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Real Presence, the Ontology of Worship, and the Renewal of Evangelical Doxological Imagination

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THE OBSERVATION that John Calvin wanted the Eucharist to be celebrated weekly in Geneva, but that he was prevented from doing so by the town council is relatively well known among Reformed theologians and historians of liturgy.[1] It is also a curious fact of American church history that many American Presbyterian churches, even very conservative ones, have not followed Calvin in his eucharistic theology, either in terms of his desire for weekly observance or in his doctrine of Christ's 'real spiritual' presence through the Holy Spirit on the occasion of the Eucharist.[2] Many of these churches, and much of the American

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[1] These circumstances have been studied recently, for example, by Laurence C. Sibley, 'The Church as Eucharistic Community: Observations on John Calvin's Early Eucharistic Theology (1536-1545)', *Worship* 81:3 (2007):249-67.

[2] For Calvin's understanding of a real though spiritual presence of Christ at the Eucharist see *Institutes* IV.17.3-10: the 'secret power of the Spirit towers above our senses… the Spirit truly unites things [glorified body of Christ in heaven, and the believer on earth] separated in space.' On Calvin's Eucharistic theology, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship that Is Reformed According to Scripture* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984) and *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1975); Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Kilian McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

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evangelical tradition from the nineteenth century to the present have been closer to Zwingli than to Calvin on the matter of the presence of Christ in the sacrament.[3]

Churches in this 'Zwinglian' memorial tradition observe the Eucharist in obedience to Christ's commandment, but often there seems to be an underlying feeling that it is a marginal practice that, if not quite superfluous, lacks the emotional and imaginative impact that can be found in a compelling sermon. This sensibility asks the question, 'What do I "get" in the Lord's Supper that I can't get in a good sermon? What's the point of doing this?' It seems that in many evangelical Protestant churches no compelling responses to those inchoate doubts are being provided to those who gather (monthly or quarterly) at the table.

The purpose of this essay is not to provide further analysis of Calvin's view of the 'real' (spiritual) presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but rather to use it as a point of departure for reflection on the larger issue of the *real presence of God* in Christian worship, or more specifically, to explore some of the possible reasons for the sense of the *absence* of God in many occasions of

'worship' in contemporary American Protestantism.[4]

This essay will first note some of the cultural influences stemming from the Reformation, the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century revivalism that have contributed to a 'thinning' and 'flattening' of the Protestant evangelical doxological imagination[5], and to the impoverishment of the theology and practice of worship; second, the metaphor and analogy of 'the game' and human 'playful' activity will be explored in the light of biblical theology, the sociology of knowledge, and recent researches in the area of ritual studies for the purpose of retrieving a more robust doxological imagination and 'ontology of worship';[6] and thirdly,

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[3] Even Charles Hodge, that stalwart proponent of the Reformed theology of Old Princeton, could view Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper as 'an uncongenial foreign element in Reformed theology', *Princeton Review* 20 (1848):227-78, cited in Sibley, op.cit., 65n.54. The Zwinglian 'memorial' view has been called, perhaps unfairly, a 'real absence' view: Christ is really not present with the worshipping congregation, but only being recalled to mind.

[4] On both sides of the Modernist-Fundamentalist divide in modern Protestantism, would a sociologist of religion visiting a typical Protestant worship service find clear evidence that the participants believe and act as though they were conscious of being in the presence of the *living God*?

[5] The term 'doxological imagination' is proposed as a semantic reminder that worship involves humans not only at the cognitive-logical level, but also engages or should engage the imagination (visual sense), the emotions, the will, and the body: worship understood as a *holistic* and *embodied* human activity.

[6] The term 'ontology of worship' is introduced to call attention to the fact that all human activities and practices presuppose some ontology, i.e., a background theory of *what is real*. The claim being made in this essay is that much contemporary worship operates on the basis of a 'thin' and 'flattened' ontology that has been impoverished by the impact of scientific naturalism, the practices of revivalism, and inadequate biblical understandings of worship. Consequently, many worship events lack robust 'ontic weight'.

some suggestions will be offered as to how such insights might be implemented at the level of congregational worship practices and beliefs.

I Reformation, Enlightenment, Revivalism & Doxological Poverty

In this section of the essay some brief observations will be offered to suggest that in their different ways the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the philosophies of the 17th and 18th century Enlightenment, and the revivalism of 19th century evangelicalism contributed to the impoverishment of the Protestant doxological imagination and practices of worship.

The Protestant Reformation delivered essential spiritual and theological benefits, of course, in the recovery of the biblical gospel of justification by faith through faith in Christ alone, the translation of the scriptures into the vernacular, administration of the Eucharist in both kinds, congregational singing, and so forth. These gains need to be maintained, recognized, respected, and further implemented in any proposals for the renewal of Christian worship.

At the same time, however, it can be asked if there were unintended consequences of the Reformation that had detrimental consequences for subsequent Protestant practices of worship. For example, did Protestant rejections of the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation overreact in the direction of 'real absence' memorial views? Did the Reformation emphasis on the preaching of the Bible[7] contribute to a neglect of the role of the sacraments in Christian worship? Did the Protestant (especially Cromwellian) 'stripping of the altars' and iconoclasm contribute to an impoverishment of the religious imagination, especially in regard to the heavenly realities of the saints and martyrs, angels and archangels, 'and all the company of heaven' of the invisible church triumphant?

Week by week the faithful in medieval churches could see visual reminders in the artistic representations of the saints and angels of spiritual realities that transcended the ordinary. Did this Protestant iconoclasm[8]

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7 Queen Elizabeth I considered that four sermons a year were quite enough for the English church, and viewed preaching with some suspicion; the Puritans understandably wanted weekly if not daily opportunities for the people to hear the Bible preached: James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), p. 91.

8 In a fascinating and perceptive study, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), Margaret Miles notes that 16c. Protestant iconoclasm was experienced by many Protestants not as destructive, but as 'liberating', in the sense that images and frescoes of the saints, the Virgin, Christ as Pantocrater, and so forth, were felt to be a religious image and justification of ecclesiastical *hierarchy and authority*: hierarchies on earth were a reflection of hierarchies in heaven: chpt.5, 'Vision and Sixteenth Century Protestant and Roman Catholic Reforms', pp. 95-125. For further insights on the generally low estimation of the visual arts in English and American Protestantism, see John Dillenberger, *The Visual Arts and Christianity in America: the Colonial Period through the Nineteenth Century* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), with many illustrations and examples.

leave the Protestant evangelical tradition more impoverished, and perhaps less equipped than the Catholic and Orthodox[9] traditions, which in their different ways are more 'iconic', to respond appropriately to the new postmodern, media-driven, image-saturated sensibilities[10] of emerging generations? Such questions are, of course, easier to pose than to answer, and will not be pursued at greater length in this essay, but they do deserve the consideration of serious students of contemporary worship practices.

It is generally recognized that the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century constituted a watershed in the religious sensibilities of Christians in the West,[11] with major impact on both Protestants and Catholics and theological conservatives as well as liberals.[12] Across the religious spectrum the impact of the new scientific view of the world—the 'clockwork' universe of Newton[13]—tended to push religious sensibility and imagination away from 'mystery' toward morality, and away from a sense of the immediate presence of God in the world (and in the worship event) toward a deistic sense of a distant God far removed from the immediacies of the present.

