

## PERSONAL

# 16. THE GREAT MISCONCEPTION: WHY MUSIC IS NOT A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

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—“Ethno-what?” *They always say that when they hear what I do.* I sigh, knowing the familiar script that will unfold.

—“I’m an ethnodoxologist.” Eyebrows raised, the quizzical look ensues.

—“What in the world is *that*?”

—“Well, in ethnodoxology we study the ways people worship God in cultures around the world.”

The quick shake of the head and slow blink of the eyes demonstrate that it’s the first time my conversation partners have thought about how other cultures worship.

—“Hmm,” they respond. “What’s the use of knowing that? Don’t they just sing the songs we do?” *At least they’re being honest.*

—“My job is to encourage and equip Christians in various cultures to express their faith through their own heart musics and other arts.” Their eyes brighten.

—“Hey, heart music! Is that kind of like heart language? A missionary once told me that people should have access to the Bible in their heart language.” Now it’s my turn to be surprised.

—“Yep, that’s right!” I respond, “Just like each person has at least one heart language, we all have our own heart music and arts; it’s like a mother tongue for expressing your heart, and it affects how you worship.”

—“Wow, that’s, um . . . interesting. But isn’t music, like . . . a universal language?”

## A MUSICAL MISNOMER

“Music is the universal language.” How often have we heard that statement? It’s amazing the power of an oft-repeated, unexamined aphorism. This one about music sounds so romantic, so

convincing. Yet this notion has had some significant ill effects on the worship practice of the North American church and the mission movement that grew out of it.

The statement, “Music is the universal language,” first appeared in the writings of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow<sup>104</sup> in the early nineteenth century. Now, nearly two centuries later, it filters into our pop songs (e.g., “music is a universal language and love is the key”<sup>105</sup>) and permeates our collective consciousness— as one of those unexamined assumptions. For many, this additionally shapes their worship theology, their mission practices, and how they speak about music in everyday conversation.

What are the logical outcomes of thinking of music as a “universal language”?

- What it means to me, it probably means to you.
- There is only “good/bad” or “high/low” in this language of music, not *different* music languages.<sup>106</sup>
- Since I speak this universal language, I should know what qualifies as a “high” or “low” expression.
- Given a choice, people probably prefer to use Western music.

Unfortunately, the popularized “music is a universal language” paradigm has infected our weekly worship gatherings. One of the root causes of the so-called worship wars is that we fail to take into account some basic differences in “music languages.” John Blacking, a well-known British ethnomusicologist, wrote, “The meaning of musical signs is ambiguous; culture-bound, rather than objectively self-evident: people are inclined to perceive and interpret them with reference to their experiences of different cultural systems, as well as according to variations in individual personality.”<sup>107</sup> In other words, our ability to decode the sounds we hear is culturally conditioned. And it is quite possible for us to misinterpret musical and other artistic signs because they have attached meanings which we don’t understand.

Some Western ears, for example, hear minor keys as carrying “sad” or “contemplative” meanings and connotations. But in many cultures, minor keys have a range of expression from impish and playful to majestic and triumphant, even exuberant and joyful. When I was in St. Petersburg, the American pastor of the church I attended forbade the Russian music director to choose songs in minor keys for the Sunday morning services. When I talked with him about the importance of minor keys as part of the heritage of the Russian church and a way of expressing a broad range of feelings for Russian people, he changed his mind. There are a host of *other* reasons why it is wrong for a foreign mission worker or pastor to have this kind of influence on the kind of music sung in a local church! But one of them is that he or she is likely to make the calls based on their own cultural bias and get it wrong.

A foundational principle of ethnodoxology is that music is not a universal language. This applies by extension to other arts as well. Blacking writes, “As public communication, musical

104 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Outre-Mer: A Pilgrimage beyond the Sea* (1833; repr. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1883), 197.

105 Statler Brothers, “I Believe in Music” (1973).

106 See my review of Kersten Bayt Priest’s MA thesis in *EM News* 8, no. 3 (1999).

107 John Blacking, *Music, Culture, and Experience*, ed. Reginald Byron (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 229.

systems are more . . . culture-specific than any verbal language . . . we cannot make any sense of another person's speech without using an interpreter or spending considerable time and effort learning its grammar and lexicon."<sup>108</sup> Occasionally a perfectly normal word in one language can be a foul curse word in another. In addition, hearing foul words in an unfamiliar language does not have the same "gut impact" on you as it would in your mother tongue. Systems of music and arts are, according to Blacking, even more culture-specific than language, so true understanding requires a long process of learning the language, rather than relying on assumptions that may or may not be correct.

