spirituality. Take only the famous passage in Thomas of Celano's first *vita*, written a couple of years after Francis' death in 1226. Thomas of Celano narrates the story of Francis preaching to the birds. In this passage, however, Thomas records not only that Francis preached to the birds, but also that Francis encouraged all creation to praise the Creator. This is a key part of the story that often remains untold. Thomas of Celano writes:

Among many other things, he [Francis] said to them: "my brother birds, you should greatly praise your Creator, and love Him always." ... After the birds had listened so reverently to the word of God, he began to accuse himself of negligence because he had not preached to them before. From that day on, he carefully *exhorted all birds, all animals, all reptiles, and also insensible creatures, to praise and love the Creator.*¹²

The conviction that everything created praises God continues to sound even after the dawn of modernity, although the sites where this sound can be heard begin to contract. And with that contraction noted, I move to a brief look at our scholarly field, liturgical studies, which emerges precisely at the same time as this contraction becomes quite noticeable.

You might wonder, as I have done: Why has the understanding of worship as a multi-creaturely endeavor largely been occluded in modern times? Why did scholars and practitioners of liturgy in modern times so intently focused on worship as an encounter between God and "man," or, more recently: human beings? Why were all created others, also called into worship, buried under the weight of modern assumptions of who counts as a liturgical subject? Granted, in Catholic liturgy at least, the angels and archangels, and all the hosts and powers of heaven continue to be acknowledged as worshipping subjects,¹³ even if at a somewhat cloudy distance, conceptually. All other creaturely beings, however, with whom human earthlings cohabit on this planet—think only of the sparrow and the swallow that nest in God's temple (Psalm 84:4), or the bees that are hymned in the *Exsultet* in the Easter Vigil—were no longer registered as ritual subjects and active participants in worship. More broadly still, most other created elements known to bless the Creator in the *Benedicite*, such as the sun, moon, and stars, fire and heat, ice and snow, mountains and hills, were relegated to the realm of poetic extravagance.

12. Thomas of Celano, "The Life of Saint Francis," in *The Saint*, vol.1: Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, ed. Regis J. Armstrong et al. (New York: New City Press, 1999), 171-308, here 234; emphasis mine.

13. This is true not least in several of the Prefaces in the current Roman Missal in their lead-up to the *Sanctus*. More on this in Joris Geldhof, "Fruit of the Earth, Work of Human Hands, Bread of Life: The Ordo Missae on Creation and the World," in *Full of Your Glory: Liturgy, Cosmos, Creation*, ed. Teresa Berger (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019), 245-265, here esp. 254-257.

My particular suspicion is that the 18th-century context in which the scholarly field of liturgical studies emerged shaped this field with a decisive loss from sight of the created universe as the work of the Creator, and therefore as everything created turning to the Creator in thanksgiving and praise. That loss had been on the horizon since early modernity, but for liturgical studies, this meant a focus on human beings as the central subjects of scholarly attention just as the field emerged as a scholarly subject in its own right. Liturgical studies, with its inception as a university-based discipline in the 18th century, clearly was shaped at a time of heightened focus on the human subject and its (supposed) autonomy. The scope of what mattered in worship shrunk at that point in time. Not only angels, arch-angels, and demons but also celestial luminaries, planets and stars, animals, and other life-forms receded into the background. Culturally, this was also a point in time when Enlightenment thinkers sought to delineate strict boundaries between rational faith and science on the one hand, and practices of popular piety and so-called “magic” on the other. Did thinking about liturgy too readily embrace its own identification with the side of rational faith, and with the anthropocentric focus that is its companion? Post-modernity and post-secularity have weakened the interpretive power of these quintessentially “modern” assumptions, but in liturgical studies at least, modern conceptions of the self and the world continue to hold sway. Now well into the 21st century, however, the “modern” subject, at least as a workable construct, is no more. Quintessentially modern construals of the self, and with them, images of a self that is stable, bounded, and self-determining are dated. Moreover, what happens to the perceiving human subject today when there are startling new revelations of perceiving subjects other than human ones?¹⁴ Think only of new insights in the last few months. We now know that elephants call family members by specific “names,” that is, sonic markers. And we have discovered that distressed plants send out ultrasonic lament signals that then make moths lay their eggs elsewhere than on the distressed plant. We also are increasingly aware of the limited perceptual powers of human beings. For example, human earthlings do not perceive electric fields that some other animals perceive. And we do not have 360-degree vision. The dragonflies with whom I co-habit in my bioregion do. Moreover, the sensory weaknesses of human perception shape our cognition throughout life. They also shape any construal of “facts,” since what human beings perceive as real is shaped by how we perceive and know in the first place. In light of all this, one may ask why contemporary theological and liturgical studies would not want to know, and would not want to re-think their own relentless and largely unquestioned privileging of the worshipping human subject?

