

## What is Real: Can Our Worship Allow the Velveteen Rabbit to Jump?

A few weeks ago we visited a very forward thinking and progressive church for a special celebration. They were well aware that the church was largely full of "strangers," and set out from the outset to make us all feel welcome. It was clear that there were a few folk of other faiths present, as well as a number of rather uncomfortable looking people, who were obviously unused to being in church.

The minister stood up to greet us:

"If you're not used to being in church, we'd like to make you welcome & thank you for coming... now we'll sing..."

Singing is not part of most people's lives. Singing is something which you might have done in primary school twenty years ago. And, on a particularly drunken night out, you might be persuaded to screech an out of tune rendition of "My Way" into a Karaoke machine. But apart from plumbers and builders, few people sing regularly.

Is this what God requires?

Is this what it means to worship?

Walk into the average Baptist church today - even a small one - and you will be confronted with an array of cables, keyboards, microphones and amplifiers. A group of averagely talented musicians - if you're lucky - will entertain the audience with a collection of songs inspired by American country music. Those who belong will know when they are expected to join in.

Some people will join in with an embarrassing exuberance. They will dance with a passion which far outweighs the quality of the musical offering, singing and waving arms as though they were watching the Beatles in 1964.

Forget your troubles and dance.

Jesus forgives your sins. Now you are one of the elect.

Eat, drink and be merry.

Escape from the dreary reality of your everyday life.

I caricature for effect.

But look at the words of our worship songs.

Jesus is Lord.

Jesus is King.

Jesus is - strangely - a Lamb sitting on a throne.

These are images of power.

These are images of politics.

These are images which conflict directly with everyday reality.

Gordon Brown is Lord.  
Barack Obama is King.  
Jade Goody is the face on the front of Hello magazine.

These are images of power.  
These are images of politics.  
These are images which reflect everyday reality.

And are completely absent from our worship.

Except that images of power are not absent from our worship! For some reason, we feel the need to project the images of power (and I hasten to add, violence) from our contemporary world onto God and onto Jesus.

God is all powerful, all mighty, vengeful, demanding the sacrifice of his only son, God is He, king, ruler, judge, lord.

And Jesus, in our worship songs is the celebrity, the one on whom our all depends, held on a pedestal, the cult hero, lord, master, king, the lamb sitting on the throne, the one who has become our sacrificial idol, our Jade Goody. Except of course, all these attributes, when speaking of God or Jesus, would also have a capital letter as if to try and distance them from our experience of power.

For most of the last two thousand years, the church has, for the most part, sided with those in power, often due to the need to engage in mission, which is far more successful, numerically, if people do not have much choice.

And I guess this is where our experience comes in to dialogue with our tradition, of living in an area where people have very little power, or choice for that matter. If God has a preferential option for the poor<sup>1</sup> and the oppressed, how can we name God in the language of power?

In our experience, God is not all powerful, God does not bring down the mighty from their thrones, in our experience, God suffers with us and in the people of our community.

So one of the dangers of worship, is that it tends to be unquestioningly middle class in both its content and expression as well as lacking a critique of power. In so doing, it separates worship from the reality of daily life.

In this worship, pain is personal, to be solved or salved by an individualised God who has the power, if one prays enough, to intervene on an individual level.

Pain is personal.

But this does not mean that there are not also dangers in siding with those on the receiving end of the in-balance of power, for these are the very communities that lack resources, that lack influence, that lack voice.

Here the church is struggling to survive. The church is also in pain.

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<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, First (Spanish) edition published in Lima, Peru, 1971; first English edition published by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1973.

Here pain is personal, but it is also deeply political <sup>2</sup>.

The self-help that is offered by much of our worship is not an option and escapism beckons, for this is easier than addressing the imbalance of power which underlies much of the pain.

And so we sing unquestioningly of a lord and master, a victorious king and dream of an afterlife where there are no more tears. A heaven beyond this world, where all are united together and join in songs of worship around the lamb on the throne. The only problem is that for me, this is my vision of hell!