Confusion about the meanings of music and other artistic forms is not limited to cross-cultural misunderstandings. It happens even with different contextual microgroupings of a society or culture. Where can we go then to learn the meaning of a musical or other artistic form? Blacking provides a response:

Not only can "the same" patterns of sound have different meanings in different societies; they can also have different meanings within the same society because of different social contexts. Thus . . . the emphasis must be on actors' *intentions to mean* something.<sup>109</sup>

The only way to know, therefore, what a musical or artistic form means is to *ask*—to do the hard work of research! This foundational aspect of ethnodoxology sets it apart from many other approaches to worship and arts in mission.<sup>110</sup>

You can begin the research process by asking a few simple questions in your local worshipping context, questions like:

- What is the state of the music debate in my church?
- What assumptions do people make about music in my faith community?
- How do these views affect the breadth of styles used in worship settings?

At the end of this chapter, we will address some of the implications of these questions for local churches in North America. But for now, let us take a look at what has been exported by the missionary community to ministry locations around the world.

## WE WENT, WE SANG, WE CONQUERED

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as European and other Western Christians traversed the globe, they took with them the prevalent philosophies of their home cultures—in particular, the idea of "cultural evolutionism." As late as 1962, Theodosius Dobzhansky, in *Mankind Evolving*, wrote that "biological and cultural evolutions are parts of the same natural process."<sup>111</sup> Due to ethnocentrism, Western culture was considered to be the most highly developed of cultures, further along on the evolutionary scale than other, more lowly, "tribal" societies and cultures.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>110</sup> See Brian Schrag's article "Ethnoartistic Cocrecreation in the Kingdom of God," chpt. 10.

<sup>111</sup> Theodosius Dobzhansky, *Mankind Evolving* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 22.

These ideas often resulted in the musical expressions of the newly encountered cultures being labeled as “primitive” and “heathen.”<sup>112</sup> Some Western Christians even tried to “help” local music makers by encouraging the translation of Western Christian songs into indigenous languages and by teaching new converts to sing in four-part harmony or in unison. Stephen Feld, an ethnomusicologist who has studied the musical traditions of the Kaluli in Brazil, for example, has observed that

one very significant generalization can be made about all Kaluli sound forms: no Kaluli sounds are performed in unison . . . missionaries have tried to get them to sing this way for twelve years [but] it is rare to hear anything approaching unison sung by Kaluli or emitted from any sound sources in their environment.<sup>113</sup>

Current practice no longer normally includes offensive labels such as “backward,” “primitive,” or “heathen,” yet even today one can find cross-cultural workers who fail miserably at valuing the God-given musical and artistic resources of the host cultures in which they minister.

Because of the widely accepted view of music as a universal language, it never occurred to most early mission workers that, just as they needed to learn new, complex, and “strange-sounding” languages in order to communicate with local people, so also did they need to study and understand local music and other artistic systems like dance and drama as well as visual and verbal arts like proverbs, poetry, and storytelling. Instead many workers simply brought their Bible in one hand and their hymnbook in the other. The Bible was generally translated into vernacular languages, as were many of the song texts from the hymnbooks. But the musical language of those hymns remained unchanged in their original, Western form.

Concerned by the charges of “music colonialism,” a number of mission workers have over the past few decades begun to resist this trend by incorporating into their thinking and practice the principles of ethnomusicology/ethnoarts (the study of music/arts and culture), mission-shaped anthropology (Scripture-grounded critical contextualization), and elements of the burgeoning field of global worship studies. At the nexus of these three disciplines, a new field of research is beginning to emerge, that of *ethnodoxology*.

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## ETHNO-WHAT?

Forty years ago Tozer wrote a book in which he described worship as “the missing jewel of the evangelical church.”<sup>114</sup> In recent years there is a revival of interest in the topic of worship, with numerous courses and conferences specifically devoted to it.

112 For a treatment of this issue as it relates to Africa, see Roberta R. King, Jean Ngoya Kidula, James R. Krabill, and Thomas A. Oduro, *Music in the Life of the African Church* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008).

