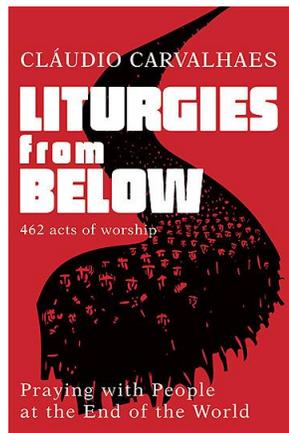


BOOK REVIEW

Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the End of the World

By *Claudio Carvalhaes*

Reviewed by Sharon Gramby-Sobukwe



Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020. \$29.99

This collection of “462 acts of worship” seems an active response to Howard Thurman’s call for a ministry for people with their backs against the wall (Thurman, 1996). It steps decidedly into the center of demands for decolonizing everything, especially worship, focusing on prayers, and liturgical practices of people from outside the metropolises of this global order. Carvalhaes presents redefined and empowered prayers against bastions of power and domination, but for the destitute and oppressed. In doing so, this book redefines prayer and its purpose in the interests of the majority of peoples in the world. In partnership with Christian World Mission, Carvalhaes presents a collection of prayers, songs, rituals, art, and poetry curated collaboratively, by globally diverse contributors who lived and worshipped incarnationally on four continents, Asia-Pacific Islands, Africa, Americas, and Europe. This collection emerges from the Council for World Mission’s project, *Re-Imagining Worship as Acts of Defiance and Alternatives in the Context of Empire*, from 2018-2019.

From the Council for World Mission’s perspective, empire is characterized as the ever-present context of God’s mission. From Jesus’ incarnation “in

an imperial world,” until today, empire kills the whole of creation, “demands to be worshipped alone,” manufactures a kaleidoscope of spiritualities in support of “the hegemonic paradigm of neoliberal politics and economics” (xi), “commodifies God’s people,” and thus, “rejects God and God’s plan for the world” (xii). Prayer, therefore, needs to be renewed radically, to “be anathema to any form of government that sustains war, that oppresses people, animals, mountains, oceans, and the whole earth” (3), if we are to change the conditions of empire. This kind of prayer brings attention to and empowers the oppressed, enlightens and enacts the privileged to solidarity, and reconciles deep community globally. Carvalhaes offers this collection as an invitation to those in the metropolises to transform their traditional prayers to connect with those at the margins (hooks, 1989), and in the process to be transformed to listen, serve, imagine, and fight, in the name of God for new worlds (6).

A collection of various types of prayers, from calls to worship and benedictions, prayers of thanksgiving, confession and intercession, topical prayers addressing the lived experiences of the destitute, to complete liturgical sequences, *Liturgies* reconsiders the meaning and purpose of prayer. Here, prayer is individual and collective; it offers social, political, and economic critique, but is also mournful, confessional, and liturgical. Steeped in the cultural traditions and expressions of Christians from various parts of the world whose lives are typically made invisible, expendable, and oppressed by racial capitalism, imperialism, hetero-patriarchy, and climate crisis, prayer is an empowering starting point for change (5). Prayer in these experiences continuously voices and validates the experiences of the poor and oppressed, everything from small joys and big hopes, loss and mourning, to anger and critique. This kind of prayer provides confirmation, healing and empowerment, leading to transformation, as a matter of responsibility to one another and worship of God.

This approach is an intersectional foray into Christian literature and analyses that gives voice to a Christian radicalism focused “glocally,” both locally and

globally. It foregrounds race, class, ability, and gender as parts of an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist analysis. In its unflinching resistance to dominant global systems of politics, economics, and even Christianity, *Liturgies* reflects criticisms emanating from climate crisis, #MeToo, and #BlackLivesMatter movements, to reconsider structures and systems holistically, and from the perspectives of those suffering beyond the attentions of capitalist metropolises. The *Liturgies'* conception of prayer builds upon Latin American liberation pedagogy, or, as Paulo Freire styles it, Liberation Theology engaging the oppressed in a process of self-awareness and empowerment (Freire, 1996). This reconnection to Christian faith as movement, like Jesus' *The Way*, is an attempt to center the marginalized, amplifying their voice and following their lead.

Such a task, noble and principled as it is, is vulnerable to typical critiques of decolonization, of going too far by conservatives and not far enough for radicals. Some will argue that these prayers, often rife with pain, suffering, mourning, and anger (as well as faith, hope, and imagination), cannot replace the holiness of established prayers. Further, efforts to replace established prayers become so persistently relativistic that they ultimately eliminate all that is sacred. Some of us, who identify more with those "in the margins" than the metropolises, cannot help but to be discomfited by language targeting the "we" and "us" of the metropole. Is this yet another empire-centric exercise? From one perspective, Carvalhaes' book is published and marketed amidst the centers of empire and these prayers challenge those of us here to learn, confess, and follow with action. Yet, would this project prove even more powerful and reflexively authentic if it instead targeted peoples of the margins, prioritizing them, and then, secondarily, bringing along those of us in the metropolises?

Written for "pastors and other leaders to use in worship services or other gatherings," the strength of this collection is not only its intersectionality, but also its practical contributions to works focused on both decolonizing religion, and its provision of pedagogies for transformation and healing as holy acts in the midst of suffering. *Liturgies'* global perspective harmonizes with contemporary, U.S. focused works, such as Obery J. Hendricks' *Christians Against Christianity: How Right-Wing Evangelicals are Destroying our Nation and our Faith* (2021); Randall Balmer's, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* (2021); and, Du Mez's *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (2020). Each of these assesses the role and impact of colonialisms in mal-shaping historic and contemporary Christian theology and ideology. While these books call for decolonization at institutional levels, Carvalhaes'

contribution seems intentional in refocusing church to local and congregational level practices. These practices echo cutting edge emphases, not only in decolonization but also in pandemic response work, on healing trauma and suffering through daily practices, made holy ritual. For instance, *The Grace of Playing: Pedagogies for Learning into God's New Creation* (Goto, 2016) and *Playing in the Face of Death: Pedagogical Play as Love and Lament in a Time of COVID* (Green, 2020) document the pedagogical processes of using play for healing and lament. Likewise, in "Schoolin' Black Girls: Politicized Caring and Healing as Pedagogical Love" (McArthur and Lane, 2019) and "From Lament to Advocacy: Black Religious Education and Public Ministry" (Lamont, 2021), these and other similar works focus on empowering the oppressed through intentional holy practices such as focusing on love to produce healing pedagogies, and practicing lament as a necessary first step in public theological reflection and action. Thus, for church ministry and relief work, this book is a powerfully inspiring and enlightening resource for engaged praxis.

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