So is the answer to our mismatch of worship with our real lives to be found in the BU initiative of Real Life Worship?

Here's a prayer written by Craig Gardiner and used at the launch of Real Life Worship at a Seminar at Baptist Assembly 2009.

In a world where so much is false:  
From the flowers on the restaurant table  
to the shiny happy smiles on the TV  
Lord, help us to get real.

In a world where so much else is fake:  
from the tan lines on the beach  
to the surgically enhanced beauties in the magazine  
Lord, help us to be real.

In a world where my banana flavoured milk shake  
tastes more banana than bananas  
And we still know more about the lives of Posh and Becks  
than we do our neighbours  
Lord, help us to get real.

In amidst the branded logos  
the spin and teleprompted passion  
Faceless banking,  
virtual communities  
and help desks where  
a computer generated echo  
assures us we are valued,

May our worship be real  
and may our living be

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<sup>2</sup> There is some debate in feminist circles as to when the phrase "The personal is political" was first used. It seems to be one of those phrases which emerged in women's circles drawing on ideas from Marxism and Social Theory from the 1950's. The first quoted use of the phrase I can find is in Carol Hanisch who wrote a memo in February of 1969 which was originally titled, "Some Thoughts in Response to Dottie's Thoughts on a Women's Liberation Movement," in reply to a memo by Dottie Zellner, who contended that consciousness-raising was just therapy and questioned whether the new independent Women's Liberation Movement was really "political." It was then edited and published under the title "The Personal is Political" in the 1970 anthology, Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation, edited by Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, see [www.carolhanisch.org](http://www.carolhanisch.org)

an authentic sacrifice of worship.<sup>3</sup>

Real Life Worship is a new venture from a group of Baptist ministers and theologians. It is an attempt to connect real life to worship. Worship that forms us relationally, politically, socially and economically!<sup>4</sup>

As of yet, Real Life Worship has not taken off. Why is this? Probably, because for the small group behind it, real life has got in the way. And the time and the resources have been limited by the pressures of family life.

But I think as an initiative, it warrants some attention. It is asking some very probing questions about the nature of our worship and of our society.

Hence this paper, seeks to rejuvenate the discussions around Real Life Worship in the hope we can nudge the dialogue forward.

Real Life Worship draws on Psalm 137 asking the key question, of how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? Rightly, they point out that much of our modern lives is fake, built on an entertainment and celebrity culture where the new church, the new place of worship is Big Brother or I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here or X-Factor.

But, I think the question runs deeper than this. For most of society, it is the church that is the strange land.

It is the song that is packaged in a way that is uniquely church.

We even speak of people as being un-churched as if they are the ones who are strange rather than ourselves with our traditions of hymn singing, referring to ancient texts and preaching morals that are outdated and, to today's society, discriminatory.

As a church, still to be debating issues of race, gender and sexuality is a strange land for most people.

Many people outside the church do have an understanding or a sense of God or spirituality. They may even have a basic understanding of some of the Biblical and gospel stories that have found their way into mainstream consciousness.

But how does the story of the Good Samaritan relate to the expression of Christianity, which is so often exclusive, found within the church?

How does the Christmas story of a baby relate to an all powerful God who is king and lord?

How does the Easter story of a man dying on an executioner's cross due to the will of an angry father, relate to our society where relationships are fragmented and broken?

Maybe those who we call un-churched just do not find the church reflecting their own experience of spirituality.

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<sup>3</sup> Craig Gardiner, quoted from the Real Life Worship Blog at <http://reallifeworship.wordpress.com>

<sup>4</sup> Quote from the Introduction to the Real Life Worship Blog at <http://reallifeworship.wordpress.com>

That does not mean that the gospel story and elements of our faith cannot relate to mainstream society.

How can a Eucharist where bread is broken and wine is poured fail to speak of the conflict and violence in the world around us? How can we not be moved to share food in community with one another?