Much more obviously needs to be said on that topic (and I hope that the book I am currently working on will do precisely that¹⁵), but for now, I conclude with three thoughts.

14. One book in particular has made waves in this regard: Ed Young, *An Immense World: How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms Around Us* (New York: Random House, 2022).

15. The book-in-progress is simply entitled *Benedicite* for now. I hope to complete the manuscript early next year.

First, I simply wish to lift up the deep joy that comes with expanding notions of worship and of who counts in, as part of the worshipping assembly. I myself have certainly found both deep joy and joyful hope in immersing myself in the inter-creaturely worshipping community that surround me. I can only invite you into the experience of that larger communion, with the caveat that this is nothing that renders itself available in an instant. It requires much patience and attentiveness, dispossession of some key unwritten mantras of our field, and openness to sustained epistemic transformation. The concept of “guesting”¹⁶ helps along the path of such transformation, as I continue to ask: How do I experience myself as guest within the worship of all creation? And how do I myself guest the primordial worshippers, who have been at the labor of worship so much longer than I have?

A second point concerns the reality of our life on a planet on life support. We urgently must attend to the question of how to worship in the face of rapidly increasing environmental devastation. And we must do so now. Scientists are unsure whether we have not already passed the tipping point for a sustainable future. Have we faced that reality in whatever we think of as “worship planning”? Surely, our capacity to lament within and for creation will have to grow exponentially, and at least as fast as melting glaciers and rising sea levels.

Finally, a note on the scholarly work of liturgical studies on a planet in peril. Liturgical studies may at first glance seem like the least practical, least effective, least decisive way imaginable to counteract ecological devastation, bleaching coral reefs, dying rain forests, disappearing species, drought, and noise pollution. However, upon second thought, what if at the heart of the created universe does indeed live the worship and praise of the Creator? And what if everything created finds its fulfillment in turning to this Creator God in worship? And what if such praise—even when emanating from a “mutilated world” (as Polish poet Adam Zagajewski¹⁷ has famously described it)—is precisely what will endure, beyond time? Then indeed, turning to worship, and the scholarly discipline of liturgical studies, centers everything else. And we of all human earthlings are the most blessed, because we dedicate ourselves to that knowledge. With that in mind, let us learn anew to say, with the three youth in the fiery furnace: *Benedicite, omnia opera Domini, Domino*.

16. See Kimberly Hope Belcher, who draws on Craig Satterlee’s reflections on “liturgical guesting,” in her “The Work of a Reconciling Academy: Apprenticing Ourselves to Our Broken Liturgies,” *Proceedings of the North American Academy of Liturgy* (2024), online at <https://proceedings.naal-liturgy.org/index.php/naal/article/view/6/36>.

17. Adam Zagajewski, “Try to Praise the Mutilated World,” translated by Clare Cavanagh. Text available online at Poetry Foundation: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57095/try-to-praise-the-mutilated-world-56d23a3f28187>. Known as the 9/11 poem, “Try to Praise the Mutilated World” was initially published in *The New Yorker* post 9/11, but it was actually written before the events of that day.