This moralizing tendency in Enlightenment religion was exemplified, for example, in Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), where he spoke of three kinds of 'illusory faith… the faith in miracles… the faith in mysteries… the faith in means of grace'.[14] 'Means of grace' such as the Eucharist could be justified, on Kant's view, not as a mysterious means of experiencing the presence of the divine, but only as pedagogical tools for the inculcation of

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9 On the significance of icons as understood in the Orthodox tradition, see Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982).

10 See Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) for observations on the pervasive impact of the new digital technologies—sound, light, image, rock music beat—on the sensibilities of post-WWII generations. For contrasting views on digital technology in worship, see Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) [critical], and Len Wilson and Jason Moore, *Digital Storytellers: the Art of Communicating the Gospel in Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) [pro-technology].

11 The Orthodox churches, largely hidden from the West because of the cultural dominance of Islam and Soviet communism, are only now fully encountering the challenges of 'modernity' represented by the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the scientific revolution, and the historical-critical attacks on biblical authority.

12 Among the many studies in this area, see Bernard J. Cooke, *The Distancing of God: the Ambiguity of Symbol in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), esp. chpt.9, 'Modernity, Science, and Religion'. See also Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: an Interpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1966-69; and Paul Hazard, *The European Mind: the Critical Years, 1680-1715* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1953).

13 On the historical origins of this mechanistic imagery in modern science, see E.J. Diksterhuis, *The Mechanization of the World Picture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

14 Cited in James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), p. 144.

moral behaviour. The sacraments and Christian worship generally needed to be 'demystified' to be made more acceptable to Enlightenment sensibilities. The Christian God may have acted in the past, but is now known only in memory.

At the risk of oversimplification, it might be helpful to posit significant points of contrast between the 'cosmological imaginations' of three historical eras and religious sensibilities: the biblical/premodern; the Enlightenment/modern; and the postmodern. In any given culture today all three sensibilities may coexist and be present to various degrees, and the boundaries between these sensibilities may not be sharply drawn either synchronically or diachronically; nevertheless, these distinctions can still provide worthwhile points for reflection. The point here is that the dominant 'cosmological imagination' of a given culture provides the background ontology ('What is real?') for the religious practices of a given community, even where that community may formally dissent from the prevailing worldview.

In the biblical/premodern imagination, the notion of a 'cosmic hierarchy' or the 'Great Chain of Being'[15] may be proposed as the dominant image. 'Reality' is hierarchical in nature, with the earth and human beings below, and the heavens and the saints and the Virgin and the angels and the Holy Trinity above. The world below is in principle open to the transcendent world above (cf. Gen. 28, Jacob's dream at Bethel),

and God is 'religiously available' through the sacraments, the prophetic and biblical word, dreams, visions, and other supernatural interventions in human history.

The human social and ecclesiastical hierarchies below mirror the heavenly hierarchy above. Spiritual realities above (especially the Holy Trinity) are more 'real' and have greater ontic weight than the transient material realities below. Premodern cultures had religious sensibilities in which a 'sense of the holy' and certain places as 'holy' (where the divine presence had manifested) were generally part of the cultural fabric—a sense of what Rudolf Otto called feeling of the 'numinous' largely missing in many contemporary (and, especially, 'seeker driven') worship settings.[16]

The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century presented, and still presents, a massive challenge to the biblical and premodern religious sensibility. Reality is no longer imaged as hierarchical, and certainly not with 'Spirit' at the top of a metaphysical hierarchy, but as naturalistic, non-geocentric, and 'de-centred'. Heaven above and hell below are discarded as pre-scientific mythological notions, together with their disembodied inhabitants.

The 'clockwork universe' can serve as a master image for this sensibility, and the only 'real' fish are those which

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15 The classic study here is Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Harper & Row, 1936).

16 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press,1931). Abraham's characterization of the Canaanite city of Gerar (Gen. 20:11) seems sadly apt for many contemporary worship gatherings in the West: 'Surely there is no fear of God in this place.'

can be caught in the nets of logical demonstration, mathematical formulae, and the empirical results of the scientific method: all the rest is 'sophistry and illusion', in the famously dismissive words of Hume. 'God', if still accorded reality, is existentially distant and for practical purposes lacks ontological weight; or alternatively, in a more consistently naturalistic point of view, is merely a construct of human imagination and the evolutionary history of the race, an epiphenomenon of material forces and processes.

Mathematics—which, as Galileo noted, was the true language of science, and a crucial instrument for man's control and domination of nature—replaces the pictorial, narrative imagination with the *quantitative*: the 'real' is that which can be quantified, measured, and expressed in a mathematical formula such as $E = mc^2$. The dominance of mathematical formulae in the scientific mindset devalued the 'final' and 'formal' causes of Aristotle in favour of the 'material' and 'efficient' causes of scientific investigation, and also devalued the narrative and pictorial ways of knowing of the biblical and premodern sensibilities.

Orthodox theologians and biblical scholars laboured mightily and often successfully during the modern period to defend the Bible and the Christian faith from the assaults of Enlightenment materialism and atheism, but the fact remains that at the subliminal level, the unrelenting pressures of modernity can be absorbed in 'one's mother's milk', reinforced as it is by the pervasive influence of those strategic institutions that control the image production of a culture and constitute the 'gatekeepers' of acceptable definitions of the 'real' and the dominant ontology: the elite universities (and especially, the faculties of the 'hard' sciences), the federal judiciary, the public schools, the major media outlets, and the entertainment industries.[17]

Christian churches need to constitute in their practices—especially in their practices of worship—alternative 'plausibility structures' that can embody and *experience* the presence of the divine in a way that directly challenges the suffocating naturalism of the dominant culture. It is important to defend belief in God and the supernatural theologically and apologetically, but this cognitive strategy, in order to have real 'traction' and attractiveness, needs to be embodied within a believing community that is aware of regularly experiencing the reality and presence of the God of the Bible in its worship.

What is variously understood as the 'postmodern' sensibility is, of course, no one unitary set of ideas, but nevertheless points to a sensibility that is pervasively felt in our culture as an alternative to or critique of the Enlightenment mentality and scientific naturalism. For the purposes of this essay, a phrase such as the 're-enchantment of nature' and the image of the 'Spiral

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17 The secularization of these institutions has been examined in George Marsden and Bradley Longfield, eds., *The Secularization of the Academy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

Dance'[18] will be offered as points of departure for discussion.

This sensibility is expressed in the imaginative worlds of 'Star Wars' and 'Lord of the Rings' and 'Harry Potter'; in the 'dawning' of the 'Age of Aquarius,' in the efflorescence of Eastern and New Age religions, the 'Green' movements of ecology and eco-feminism, the invention of neo-paganism and the revival of the religions of pre-Christian Europe, and the neo-romantic and Gothic worlds of simulation games and virtual worlds such as *Myst, World of Warcraft*, and *Second Life*.

In this post-Enlightenment and post-colonial sensibility, mystery, magic, and ritual return with a vengeance to challenge the 'flatness' of modernity's rationalisms. Orthodox Christian churches should not capitulate epistemically to this new sensibility, but neither should they ignore it, for the new imaginative landscape—in some ways closer to the biblical world than to that of the Enlightenment—provides an opportunity to connect with cultural streams that are now seeking a sense of the transcendent.

Will postmodern seekers be able to find in the worship events of the American churches the sense of the reality and presence of God that the consumerist and entertainment-driven expressions of modernity have failed to provide?[19] Can evangelical churches retrieve from their own theological traditions the elements of mystery, of sacrament, of the immanence of Spirit in nature, of humanity's connection with the earth, and the deeper resonances of ritual action to connect with this postmodern sensibility? A positive answer would seem to require a recovery of a more robust theology of worship than that practised in many churches today.