How can we not see hope in the coming of spring or in community regeneration?

To be Real, maybe, we have to take seriously the critiques offered by liberation theologies, black theologies, feminist and environmental theologies. Maybe to be Real, we have to reflect theologically on our context.

The problem is that most church folk don't see the problem. They think their worship is Real. Maybe this is the real reason why Real Life Worship has not taken off.

Let me tell you a story! It is a story called the Velveteen Rabbit by Margery Williams.<sup>5</sup>

There was once a velveteen rabbit, and in the beginning he was really splendid. He was fat and bunched, as a rabbit should be; his coat was spotted brown and white, he had real thread whiskers, and his ears were lined with pink sateen. On Christmas morning, when he sat wedged in the top of the Boy's stocking, with a sprig of holly between his paws, the effect was charming.

...For at least two hours the Boy loved him, and then Aunts and Uncles came to dinner, and there was a great rustling of tissue paper and unwrapping of parcels, and in the excitement of looking at all the new presents the Velveteen Rabbit was forgotten.

The Velveteen Rabbit realises he is not real, he does not have sticking out handles or bits that turn. the Skin Horse tries to comfort him.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day...

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

And then the boy takes the Rabbit to himself, and gradually, over time the Rabbit's whiskers fall off and his ears become shabby and the Velveteen Rabbit becomes Real to the boy.

"You must have your old Bunny!" she said. "Fancy all that fuss for a toy!"

The Boy sat up in bed and stretched out his hands.

"Give me my Bunny!" he said. "You mustn't say that. He isn't a toy. He's REAL!"

One day, they are out in the woods and the Velveteen Rabbit meets some Real rabbits who have legs and can run and jump. And the Velveteen Rabbit realises that while he is real to the boy he is still not Real and cannot jump.

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<sup>5</sup> Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, (1922), Egmont Books Ltd., 2004

And then, just as the Velveteen Rabbit realises he is old and his stuffing is coming out, the boy gets sick and they cannot go out and play. Once the boy recovers all the toys, including the Velveteen Rabbit are thrown in a sack behind the fowl-house ready to be burned.

And while the Boy was asleep, dreaming of the seaside, the little Rabbit lay among the old picture-books in the corner behind the fowl-house, and he felt very lonely...Of what use was it to be loved and lose one's beauty and become Real if it all ended like this? And a tear, a real tear, trickled down his little shabby velvet nose and fell to the ground.

And then a strange thing happened. For where the tear had fallen a flower grew out of the ground, a mysterious flower, not at all like any that grew in the garden. It had slender green leaves the colour of emeralds, and in the centre of the leaves a blossom like a golden cup. It was so beautiful that the little Rabbit forgot to cry, and just lay there watching it. And presently the blossom opened, and out of it there stepped a fairy.

... "Little Rabbit," she said, "don't you know who I am?"

The Rabbit looked up at her, and it seemed to him that he had seen her face before, but he couldn't think where.

"I am the nursery magic Fairy," she said. "I take care of all the playthings that the children have loved. When they are old and worn out and the children don't need them any more, then I come and take them away with me and turn them into Real."

"Wasn't I Real before?" asked the little Rabbit.

"You were Real to the Boy," the Fairy said, "because he loved you. Now you shall be Real to every one."

And so the fairy takes the Velveteen Rabbit back to the woods where he had once met Real rabbits.

And she kissed the little Rabbit again and put him down on the grass.

"Run and play, little Rabbit!" she said.

... And he found that he actually had hind legs! Instead of dingy velveteen he had brown fur, soft and shiny, his ears twitched by themselves, and his whiskers were so long that they brushed the grass. He gave one leap and the joy of using those hind legs was so great that he went springing about the turf on them, jumping sideways and whirling round as the others did, and he grew so excited that when at last he did stop to look for the Fairy she had gone.