113 Stephen Feld, “Sound Structure as Social Structure,” *Ethnomusicology* 28, no. 3 (1984): 391.

114 A. W. Tozer, *Worship: The Missing Jewel* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1992).

In the late 1990s worship leader and missionary Dave Hall coined the term “ethnodoxology” by combining three Greek terms—*ethne* (peoples), *doxa* (glory), and *logos* (word). The English word *doxology* combines “words” and “glory” into a concept signifying “words to glorify” or “worship” God. Hall defined ethnodoxology as “the study of the worship of God among diverse cultures.” He stressed a broad understanding of worship beyond the Sunday morning corporate gathering to emphasize “first and foremost a life to be lived, and secondarily as an event in which to participate.” The dual aspects of this definition are important, says Hall, because “scripture calls us to both.”<sup>115</sup>

In more recent years the term “ethnodoxology” has gained increasingly wide usage. In 2000 the publication *EM News* was succeeded by a new review called *EthnoDoxology*. Sponsored by Artists in Christian Testimony, this new publication began offering articles “devoted to the multi-faceted music, arts and worship of every tribe, tongue and nation.”<sup>116</sup> Contributors to the journal included a growing number of Christian ethnomusicologists and mission workers who were applying their training to diverse ministry contexts.

By 2003 when I, along with a few colleagues, launched a network for this global “tribe” of worship and mission-focused musicians and artists, the charter members expressed their desire to use the newly emerging term “ethnodoxology” as a part of the group’s identity, thus giving birth to the network’s name, the International Council of Ethnodoxologists—or ICE, as it is more commonly referred to. Growing rapidly within the first ten years to a group of over 280 associates in more than seventy countries, ICE has a website—a virtual library at <http://www.worldofworship.org>—dedicated solely to the issues and concerns of ethnodoxology. The site facilitates forums and conferences for training and networking on ethnodoxology-related matters. An online peer-reviewed journal, *Global Forum on Arts and Christian Faith*, was launched by ICE in 2012.

In addition to online resources, several seminaries and graduate schools have caught the vision as well and are collaborating with ICE to host intensive week-long courses on ethnodoxology. A growing number of other Christian educational institutions have also begun to offer both undergraduate and graduate degrees in world arts, ethnomusicology, and/or worship studies.<sup>117</sup>

Various seminars, tracks, and task forces on ethnodoxology—using the term in either title or approach—have been launched at mission conferences such as the Global Consultation on Music and Missions (GCoMM), the International Orality Network (ION), the Mission Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), and a regional meeting of the Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS) held in 2012 at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

A 2011 “Arts in Mission” training event cosponsored by ICE, WEA, SIL International, and All Nations Christian College taught attendees how to put into practice basic ethnodoxological principles through a model called “Creating Local Arts Together”<sup>118</sup>—a process which involved working together with communities to:

115 International Council of Ethnodoxologists, “Ethnodoxology,” ICE: A World of Worship, <http://www.worldofworship.org/Ethnodoxology.php>. His scriptural basis for making this claim is based on texts that he references, such as Psalm 95 and Romans 12:1. Hall has been significantly influenced in his thinking and writing by John Piper’s reflections on the connection between worship and mission (see Piper publications in the *Handbook* bibliography).

116 See <http://ethnodoxology.org/>. The entire archives of this resource is available on the *Handbook* DVD.

117 Christian institutions offering training in world arts, ethnomusicology, and/or worship studies are listed at <http://www.worldofworship.org/Training/index.php>.

118 For a summary of what happened during this training, see the “Arts in Mission 2011” video on the *Handbook* DVD.

- meet a community and its arts
- specify specific kingdom goals they hope to achieve
- select a particular arts genre along with the desired effects for its use
- analyze an event containing the chosen genre
- spark creativity by generating a new artistic work in the selected genre
- improve and celebrate both new and old artistic creations for integration into the community
- celebrate both old and new works as they become part of the community's life.<sup>119</sup>

These new streams of teaching, learning, thinking, writing, and ministry are being energized by the emerging ethnodoxology movement. Perhaps someday the conversation that we recorded at the outset of this chapter will be a rare one indeed, but how long it will take to arrive at that point is yet to be seen.

## HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO CHURCHES IN THE NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXT?