To round out this first section of the essay, it can be briefly noted that the revival tradition of eighteenth and nineteenth century America, so formative for the evangelical Protestant heritage, did not escape the 'flattening' impact of the Enlightenment on worship practices and sensibilities. In the drama and excitement of personal conversion experiences in the setting of the revival meeting, the momentum of the religious meeting typically reached its climax in the sermon preached and the 'invitation', not in the invitation to encounter the 'real presence' of Christ in the Eucharist.

Revivalism arguably contributed, however unintentionally, to the further marginalization of the Lord's Supper in American evangelicalism: the 'real'

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18 From the title of the book by Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: a Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), considered by some to be one of the 'bibles' of the modern revival of Wicca and goddess religion. On modern goddess religions, see Larry W. Hurtado, ed., *Goddesses in Religion and Modern Debate* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

19 In 1977 Paul Vitz, noting the cultural shift under way, wrote that the '…search for transcendence of the self is now firmly begun… the country is full of holy men—Sri Chinmoy, Maharishi,… Baba Ram Dass… but where are the Christian holy ones? Where are the Christian mystical messengers to our pagan universities and suburbs?' in *Psychology as Religion: the Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp.134-35. The 'Emerging Church' movement can be seen as one attempt to respond to this shift in sensibility.

action was to be found in the sermon, not in the bread and the wine. This 'Frontier' style[20] of worship pushed American evangelicalism in the direction of a simpler, more casual, less liturgical, and more speaker-oriented styles of worship—a trajectory that can be traced from Whitefield to Finney to Billy Graham to Bill Hybels and Willow Creek at the present. In its weakest and crassest expressions, the 'Frontier' model of worship could focus the consciousness of its participants on the magnetic personality of the revival speaker rather than on the glory of the Risen Christ, invisibly but truly present in the assembly in the power of the Spirit.

The 'Frontier' model of worship had the unintended consequence of shifting the audience's attention from the 'Big Name of Jesus' (heavenly Kurios, Acts 2), invisible in heaven, to the 'Big Name speaker'[21] who was visible on the earthly (concert) stage. The stage had been set for a 'doxological paradigm shift' from 'Kurios-consciousness' to 'celebrity consciousness' as the tacit preunderstanding of the evangelical attendee at 'worship' events. The loss of the sense of the presence of the *sacred* qua sacred in the worship-event can lead to a state of affairs where the 'worshippers' celebrate not the presence of the transcendent God, but rather celebrate the Self in and among *themselves*.

II 'The Ontology of Worship':

In this middle section of the essay attention will be focused on the 'ontology of worship'. This terminology is being proposed to call attention to the following claim: all theologies and practices of worship presuppose certain background theories or ontologies *of what is considered real*; and further, that eviscerated or 'thin' background theories of the real will produce thin or eviscerated expressions of worship, even in the case of formally adequate theories of the real, but which are in fact diminished in view of pervasive background pressures and influences from the dominant culture and the churches' own worship traditions. It is proposed in this essay that the ontologies or background theories of the real that underlie the worship practices of most Protestant evangelical churches have been substantially eviscerated by pressures of the Enlightenment's scientific naturalism and by the 'Frontier' traditions of worship stemming from revivalism, and that this 'thinning' of worship has not been adequately recognized or challenged from the perspective of a robust evangelical and biblical theology of worship.[22]

This reflection on the 'ontology of worship' will be in four parts: first, observations regarding ontology in general; second, observations on the ontology of the *church*, that is, reflection on the ontological or metaphysical reality of the *ecclesia* in relation to

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20 On the impact of the 'Frontier Tradition' of worship on the American churches, see James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), pp.160-61.

21 And, more recently, at times to the 'Big Name Band' in emulation of rock star celebrity concerts.

22 Substantive Protestant treatments of the theology of worship would include J.J. von Allmen, *Worship: Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford, 1965) [Reformed], and Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968) [Lutheran].

other entities that constitute the total class of the 'real', in view of the belief that proper understanding of what the church *does* (e.g., worship) arises out of insight into what the church essentially *is*; third, reflection on the ontology of worship with respect to the *context* worship, i.e., the location of the church's worship-event in space, in time, and in relation both to the heavenly realm and to the lower creation; and fourth, with regard to the ontology of worship and the *event* character of worship, reflections will be focused on the ontological nature of *games* and *play* as specific forms of human activity, in order to elicit, by way of metaphorical and analogical imagination, fruitful insights about the ontic quality of the church's worship-event.

These latter reflections will be informed by perspectives drawn from the sociology of knowledge, cultural anthropology, studies of symbol and ritual, and concepts drawn from information science and computer technologies.

1. Ontology: General Considerations

First, with regard to a general ontology or background theory of the real, a five-level ontology is here presupposed, with historic Christian and biblical theism being assumed as normative. Five levels or realms of the real can be distinguished in this schema: Level 1 is the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—where the Son is recognized as the eternal Logos, incarnate, crucified, now enthroned at the right hand of the Father as *kurios*, as cosmic Lord of the universe and of the church. The Holy Trinity, as eternal, uncreated, and necessarily existent, has the greatest 'ontic weight' of any level, and is the source and ground of all else that constitutes temporal and created realities.

This 'ontic density' of God, a 'neutron star' of Trinitarian Being, will be visibly manifested on the Day of the Lord and the Last Judgment, when 'Earth and Sky will flee from his presence' (Rev. 20:11); the relative 'lightness' of the seemingly solid physical universe will then become apparent. As the ground and starting point of any proper biblical and Christian ontology, the self-grounded reality of the Holy Trinity shows that the ultimately real is *personal* and not impersonal in nature, and that, more specifically, the ultimately Real is found in *persons in relationship*, not in an abstract and impersonal 'Being'.[23]

Level 2 is the spirit or 'heavenly' world: angels, archangels, principalities, powers; Satan, demons; saints, martyrs, the 'church triumphant'. Entities in Level 2 are created, not eternal realities, and are understood to have such personal attributes as consciousness, intelligence, and will.[24]

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23 This critical insight has been advanced vigorously in Trinitarian theology by John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985); see also his subsequent work, *Communion and Otherness* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2007).

24 The eclipsing and neglect of the spiritual world in the modern church is noted by the Episcopal priest Charles Jaekle, *Angels: Their Mission and Message* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1995), p.2: 'I, for one, cannot recall one sermon on that subject that I ever preached, or heard anyone else preach, in all my years within the Christian church… Further, I cannot recall even once, in all my entire theological education… any discussion having to do with angels or the church's historic angelologies.'

Level 3 is man, *Homo sapiens*, considered, in Christian and biblical theism, to be created in the divine image for relationship with the Trinity, but then fallen, and subsequently redeemed (or redeemable) in Jesus Christ. The designation 'Level 3' suggests that *Homo sapiens* occupies something of an intermediate position in the schema of reality, being capable of conscious awareness of and interaction with entities in the other four levels.

Level 5 consists of material (but subhuman) entities: animate, inanimate, sentient, non-sentient: rocks, trees, great blue whales, bald eagles, dinosaurs, stars, black holes, electrons, Mount Everest, and so forth. The entities generally associated with the biblical concept of the 'creation' or 'Nature' are to be found here.