He was a Real Rabbit at last, at home with the other rabbits.

Now the Velveteen Rabbit is Real. He can jump!

It is in the letting go of the cosy insulated world of the nursery, in the dying and rising again that the Velveteen Rabbit becomes Real.

What is Real for the Velveteen Rabbit is not neat or tidy. Rather it is messy, authentic, and found in a wider community.

So if Real is outside of the church, why do we remain in the church? What is it that is distinctive about Christianity and the church?

For me, it is about the myth, the story, to be very churchy, the gospel. The problem is that the myth has been distorted by 2,000 years of church history and its abuse of power. To be Real, we must unmask the language of oppression and create a new language.

And here is one of the first problems we encounter with Real Life Worship. Very helpfully, they have produced what are called the Real Life Worship Files which explore different aspects of worship, such as Bible Reading, Lord's Supper, Prayer, Psalms and Songs.<sup>6</sup> And while all these do have a place, they are still very much traditional church.

How about exploring films, books, pop music, our contemporary newspapers and magazines?

If we read the daily paper, how does this change our prayer and our understanding of what God is saying to us?

If we watch a film such as *Shrek*<sup>7</sup>, how does this help us understand ourselves made in God's image?

If we read *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*<sup>8</sup>, what does this say about sacrifice, the cross and resurrection?

If we watch *Saving Private Ryan*,<sup>9</sup> what does this say to our understanding of "This is my body, this is my blood"?

If we watch *Babette's Feast*<sup>10</sup>, how does this relate to our understanding of communion?

The task of re-mythologising, of reclaiming and re-working the myth for our own context is extensive and involves a critique of language and theology. Many have begun this work, but it has yet to filter into our worship. For example, Mary Daly, a radical post Christian thea-logian and philosopher used the language of Verb, of Be-ing by which to speak of God/dess.<sup>11</sup> The divine is dynamic, moving, ever-changing, diverse and values difference.

The online edition of the Compact Oxford English Dictionary defines myth:

### Myth

- noun 1 a traditional story concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, typically involving the supernatural. 2 a widely held but false belief. 3 a fictitious person or thing.

— ORIGIN Greek *muthos*.

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<sup>6</sup> See Real Life Worship Blog at <http://reallifeworship.wordpress.com>

<sup>7</sup> *Shrek*, DVD, directed by Andrew Adamson, Paramount, 2001

<sup>8</sup> J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Bloomsbury, 2008

<sup>9</sup> *Saving Private Ryan*, DVD, directed by Steven Spielberg, Paramount, 1998

<sup>10</sup> *Babette's Feast*, DVD directed by Gabriel Axel, MGM Entertainment, 1987

<sup>11</sup> See Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, Beacon Press, 1974, in which she draws on and rejects Paul Tillich's concept of God as Supreme Being or Being itself (noun), which was itself a response to the existential dilemma of non-being, in favour of an understanding of God as Verb, as Be-ing.

This is interesting because it clearly documents the way in which the meaning of the word has shifted over time. An earlier edition<sup>12</sup> focuses our attention entirely upon the historicity of the events contained within the myth:

Myth... 1. A purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena. Often used vaguely to include any narrative having fictitious elements. 2. A fictitious or imaginary person or object.

Thus, when John Hick publishes a collection of essays entitled the Myth of God Incarnate<sup>13</sup>, much of the popular - and scholarly - attack focuses on the use of the category of Myth.

Since the time of Reimarus<sup>14</sup>, Christian theology has allowed itself to be sidetracked into a debate about historicity. What can, and cannot, be proved actually to have happened. Or been.

Questions of faith are then reduced to questions of belief. Do you believe in our Lord Jesus Christ...?

And theology is reduced to a needle-sitting debate where every sentence begins "It depends what you mean by..." It depends what you mean by "Lord." It depends what you mean by "Christ." It depends what you mean by "Jesus." It depends what you mean by "believe."