The principles of ethnodoxology apply not only to international contexts of ministry, but also to churches located in North America. Ethnodoxologists are addressing the “worship wars” by emphasizing the importance of accepting diverse worship styles—especially those of marginalized groups—as a way of showing love to our fellow worshipers and to illustrate vital theological truths regarding the body of Christ. “Prioritizing the honor of Christ’s name and the progress of his kingdom,” writes Bryan Chapell, “can create harmony around a common mission that will enable us to unite in worship style choices even when personal preferences vary.”<sup>120</sup>

Yet many Christian worshipers consider their different tastes to be more than “preferences,” causing them to judge as “good” or “bad” another’s music—and sometimes even the person themselves!—based on their own cultural values, tastes, or preferences.<sup>121</sup>

David Peterson elaborates on the “high” vs. “low” music debate with a challenge to examine carefully and prayerfully our response:

We all know that music is a great encouragement to snobbery . . . We become so familiar with and comfortable with our particular styles of music that we end up saying, maybe overtly sometimes, “I am not willing to listen to your kind of music. I am not willing to sing one of your silly songs.” We get even more intense than that. We say, “Your music is not true worship. Your music is not honoring to God.”<sup>122</sup>

119 These seven points are unpacked in much more detail in Schrag’s companion volume to this *Handbook: Creating Local Arts Together: A Manual to Help Communities Reach their Kingdom Goals*. For a highly condensed version of that manual, see Julisa Rowe’s, “Creating Local Arts Together: The Manual Summary” in Section 3 of this *Handbook*, chpt. 148.

120 See Bryan Chapell, *Christ-centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 297.

121 See Robin P. Harris, “Contextualization: Understanding the Intersections of Form and Meaning,” *EthnoDoxology* 3, no. 4 (2007): 14–17.

122 David Peterson, “Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: Does the Bible Direct Us in the Choice of Musical Styles?” (lecture, Institute for Christian Worship Lectures, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, April 14, 2005).

Ron Man, one of the theological trainers in the ethnodoxology movement, writes that because the New Testament does not prescribe what worship expressions should look or sound like, we can be assured that God delights in a diversity of worship expressions that are grounded in culture yet faithful to biblical teaching:

The bottom line is that God is much, much more concerned about the hearts of his worshipers than about the matters of form and style on which we expend so much energy. “Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). *To put it bluntly, God has no favorite songs or favorite style! Rather he rejoices in an infinite variety of worship expressions from his people* (evident around the world, as well as down through the centuries), when lifted up with an attitude of thanksgiving and in dependence upon his Spirit. Let’s not try to limit God or impose our own narrow tastes upon him.<sup>123</sup>

In the roiling free-for-all of the worship debates, ethnodoxologists are joining hands with the multiethnic worship movement to apply the principles of ethnodoxology to churches in the North American context. What is our goal? To see in churches expressions of heart worship which embrace not just the majority culture but also the various and multiple ethne in their communities. Applied in an even broader sense, the implications of these conversations affect far more than what happens in gatherings of worship. They also permeate the wide range of artistic expression which flows out of God’s desired kingdom goals and values and impact every aspect of life within the rapidly growing multiethnic communities in our home settings and around the world.

What then are some of the key ethnodoxology principles that apply to both home communities and ministries around the world? I propose that we start with these four:

1. Music, like other art forms, is *not* a universal language—our responses to music are learned, not intrinsic.
2. Just as in spoken language, music and other arts must be understood in their historical and cultural contexts to be interpreted correctly.
3. All peoples should have the opportunity to worship God in their own heart languages, heart musics, and other arts.
4. Churches that value and encourage heart music and arts in worship, reflecting the various and multiple cultures in their communities, are demonstrating the love of Christ to the world.

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**Music may be a universal phenomenon, found in virtually every culture around the world. But it is definitely not a universal language!**

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For an audio mp3, go to <http://www.sbts.edu/resources/lectures/icw/psalms-hymns-and-spiritual-songs-does-the-bible-direct-us-in-the-choice-of-musical-styles>.

<sup>123</sup> Ron Man, “Global Worship: What in the World Can I Do about It?” *Worship Leader* (November–December 2009): 27–28, emphasis mine. For more on this matter, see two other chapters in this *Handbook*, one by Ron Man, “‘The Bridge:’ Worship between Bible and Culture,” chpt. 4, and a second by John Piper, “The Missional Impluse toward International Worship in the New Testament,” chpt. 19.

I realize that by calling myself an ethnodoxologist I will continue getting quizzical looks and responses. Moreover, the conversation that starts with “ethno-what?” will likely continue to be a regular part of my life. But what I love about this conversation is that I get to talk about the four important principles outlined above—principles that are slowly but surely infusing the minds and hearts of worship pastors, mission leaders, and laypeople around the world.

If you don’t feel comfortable calling yourself an ethnodoxologist just yet, then at least help the rest of us out a bit. The next time you hear the comment, “Music is a universal language,” do the world a favor and speak up! Point out that music systems, perhaps more than any other forms of verbal language, are culture specific and must be learned to be understood. Music may be a universal phenomenon, found in virtually every culture around the world. But it is definitely not a universal language!