

Gail Ramshaw. *Christian Worship: 100,000 Sundays of Symbols and Rituals*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009. 239 pages. \$30.

Teaching Christian worship in a non-sectarian, liberal arts college to undergraduates who are arguably in their prime years for distancing themselves from anything remotely associated with “church” is a decided challenge. In a weak moment, I accepted the challenge and found myself scrambling for a text.

Enter *100,000 Sundays*. Gail Ramshaw asserts in the first sentence of her book, “We are alive at a time when an educated person ought to know a considerable amount about the world’s religions and how they function for individuals and in society”(1), thereby indicating that this will be more than an insider’s theological account of Christian worship. She ably accomplishes this in *Christian Worship: 100,000 Sundays of Symbols and Rituals* by providing a succinct, yet thorough study of Christian worship over the past 2000 years. While it is historical in its orientation, *100,000 Sundays*’ religious studies approach takes it beyond a traditional, linear historical account, focusing instead on cultural adaptations and modifications that take place over the course of time. This methodology makes it possible to separate the theological interpretations of Christian worship from the historical and cultural developments which is key in a secular, liberal arts setting such as mine. That being said, Ramshaw leaves ample space for the re-insertion of theologies of worship throughout the text. Her approach, then, is well-suited for her intention that the book serve as a primary text for undergraduate studies of Christian worship (9).

Ramshaw addresses the problem of the unconvinced student at the outset of her text. Without apologetics, she lays out reasons for and against the study of Christian worship, acknowledging varying perspectives on Christianity and its practice without trying to sway the skeptic. The more important foundation for her approach, however, is laid out in the next two chapters on symbol and ritual. These chapters set the framework that positions this text as something other than the expected seminary-style, theologically oriented worship history. Without delving deeply into theoretical analyses, Ramshaw effectively describes individual and communal practices of symbol and ritual across religious traditions so that Christian practice is seen in the broader human religious experience. For example, in the chapter, “What is a Symbol?” she includes a discussion of the tree of life as a symbol with varying meanings in Chinese storytelling, reconciliation ritual for Gyaba people of Cameroon, Hindu and Buddhist traditions, Hanukkah, and Christianity (20-21). Similarly, “What is a Ritual” delineates and gives examples of four types of ritual implemented throughout history: rituals situating people within the cosmos, rituals connecting the community with its historic past, rituals celebrating lifetime events, and rituals connecting people with God (37-40). Establishing symbol and ritual as foundational tools of all religious traditions and not merely arbitrary devices of Christianity is crucial to situating the student as “observer” of a particular group of religious practitioners and not as “potential convert” as might be the case with theological explanations of worship.

After these foundational chapters, Ramshaw launches us back to 100,000 Sundays ago and progresses through time at a rate of 25,000 Sundays (500 years) per chapter, skipping from the era of the Protestant Reformation to 19th Century America. These chapters, which, significantly, include symbolic differences arising from The Great Schism, address the adoption and adaptations of symbols and rituals according to cultural and historic contexts and shifts. The lack of Christian exceptionalism may prove a challenge for adherents to overcome. Yet, this is

essential to the “observer” positioning of the student that makes this study engaging and inviting for learners from diverse backgrounds.

The four concluding chapters consider the practical implications of Christian worship in American society and include the practice of baptism, a comparison of Christian practice to that of other religions in America, and the closing chapter entitled, “How might Sunday worship affect daily life?” Here, Ramshaw outlines twelve proposals suggesting “ways that worship may affect what happens outside of worship” (203). These proposals read more like ideals or hopes for God’s people, and it is at this point that Ramshaw steps out of religious studies mode and into theological reflection. My initial thought was to avoid this chapter in teaching because of its “church-y”, potentially proselytizing feel. Yet, it is this theological reflection on the meanings of worship that provides a valuable opportunity to explore the complexities of belief in a nation founded on principles of disestablishment.

What I found in *100,000 Sundays* is an effective tool not only for teaching college students about worship, but also for educating ourselves.

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