Level 4 consists of entities occupying the realm of the *symbolic* and the *cultural-artifactual*, a class of entities including what is termed 'virtual reality': a song by the Beatles such as 'Eleanor Rigby'; the Constitution and Bill of Rights; cave paintings in Lascaux, France; a recipe for apple cobbler or blueberry muffins; Einstein's Theory of Special Relativity; traffic laws for the state of Massachusetts; software for a computer game such as *Myst V*; a performance of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; the books in the Library of Congress; the IPod and IPhone; EBay; Google; Microsoft Office; the rules governing major league baseball; the rite of the Latin Tridentine mass—and so forth, *ad infinitum*.

The point here is that *Homo sapiens*—or biblical man as *imago Dei* is a symbol-using creature, and has the power to make and shape his own

world through symbolic creativity and invention. Man rarely if ever relates to the 'natural' world immediately, without symbolic mediation, but almost exclusively through symbolically shaped media: clothing, furniture, tools, instruments, and, most crucially, through the symbols of language, mathematics, music, and culturally learned and transmitted practices and experiences.[25]

The symbolic-cultural world is a world of *information*—that is, a patterned string of symbols that convey meaning, that can give structure and function to material objects and processes, and provide 'scripts' for human performances and behaviour. Information is embedded, for example, in the DNA of the double helix's genetic code in every living cell; in mathematical formulae; in the Code of Hammurabi; in the musical score of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*; in the lines of code that constitute the software of Microsoft *Office* or *Powerpoint*. The scientific community is, in fact, beginning to recognize information as a 'fifth form' of natural reality—alongside space, time, matter, and energy.[26]

25 Cultural anthropologists have defined culture as systems of symbols—law, religion, music, myth, rituals, scientific theories—that give meaning and identity to social groups and define their place in the larger scheme of the universe: see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Amos Rapoport, 'Spatial Organization and Built Environment', *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 460-452.

26 Hans Christian von Baeyer, 'Information as Physical Reality: a New Fundamental Principle Proposed by Anton Zeilinger', http://www.mdpi.org/fis2005; von Baeyer, 'In the

Level-4 realities can be recognized as having as much ontic weight as entities in levels 2, 3, and 5—perhaps not self-evident, but to be argued below.

Several brief observations will be offered here regarding the relevance of this five-level ontological schematic as a hermeneutical device for reflecting on the ontology of worship. With regard to Levels 1 and 2—the Triune God and the inhabitants of the heavenly realm—various influences have conspired to eviscerate the doxological imagination of Protestant evangelicalism. Much popular evangelical preaching is effectively 'Unitarian', focusing on Christ to the neglect of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, and further, this Christ is generally imaged as the historical Jesus, dying on the cross, with little discourse (except perhaps at Easter) on Christ as the *presently risen, living, reigning and returning Lord*, the Kurios who is 'religiously available' in 'real time' through the Spirit in the worship-event.

Level 2 religious imagination was also 'stripped' by Reformation and Puritan iconoclasm, removing from the churches the weekly visual reminders of the saints, the angels, the Virgin, the martyrs, and 'all the company of heaven'. The unremitting foreground and background pressures of scientific naturalism tended to make the imagi-native intensity of angels and demons and the heavenly world recede in the modern evangelical mind, despite the continued affirmation of these realities at the formal and theological levels.[27]

Level 5 realities—the 'creation', the world of nature, the animal world and the biosphere—are generally underrepresented in Protestant evangelical doxological imagination as well. 'Creation' is often referenced in terms of 'creation-evolution' controversies, not with respect to the intrinsic value and beauty of creation, itself to be redeemed (Rom. 8:21,22) in its eschatological trajectory toward a glorious New Creation (Rev. 21, 22). This trajectory of creation toward the glorious New Creation is largely underrepresented in the church's hymnody, preaching, and doxological imagination generally.

Level 4 realities—the world of symbols, words, rituals, cultural artefacts, and so forth—can also, curiously, be underrepresented in the evangelical doxological imagination, even though the evangelical Protestant tradition is a very 'wordy' tradition, a tradition of 'the Book'. Some of the possible reasons for this defect, rooted in a thin theology or ontology of culture, will be suggested below, in relation to the discussion of the ontology of the game and of play.

Beginning Was the Bit', in *New Scientist* n.2278 (17 February 2001). Zeilinger, an Austrian physicist and specialist in quantum mechanics, has proposed that information theory can provide a way of unifying the worlds of classical and quantum physics: cf. Anton Zeilinger, 'A Foundational Principle for Quantum Mechanics,' *Foundations of Physics* 29(1999):631-43.

27 This generalization needs to be somewhat qualified in light of the Pentecostal and charismatic revivals since 1900, and the recent growth of the Southern Church, giving greater prominence to the reality of the spirit world and the demonic.

2. Ontology of the Church

Before proceeding with reflection on the ontology of the worship-event, some observations will be offered concerning the *ontology of the church*. The significance and weight of a human activity is very much dependent on the context within which the activity takes place. Boys kicking a soccer ball around in a city park and Brazil vs. France in the final game of the World Cup are both 'soccer,' but the latter is a much more intense and 'weighty' expression of the game. A support staff entering data on laptop computers in the local high school and a support staff working on laptops on Air Force One with the president of the United States on board are engaged in similar activities, but the latter staff has greater 'weight' and authority. The 'White House' is not just a building on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., but *that place where the president is personally present*—a centre of command and control and authority.

Three of the fundamental images of the church in the New Testament[28]—the family of God (the Father), the body of Christ (the Son), and the temple of the Holy Spirit—call attention not only to the Trinitarian and pneumatic nature of the church, but also to the *presence of the living, Triune God* as its defining and characteristic mark. Throughout the Bible it is assumed that the initiative in true worship is God's, and of particular significance for understanding the divine initiative

is the reality of the *divine presence*, in connection with the ark and mercy seat, the cloud and fiery pillar in the wilderness, the tabernacle, and the temple as places of manifestation of the glory of God.[29]

The ecclesia, the assembly of the living God, the true church, is that entity constituted by those people elected and called by God, assembled by his authority in his presence to experience and respond to his presence in the worship-event. In biblical thought, the presence/parousia of the true and living God unmasks and overturns the 'common sense' ontology of self-enclosed naturalism. When Yahweh appears on the Day of The Lord, 'the mountains melt like wax before him'(Ps.97:5)—the apparent solidity of a Mount Everest disappears like smoke in a hurricane, like shadows of the night before the rising sun—before the intense ontic reality of the Triune God, whose 'ontic density' places the 'lightness of material being' in its proper perspective.

The personal presence of God in the ecclesia, by virtue of his covenant promises, his Word, sacraments, and Spirit, invests the ecclesia with an ontic weight that does not obtain with merely human organizations and assemblies.[30] In practice, it seems that

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28 Cf. Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

29 C.E.B. Cranfield, 'Divine and Human Action: the Biblical Concept of Worship,' *Interpretation* 12 (1958):385-98 at 386; the entire article is worthy of careful study.

30 A high 'ontology of the church' is presented, from an Orthodox perspective, by Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2002), 253-68, based on his reading of Eph. 1:4-11 and the biblical

ordinary evangelical Protestant concepts of the church reflect notions that are more sociological than theological, more functional and pragmatic than 'mystical' and ontological, more 'Pelagian'[31] than 'Pauline' and pneumatic, i.e., an eviscerated ecclesiology in which the church is viewed as a voluntary human organization gathered for certain activities: 'worship and praise', instruction and motivation, and friendship.

