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Andrew M. McCoy

Hope College, mccoya@hope.edu

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Why Geographers Should Study Christian Congregational Song

Andrew M. McCoy, Center for Ministry Studies, Hope College

(co-authored project with John D. Witvliet, Calvin College)

Worship through congregational song has been studied—with attention to both texts and music, both practices of composition and reception— using a variety of methods, and by practitioners of several academic disciplines including musicology, theology, sociology, ethnography, and social and intellectual history—*with relatively minimal engagement with geography*. Meanwhile, cultural geographers have cultivated a rich body of studies of geography of music (Carney, 1990, 1994, 1998; Nash & Carney, 1996; Leyshon et al., 1995; Waterman, 2006; Duffy, 2009) with little engagement with Christian congregational song. **Here are some reasons we believe singing in worship matters for geographical research...**

Because Congregational Songs Reflect and Shape Perceptions of the Physical World and Geopolitics.

- Descriptions of the physical world often feature significantly in collections of congregational song.
- Congregational song identifies those gathered for worship in terms of location. Worshipping communities come to know *who* they are, at least in part, by singing about *where they are* and *where they are not*.
- Recent movements towards global perspectives on hymnody aim to incorporate critical reflection on various aspects of Western hegemony alongside increasing appreciation for cultural diversity and plurality within the self-understanding of all worship communities and their liturgies.
- Recent trends in congregational song also locate the church amidst ongoing ecological concerns for the global environment.



Because So Many Practices of Congregational Singing Are So Closely Identified with Geographic Location.

- Patterns of worship practice take shape and particular bodies of literature take root, not only along theological or sociological lines, but also in terms of place. Congregational song may become explicitly identified by or linked with a certain region (for example, Appalachian folk hymns), nation (for example, Sibelius' tune FINDLANDIA), or type of geographic location (for example, urban hymns).
- Connecting songs with places not only affects how people perceive music, but also how they perceive the potential and meaning of specific places or landscapes. A hymn like "I Come to the Garden Alone" affirms gardens as places for divine encounter, but might also unwittingly suggest that urban streetspaces are not, a tendency that is similar to, and possibly reinforced, by country and western music's tendency to picture cities as places of exile, isolation, and even godlessness (Wood & Gritzner, 1990).



Patterns of Use and Reception Confirm Perceptions of What Locations Are "Central" and What Is "Peripheral" in Religious Experience.

- Just as moviegoers perceive Hollywood to be the center of the film industry, so too those who engage in shaping congregational song have a sense of being oriented elsewhere. This orientation can be reinforced by theology, politics, church polity or the economics of the "worship industry."
- Many Hebrew Psalms evoke Mt. Zion, the temple space in Jerusalem, as a place of orientation (Maier, 2008; Miller, 2010). Much more recently, the influence of Pentecostal "praise and worship" on contemporary congregational song emulates the structure of Israel's temple through a pattern of worship that presents a figurative progression from the outer gate into the inner sanctum of the Holy of Holies (Music, 2001:7).
- Spirituals associated with 19th century American slavery have been used differently over time to describe, in terms of location, the struggle for and movement towards freedom. (think "If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me.")
- North American congregations locate their musical practices in relationship to places like Nashville (known for its substantial Christian recording and publishing industry), Detroit or Memphis (cities with long histories of association with blues and black gospel).



Because Patterns of Use and Reception Confirm, Shape and Sometimes Resist Patterns of Immigration, Diffusion, Colonization and Colonialism, and Globalization.

- Congregational song and associated practices often become central to the identity of immigrant communities, helping them negotiate their sense of displacement.
- Issues of power, money, globalization, and colonialism. "Onward Christian Soldiers"—has contributed to Western colonialism throughout many parts of the world (Glover, 1990: 441; Doughty, 2005; Jagessar & Burns, 2008). Yet Groody (2007: 216) also describes congregational song as possible resistance to problematic aspects of colonialism and globalization: "Music is one of the primary ways through which the liturgy is inculturated, and it is often one of the ways in which oppressed groups in particular resist the cultures that dominate them."
- Critical examination provides impetus for growing movements of hymnody which reincorporate indigenous instruments and musical practices back into Christian liturgical practice in non-Western contexts (See I-to Loh, *Sound the Bamboo*, 2011).

Because Hymns Frequently Draw Upon the Elements of the Physical World as Metaphors and Mental Models by Which People Construe Other Realities.

- Congregations might sing of mountains as a place of order and protection or disorder and terror. Examples include metaphors for public proclamation ("Go Tell It On the Mountain"), isolation ("Out on the Mountain, Sad and Forsaken"), places of mystical encounter and/or political power ("Jesus, Lead Me Up to the Mountain").
- Bodies of water, likewise, may provide images of danger, or abundance, or even both simultaneously. Rivers, for example, can be understood as barriers ("There's a Land Beyond the River"), meeting places ("Shall We Gather at the River"), and icons of redemption ("I've Got Peace Like a River"; "There's a River of Life").
- Melodies, rhythms, and harmonies can reinforce these themes either through explicit "word-painting" or through the placement of musical emphasis or affective texture of the music—a good reminder that not just texts, but also the sonic aspects of music are important for geographers.

Because Hymns Reveal Patterns of Response to Catastrophes.

- Congregations sing in good times and in bad, and collections of hymns often include localized responses to events perceived as tragic and overwhelming.
- Hymns do not simply memorialize specific events, but evoke the experiences suffered at the locations of catastrophes.
- Hymns can reinforce a sense of vulnerability for those who live on faultlines or in the frequent pathway of hurricanes or tornadoes, but also may reinforce resolve to face these recurrent dangers.
- Frequently at issue are perceptions of God or the divine character arising in relation to environmental events.
- Geographers who are engaged with hazards research could explore new data in the form of congregational songs that provide insight into the observations and experiences along the continuum of various natural to technological to social hazards (Montz et al., 2003).