The ecclesia of the New Testament is in fact a *theanthropic reality*, considered ontologically. That is to say, its reality can only be partially described in terms of material, sociological, psychological, anthropological, and historical categories; these latter categories can be useful in describing aspects of the church, but they fail to capture its defining essence. The ecclesia is a *sui generis* entity in the universe, among the ensemble of all entities constituting the 'real', for it is essentially that class of individuals among the species *Homo sapiens*, from the beginning of time, chosen and designated to subsist, exist, and have their identity and purpose defined and grounded by a real ontic bonding with the Triune God, mediated by Word, Spirit, and sacrament.

The ecclesia *is* the family of God the Father; the ecclesia *is* the body of Christ the Son; the ecclesia *is* the temple of God the Holy Spirit, where 'is' is given full ontic weight. This real presence of the Triune God and his ontic-covenantal bonding with his people was manifested experientially in the Pauline assemblies of the New Testament era, as the cry 'Abba' expressed the sense of the personal presence of the Father, the cry 'Maranatha' the vivid awareness of the risen, exalted and returning Son, and the Spirit was palpably felt in the manifestations of the charisms exercised by *each one* (1 Cor. 14:26). Not only the Corinthian church was 'charismatic,' however; in New Testament theology, each true assembly is pneumatic, Trinitarian, and theanthropic in its fundamental being.

The evangelical Protestant tradition has been characterized as generally having a 'low ecclesiology'; the New Testament, however, has a *high* and ontically 'weighty' ecclesiology, because it has a *high Christology*.[32] The church is 'high' because Christ is 'high': seated at the right hand of the Almighty, as *kurios* invested with universal and plenipotentiary authority,

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images of the Bride of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit: 'The Church… is a union of divine and creaturely principles, their interpenetration without separation and without confusion' (p. 262). In terms of the present essay, the church could be seen to represent a unique '*theanthropic* ontology' grounded in the eternal mind and purpose of God (cf. Eph.1:4).
31 The term 'Pelagian' has been suggested by James Torrance as a characterization of much Protestant worship, in the sense that, in practice, it seems to be performed in merely human energy, as though true worship in 'Spirit and in truth' (Jn. 4:24) did not require the 'pneumatic' presence and energy of the Spirit himself: *Worship, Community, and the Triune God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), pp.20, 92, 117.

32 On the 'high ecclesiology' in Paul, especially in the prison epistles, see Lucien Cerfaux, *The Church in the Theology of St. Paul* (New York: Herder, 1959), pp.289-383, 'The Church Heavenly'.

appointed as 'head over all things *for the church*, which is his body, the *fullness* of him [Christ] who *fills* everything in every way'(Eph. 1:22,23, emphasis added).

The glory/kabod/'heaviness' of the glorious Son flows into the ecclesia, the beloved bride of the Son, who fills his church with his Spirit, his love, joy—and ontic weight. At the end of this filling, this 'pleromafication' of the church, it will be revealed in sight as the massive, beautiful, and intensely real entity depicted in the new creation imagery of the New Creation (Rev. 21, 22),[33] a real 'reality' in which the 'reality', beauty, and value of the present age takes a quantum leap upward into an unimaginable future.

It is essential, then, for the people of the ecclesia to have an 'ontology of the church from above,' constituted by an awareness and recognition of its theanthropic, Trinitarian, and pneumatic character. This is in contrast with an ontology of the church 'from below', driven by functional, empirical, and pragmatic categories, all of which are all too prone to be held captive by the impoverished doxological imagination of modernity and its consumerist and entertainment-driven concerns.

This section on the ontology of the church will be rounded out by noting a number of distinctions that can be made with regard to the church in its

several aspects and manifestations. The church pre-existed in a *conceptual* sense in the eternal mind and plan of God before matter, energy, space and time were created by God *ex nihilo* in the 'Big Bang' creation event: 'he [the Father] chose us [the church, the body of Christ, temple of the Spirit] in him [in relation to the Son] *before the creation of the universe* (Eph. 1:4, emphasis added).[34] As foreseen and intended in the pretemporal consciousness and purpose of the Holy Trinity, the church already had ontic reality, for any entity conceptualized and willed by the eternal God has reality even prior to its historical and physical creation.[35]

This conceptual reality is then actualized as *historical and empirical* reality as God calls, converts, and assembles his chosen people through the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and New Covenants and the regenerative power of the Spirit in the *ordo salutis* (Rom.8:29,30). This historical and empirical church,

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33 The massive dimensions of the New Jerusalem/ecclesia—a cube measuring 1,400 miles long, wide, and high (Rev. 21:16)—and the gold, silver, and precious stones that image its nature, all point to the intensification, magnification, and ontological 'weightiness' of the *value, beauty, and being* of the church as a theanthropic reality.

34 The laws of physics, chemistry, and biology, the fundamental physical constants, are 'friendly to life' ('cosmic coincidences') because God created the physical world and its laws for the purpose of and having the church in view as his final purpose.

35 Theologically, in terms of the knowledge of God, it is usual to distinguish between those things that are known by God as logical but merely hypothetical possibilities (e.g., a world in which John Wilkes Booth did not shoot Abraham Lincoln), and those things foreknown by God as to become actual, because of the determination of the divine will that it become actual (e.g., that Jesus would die on the cross in Jerusalem). The latter has more ontic weight than the former; a set of symbols such as '2+2=5' has no coherent meaning, is not known as such by God or other rational agents, and hence has no ontic weight.

constituted with a theanthropic, pneumatic, and Trinitarian ontology, then subsists in either its 'gathered' or 'scattered' state.

When the church gathers itself together intentionally *as a church, in the name of the Lord Jesus* (1 Cor.5:4; cf.14:23-25), as an assembly of God for the worship of God, then God himself is present, and the church can experience its full theanthropic and ontological weight. The transcendent Christ is then immanently and really present in the midst of the assembly, investing it with his own reality, authority, and 'weight'.

An analogy may help to illuminate this distinction between the church as 'gathered' and 'scattered', with the gathered church being understood as having greater ontological weight and depth. Twelve persons called and selected to sit on a federal grand jury spend weeks hearing evidence and argument in a complex case involving terrorism and national security. At the lunch breaks, the members of the jury are strictly charged not to discuss the case with one another in the cafeteria; they are, so to speak, 'off duty'. Though still a jury ('scattered'), they do not have the full authority invested in jury members as a jury until they are officially 'gathered' again into the courtroom by the federal authority that called and constituted them in the first instance.

In like manner, the ecclesia can be thought of as 'scattered' during the other 'six days', but when gathered on Resurrection Day, the Day of the Lord, when the Lord himself is present in the Spirit, then they are invested with the ontological weight and exousia of Lord himself, and their actions—worship—is accordingly invested with high weight and significance.

3. Ontology of the Context of Worship

In this next section of the essay the theme of the ontology of the church will be examined with a view to highlighting the ontology of the *context* of the church and its worship. More specifically, attention is to be drawn to the peculiar and ontologically distinct nature of the *space* and *time* within which the worship-event takes place; the claim here is that, according to the theology of the New Testament, space and time themselves are altered and no longer 'ordinary space' or 'ordinary time' in light of the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus as Lord, the eruption of the age to come, and the outpouring and presence of the Spirit.

As to the nature of time in the worship-event, the assembly acts not in 'ordinary time', but what can be called 'Kingdom time', for with the advent of the Messiah, the ontic reality of the heavenly kingdom has erupted into ordinary time and history, 'the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand'. The ecclesia experiences the presence of the Risen Christ in the power and presence of the Spirit, and lives between the 'already' and the 'not yet'; it is the End-time assembly of the Lord upon whom the end of history as we know it has already come (1 Cor. 10:11). The powers of the future age to come (Heb. 6:5) are already being experienced as present in the gathered assembly.

The great events of the redemptive past such as the Exodus, crossing of the Red Sea, Sinai, the cross and the resurrection, are 'remembered' not

just notionally and informationally in a 'Zwinglian' sense, but are made spiritually present (cf. Deut.5: 2,3: the Lord made a covenant at Horeb… with all of us who are alive here this day').[36] By the believing assembly's mystical and covenantal personal bond with the Lord through word, sacrament, and Spirit, the assembly experiences sacred 'time travel', re-experiencing with the Lord and his people the power of the saving events of the past, as well as tasting the reality of the future New Creation in the 'down payment' of the Spirit.

The members of the sacred assembly, chosen from eternity (Eph.1:4), are seen by God as mystically present at the Exodus, at the Last Supper, at the Cross, at the empty tomb, at Pentecost, for these events were pre-ordained with each member in mind as mystical beneficiaries and participants.

Sacred past and promised future are *ontologicaly* and not merely metaphorically present in the worship-event. This experience of the past and the Spirit-mediated experience of the future are constitutive for authentic Christian worship according to the New Testament. Not 'chronos', ordinary clock-time, but *kairos*, redemptive time, is the 'real' time during which the

worship-event takes place.[37]

Similarly, the spatial context of the worship event, whether cathedral or house church, is not ordinary space, but is transformed, spiritually,[38] into sacred, 'Kingdom space'. This latter term is meant to evoke the image of an assembly caught up in the worship-event 'between heaven and earth'. In the liturgy the assembly is invited to 'Lift up your hearts… we lift them up unto the Lord'. John of the Apocalypse is 'in the Spirit' on the Lord's day (Rev. 1:10), and is lifted into the midst of the heavenly worship (Rev. 4, 5, 19) where he sees the Lamb on the throne, in the midst of countless angels and the church triumphant.

John's vision of heavenly worship is not unique in the New Testament; the writer of Hebrews reminds his readers that in worship they come into the presence of the Heavenly Zion and thousands of angels in festive assembly (Heb. 12:22-24). Paul reminds the Corinthians that in their assembly they worship in the presence of the angels (1 Cor. 11:10); for Paul, in fact, each believer is seated spiritually and mystically in the presence of Christ in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6), and in the Spirit is being transformed, like Moses on Mount Sinai, by beholding the Shekinah glory of God in the face of the

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36 Cf. Edward P. Blair, 'An Appeal to Remembrance: the Memory Motif in Deuteronomy,' *Interpretation* 15 (1961), pp.43,47: 'In the Bible… If one remembers in the biblical sense, the past is brought into the present with compelling power… The patriarchs and the prophets become our contemporaries.'

37 Cf. Paul Hoon, *The Integrity of Worship: Ecumenical and Pastoral Studies in Liturgical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), p. 131:

'… worship transforms time into its own time—'sacred time' or 'liturgical time'… Wherever two or three are gathered, there *am* I. The action of worship is grounded in the past action of the Word yet contemporizing and futurizing itself.'

38 That is, in view of the *epiclesis*, or prayer of invocation for the presence of the Lord in the Spirit to be present with the worshipping assembly when it gathers *as a church*.

risen, glorified Christ (2 Cor. 3:18).

The standpoints of John, of the writer of Hebrews, and of Paul should not be viewed as 'extraordinary' but as the 'normal' experience of the church in worship; its self-consciousness during the worship-event can rightly be termed 'heavenly' and pneumatic ('in the Spirit').

While biblical, Christian worship is 'heavenly' in that its sense of space is not limited to earth but keenly aware of heavenly realities, it can also be said to be 'earthly' in that, like the psalmist, it can invite the lower creation, the sea creatures, the animals, mountains, hills, fruit trees and all cedars (Ps. 148), to join in the praise of the glorious God, in anticipation of the renewal of all creation at the end of history (Rom.8: 21,22).

The praises of God's people for God's redemption of humanity do not forget God's work to redeem and transform the lower creation. It is fitting, then, for the physical space in which the assembly gather for worship symbolically, visually, and liturgically to enrich the Christian's imagination with images of the heavenly court and of a creation waiting for full redemption.

'Primitive,' premodern religions have a sense of the sacred space that is largely lacking in religious communities living under the ontological flatness of modernity. As Mircea Eliade has noted, for man in traditional religions, '… space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others… the religious experience of nonhomogeneity of space is a primordial experience… the manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world' and gives it a

centre.[39] Moses takes off his shoes at the Burning Bush because the place where he is standing, where Yahweh chooses to reveal himself, is *holy ground*.[40] This is what Rudolf Otto in his classic study, *The Idea of the Holy*, called the sense of the 'numinous' or the 'aweful' *mysterium tremendum*.[41] The loss of this sense in much contemporary worship is a mark of the alienation of such worship from the biblical realities.[42]

Traditional Protestant religious sensibility may find the notion of 'sacred' or 'special' space troubling. Is it not the case, it might be asked, that in a post-70 A.D. context, after the resurrection and ascension, after the destruction of the Jewish temple, that all places are equally sacred and equally profane? Is it not the case that the church is now called to worship God not merely in 'Jerusalem' or 'Mount Gerizim' (Jn. 4:23,24) but in 'Spirit and in truth'?

This is indeed the case, but misses a crucial point in texts such as Jn.

39 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957, 1961), pp. 20,21.

40 Since the sixth century the Greek Orthodox monks at St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai peninsula have remembered Mt. Sinai as a special place, where God revealed himself to Moses in the Burning Bush.

41 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931).

42 David F. Wells has called attention to the loss of the sense of the holiness of God in evangelicalism in *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 300, and to the sense of the 'weightlessness' or inconsequentiality of God in modern culture in *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p.88.

4:23,24 and 1 Cor. 11:23-25 ('if the whole church *comes together*… 'God is really among you!''), namely, that when the assembly gathers in the name of Jesus and the Lord is present in the power of the Spirit (worshipping 'in Spirit', Jn. 4:24) then that location is a 'special' location not in virtue of the building or room per se, but because *the Lord himself is present*. Air Force One becomes a special airplane, it becomes for that time the 'White House' because *the President of the United States of America is on board and is in command*.

To briefly recapitulate, then, this discussion of the ontology of the *context* of the church's worship, when the church worships in 'Spirit and in truth', ordinary space and time become 'Kingdom space' and 'Kingdom time'. The earthly assembly is lifted up to heaven, seated with Christ in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:6), in the presence of the angels and the church triumphant (Heb. 12:22,23), and the powers of the age to come can be experienced *now* in the act of worship (Heb. 6:5; 1 Cor. 5:4).

A sports analogy may help to make the foregoing a bit more 'down to earth'. It could be said that 'Fenway Park' in Boston both is and yet is not the same baseball park in February and in late October. On a cold February afternoon during the off season, Fenway Park is still Fenway Park, though deserted, quiet, and forlorn. Late in October, with the Yankees in town, last of the ninth, two outs and a full count, bases loaded, with Ortiz at the plate, the Red Sox down by one run and the American League championship on the line—a capacity crowd, bright lights, emotion running at fever pitch—then, for this 'kairos', Fenway Park is no

'ordinary' place and this is no ordinary time but a 'magical' and intense moment that the fans may remember for the rest of their lives, and tell their children after them. Because of the participants in the game, and the 'historic' nature of the event, here is a 'parallel universe' that for those moments, are more 'real' than ordinary life itself.

4. Ontology of the Worship-Event

The baseball analogy above provides a natural transition to the last part of this middle section, to a discussion of the ontology of worship itself, considered as 'event' or by way of analogy, as 'game' or 'play'. As a point of departure, consider the definition of 'play' offered by Johan Huizanga in his classic treatment of the subject, *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1998):

> Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself, joy and the consciousness that it is different from 'ordinary life'.[43]

This definition of 'play' can encompass games, sporting events such as baseball, a staging of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a performance of the *1812 Overture* by the Boston Pops in Symphony Hall, a computer simulation game such as *Myst*, and many other expression of human culture, including liturgical worship. It draws attention

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43 Johan Huizanga, *Homo Ludens* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 26.

to the fact that such activities are socially constructed, rule-based activities[44] pursued for their own sake, usually for enjoyment and emotional intensity. They provide for their participants a sense of participating imaginatively in an 'alternative world' that, for the duration of the game, is more interesting than 'ordinary' life.

Such activities are, in practice, 'consciousness raising' or 'consciousness altering' events that are pursued, in large measure, for the purpose of experiencing such different states of consciousness. Participation in these 'games' generally involves what the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the 'willing suspension of disbelief' in 'ordinary' and customary perception, in order to enjoy a different state of awareness or a different way of looking at the world.[45]

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44 Other human activities, such as a courtroom trial, or commuting to work, are socially constructed and rule-based, but are generally not pursued as ends in themselves for inherent enjoyment, but as means to other human ends, i.e., the pursuit of justice or earning a living. The logical structures and semantics of socially constructed 'institutional facts' such as marriage, money, and contracts have been analysed by the philosopher John Searle in *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995), esp. chpt.2, 'Creating Institutional Facts'.

45 The phrase was coined in Coleridge's *Biographica Literaria* (1817), recalling his collaboration with Wordsworth in the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Coleridge was making the point that good poetry can help the reader of the poem to see and experience the world in a fresh way, and can even '… excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom': in 'Suspension of Disbelief,' http'//en.wikipedia.org/

Before pursuing further reflection on this definition of play, considered as a hermeneutical device or heuristic tool for reflection on the ontology of the worship event, a possible objection to this inquiry should be acknowledged. Some readers may be thinking, 'The comparison of Christian worship to "play" is demeaning to the biblical understanding of worship, and trivializes it.' It is true that in our current (American) cultural context, the word 'game' or 'play' tends to evoke images of the trivial and the superficial, of frenzied and over-hyped events in professional sports, of TV game shows such as *Jeopardy* or *Survivor*, that can embody the consumerist, entertainment oriented, and often competitive and violent elements of the culture.

All this being acknowledged, it remains the case that Huizanga has pointed to the 'game' as a serious subject for cultural reflection and analysis, because games are expressions of *Homo sapiens'* distinctive capacities for *imagination* and *symbolic thought*. The (human) capacity to envision and build a structure like the Eiffel Tower, and the activity of a colony of beavers building a dam in a mountain stream, differ essentially in that while the beavers build a structure by instinct, with little or no symbolic mediation, the human builder can, by an act of imagination, see a state of affairs that transcends the immediate environment, and construct that vision through the use of tools and symbols. The human's powers of visual imagination and manipulation of symbols (verbal, mathemati-

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wiki/suspension-of-disbelief/ (accessed 12 November 2007).

cal, visual) are constitutive of the human qua human, and distinguish humanity from the lower animals.[46]

It should also be noted that in our 'ordinary' day-to-day existence, we as human beings rarely if ever encounter 'nature' in pure, unmediated state.[47] We move in a 'built' environment in which human symbols, images, intentions and purposes have been impressed on material objects. The carpet on the floor, the light fixture in the ceiling, the car keys in my pocket, the MP3 file on the IPod (as well as the IPod itself), the Google homepage on my laptop, the food on the table, the clothing we wear, the traffic rules we (usually) observe, the National Anthem at Fenway Park, the language we speak, the textbooks in our schools, the movies we watch…. *ad infinitum*.

Even 'wilderness' experiences—a hike in the remote regions of the Grand Tetons, for example—are still in fact symbolically mediated experiences, by virtue of the images and words I have absorbed through my guidebook, the backpack on my back, the maps, my culturally inherited memories and

expectations, and so forth. All this is to say that *Homo sapiens* is by nature a *culture forming* creature, and relates to the 'natural' environment through the mediation of 'cultural worlds' (law, religion, literature, music, rituals, images, traditions) that he himself has largely constructed through his own symbolic and imaginative capacities.

We now turn to a metaphorical and analogical comparison of the worship-event itself and an online, multiplayer, interactive computer simulation game[48] such as *World of Warcraft*.[49] As of 2007, the game developers were claiming some nine million online players distributed around the world, clustered in the United States and Canada, Europe, Australia, South Korea, and China.

For those unfamiliar with such online simulation games, the imaginative landscape of *World of Warcraft*, set in the imaginary world of Azeroth, has a neo-pagan, magical, and Gothic ethos reminiscent of elements of *Star Wars,*

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46 From the perspective of paleoanthropology, the emergence of clearly symbolic representations such as the beautiful cave paintings in the caves of Lascaux and elsewhere point to the emergence of culturally modern man, in distinction from earlier forms such as the Neanderthals, Homo erectus, and the Australopithicenes, whose behaviours and relationship to their environments did not seem to be mediated primarily by symbols.

47 This has been pointed out perceptively by the cultural anthropologist Thomas Zengotita in Mediated: *How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It* (New York: Bloomsburg Publishing, 2005).

48 In his insightful article, 'Metaphor or Invocation? The Convergence between Modern Paganism and Fantasy Fiction', *Journal of Ritual Studies* 21(2007):1-15 Martin Ramstedt, notes that 'Fantasy role-playing games provide an intense link between mythic and mythological stories on the one hand, and personal imagination on the other, by allowing players to literally become part of the story… Cyberspace.. has nowadays turned into a salient metaphor for a realm of transcendence or "soul space"… the real success of "virtual reality" has also contributed to blurring the boundaries between the realms of the "factual" and the metaphorical' pp. 11,12.

49 The following descriptions are based on the article 'World of Warcraft,' http://en.wikipedia.or/wiki/World_of_Warcraft (accessed 16 November 2007).

Lord of the Rings, and *Harry Potter*. Players are characters in opposing factions (the 'Alliance' and the 'Horde'), choose membership in different 'races' (Human, Night Elves, Gnomes, Orcs, Undead, Trolls, etc.), 'character classes' (Druid, Hunter, Paladin, Priest, Rogue, etc.), and 'professions' (Herbalism, Mining, Alchemy, Enchanting, Cooking, Fishing, etc.), and engage in combat, fighting monsters, performing quests, building skills, and interacting with other players (and non-player characters driven by artificial intelligence) and earning money, rewards, and 'honour points'. The online game universe of *World of Warcraft* is supported by an online virtual community with chat forums, places for the display and exchange of personal artwork, videos, and comic-strip style storytelling.

It is fairly evident that *World of Warcraft* is an impressive contemporary example of the 'game' as defined by Huizinga above: 'a voluntary activity… executed within certain fixed limits… having its aim in itself… and the consciousness that it is different from "ordinary" life.' It is also intriguing to look at this enormously popular game as functioning, for some of its participants, at least, as a *substitute for religion*. *Warcraft* projects a complex, mysterious alternative world that appeals strongly to the imagination and emotions; has a multi-level 'ontology' of sentient beings that mimic the imaginative worlds of religion and myth (angels, demons, etc.); has story lines of the conflict of good and evil; provides a sense of community; provides opportunities for personal skill development and social recognition; the presence of magical powers mimics the supernaturalism of the biblical world and provides imaginative relief from the flat world of scientific naturalism and 'everyday' life.

It is no surprise that for the hundreds of thousands (millions?) of adolescents[50] around the globe that 'live' in *World of Warcraft*, that this alternative world, supported by powerful computer servers and software, and sophisticated 3-D graphic animations, is emotionally and imaginatively more 'real' than the 'boring' everyday realities of high school algebra—or typical church services!

The concept of *fantasy* associated with games such as *World of Warcraft*, suggesting as it does frivolous and unproductive activities of an escapist nature, may deflect attention from the significant cultural and religious implications that are embedded in this contemporary development in the cyber-world. Fantasy is an expression of the power of humans to imagine, to visualize a state of affairs different from the existing (ordinary) world, and as such is intrinsic to human nature and behaviour.

The imaginatively constructed Gothic world of *Warcraft* is not utterly different from the imaginatively constructed worlds of Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* or Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or *Beowulf* or *Cinderella* or the score for Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, though

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50 This is not to suggest or claim that all or the great majority of online gamers are adolescents, though many are; precise user demographics are not known to the author. Anecdotal evidence and personal observation suggests, however, that such online gaming is heavily populated by Gen-X and 'Millennial' males.

the literary quality and cultural level may vary from case to case. Each of the latter can be viewed as 'Level 4' (above) socially constructed symbolic artefacts. Such cultural artefacts are 'real' and have ontic weight to the extent that they display internal structures and coherence, embody intentions, meanings, and symbolic references, encode information, have stable existence over time, and have the power to shape and influence human behaviours and institutions.

The information encoded in the software for a game such as *Warcraft*, or, for that matter, in Microsoft Office, has an 'objective' existence that is to be contrasted, say, with the more 'fantastic' and shadowy reality of my private dream last night ('I dreamed I was Elvis Presley') or a hallucination (e.g., *A Beautiful Mind*). The dream has some reality, insofar as it is an experience that affected me (privately), but it lacks the public, intersubjective, coherent, and more enduring reality of entities here characterized as occupying ontic levels 1-5.[51]

Finally, to introduce the 'thought experiment' of viewing the worship-event as 'online multi-player simulation game', imagine that in the game of *World of Warcraft*, currently in progress, that the players encounter a mysterious new player-Avatar—a player of enormous knowledge, skill, and wisdom—who, in fact is an extra-terrestrial being, 'Golem', from a

highly advanced civilization in another, very-distant galaxy. A transcendent, god-like being has become immanent in the world of Azeroth, interacts with its participants, and is 'really present' to them through his avatar.

It is easy enough to complete the comparison: in authentic Christian worship, the risen, reigning, glorified, and returning Christ is present to the worship participants through his 'avatar', the Holy Spirit;[52] in the game of 'Kingdom Life', the players/worshippers are imaginatively (by faith) transported in the Spirit to a complex, transcendent world (the heavenlies) that is more intense and interesting than ordinary life; the time between 'game starts' (invocation) and 'game over' (benediction) is not ordinary time, but 'Kingdom time'; the worship/cyberspace is not an ordinary space, but a 'Kingdom space', with the interpenetration of heaven and earth.

The activity is participatory, both

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51 Perhaps the ontological schematic of this essay could be amended to include a 'Level 6' of lesser realities such as dreams and hallucinations that are not in the category of 'Nonbeing' but lack the fuller degrees of reality recognized for the entities of Levels 1-5.

52 This analogy of Holy Spirit as 'avatar' of the risen Christ in the midst of the worshipping assembly recalls an element frequently missed in many worship services: a consciousness of the *real presence of Christ* in the midst of the community. Cf. Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1964), p. 130: 'the hallmark which stamped the assembling together of Christians (Heb. 10.25) as something for which no other religion can provide a parallel, was *the presence of the living Lord in the midst of his own* (Mt. 18:20; 28:20). Cf. also Larry Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p.50: 'They [NT Christians] experienced their assemblies as not merely human events but as having a transcendent dimension. They sensed God as directly and really present in their meetings through his Spirit.'

players/worshippers, *and* the Triune God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit are 'online', present, and interacting in 'real time'. The Bible, the sacraments, and the liturgy and creed are the 'software';[53] the church building, furnishings, and musical instruments are the 'hardware'; the mind of the Triune God is the heavenly 'server' that archives all the software and the history of its action.

This comparison, however, could easily be misunderstood. Let it not be thought that the force of the analogy is to suggest that the worship experience is, so to speak, only a 'virtual reality' or a 'simulation' of a more 'real' everyday human reality. On the contrary, the notion here proposed is that the worship-event, because of the real presence of Christ by the Spirit in the midst of the assembly, is more real than ordinary life.[54] This is so because the greater ontic reality and weight of the 'Level 1' Triune God is irrupting into the midst of the assembly and investing it with an 'eternal weight of glory'(cf. 2 Cor. 4:17) even as the ascended Lord is constantly filling the church with the fullness of his glorious reality (Eph. 1:23); this is a present foretaste and anticipation of that final glorious 'ontic density' that will be displayed in the ecclesia/New Jerusalem in the New Creation, where its consummated beauty and weight will be revealed as unimaginably vast beyond its present earthly dimensions (Rev. 21:16).

The claim here advanced is that the act of true New Testament worship 'in the Spirit' involves a process of *ontological transformation of the church*, ('Christ *in you*, the hope of glory') in anticipation of the final, end-time of the 'ontic weight-gain' divinely ordained by the Triune God for his people. Indeed, 'his love (experienced in true worship) *is better than* (ordinary) *life*'.

It will be left to the reader to explore further this comparison between the worship-event and online simulation games. Hopefully, enough has been suggested to encourage additional efforts to restore to the Protestant evangelical doxological imagination some of the sense of mystery and transcendence, and especially the sense of awareness of the *real presence of Christ* in the worshipping assembly, that has been stripped away and weakened by the influences of Reformation iconoclasm, Enlightenment naturalism, revivalism's marginalization of the Eucharist, and the seductive powers of modern consumer and entertainment-oriented cultures.

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53 Cf. Gerard Loughlin on the connection between the Christian narrative and its enactment and embodiment in liturgy and worship: 'The participant's absorption in to the story is made possible through their absorption of the story in and through its ritual enactment. They are not simply witnesses of the story, but characters within it:' *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.223, as cited in David Torevell, *Losing the Sacred: Ritual, Modernity and Liturgical Reform* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2000), p.10.

54 In popular culture, stories of persons abducted by extraterrestrial beings, with life-transforming consequences, are generally viewed with great scepticism. To follow this science-fiction analogy, in the act of true worship, those assembled in the name of Jesus in the presence of the Spirit do in fact have a 'close encounter' with an extraterrestrial being from a higher world, the Risen Christ who is *really present* in their midst.