Christianity is fortunate in having a clearly defined, foundational myth. The myth of God incarnate. A baby, born in a stable in Bethlehem, acclaimed because of his teaching, acceptance and healing, crucified and experienced as resurrected.

That is the myth which we proclaim every Sunday in the visible symbols of broken bread and spilled wine.

More importantly, that is the myth in which we have faith and by which we try to live our lives. This is not a question of mere belief. This is a question of faith.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) still has some way to go before it catches up with the way we are using myth here. The myth of Christianity is the central, unifying story from which the Christian people derive their identity - or perhaps better identities.

If we may, for the moment, put aside the very live question of whether, in reality, the myth unifies or divides, the strength of the concept of myth is that myth is a living, dynamic, creative, adapting narrative.

Where the OED continues to stress questions of 'fact' verses 'fiction,' the use of the term myth can set us free from such constraints and to see the myth as being in a constant, dynamic tension with the historical reality.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in *Bread not Stone*<sup>15</sup>, argues that this continuous process of hermeneutical interpretation, particularly from a feminist perspective of marginal identification in the Bible brings into question the very closed nature of the Biblical text itself.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Book Club Associates, 1983.

<sup>13</sup> John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, SCM, 1977

<sup>14</sup> *von Reimarus zu Wrede: eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu Forschung* is the original German title for Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1st British Edition, A&C Black, 1910

A feminist hermeneutic must rid itself of the images of patriarchy with which 5,000 years of contextual mythologising has overlaid the text.

Although the Velveteen Rabbit believes himself to be real, it is only when he is thrown away to be burned with the contaminated rubbish, that he is finally able to jump and dance.

So, can this process of 're-mythologising' be applied to the concept of worship?

Week by week Tim and I write a new Eucharistic liturgy. Week by week Tim and I write a different Eucharistic liturgy.

Week by week, as a community, we remember Christ.  
Sometimes this liturgy includes traditional words  
familiar words  
comforting words.

We do not imbue those words, however, with any supernatural or magic powers.  
The words do not transform ordinary bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.  
That process takes place in the mind, in the imagination of the believer.

As a consequence, our Eucharists are as likely not to contain Paul's words from 1 Corinthians.  
We draw upon themes from daily life  
themes from the Bible  
themes from the reality in which we find ourselves.

*Thunderbird Eucharist* compares the violence to which Jesus was submitted with the domestic violence suffered by so many in our community fuelled by substance abuse.

*Three Wise Hippies* plays with the insight that the Magi were probably idealistic social misfits who 'find themselves' in the breaking of bread and sharing of wine.

*Fragile Earth* envisions Christ's body broken in the brokenness of the current ecological crisis.

Week by week Tim and I write a new Eucharistic liturgy. Week by week Tim and I write a different Eucharistic liturgy.  
Week by week, as a community, we re-member Christ.

At the centre of each of these examples - is the central metaphor of the Christian faith. That God's body was broken on the cross and God's blood shed to seal the promise of resurrection. This is the metaphor - myth, if you like - which unites all Christians. This is the myth which, if understood mythologically actually has the potential, as yet largely unexplored, to unite people of faith across sectarian divides.

However, it is profoundly Baptist — congregational — to suggest that each gathered community of worshippers should re-tell that myth from its own context, from its own reality.

The reality of twenty first century Britain is that while immigration may still be a live issue, an apology for the transatlantic slave trade is, at best, taken for granted. That it is still being debated shows a church which has lost touch with the society in which it is located.

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<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza , *Bread not Stone : the Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Beacon Press, 1984.

In a society where women have had legal equality for decades, the debate is not about whether women *should* have positions of leadership. Rather it is about what barriers are still in place which are preventing this from happening. Yet in the strange land of the church, there are still discussions about whether women can legitimately be ordained, and if so, to what degree.

We live and worship in a city in which the annual Pride march<sup>16</sup> attracts tens of thousands of celebrating participants. Yet the message those people hear from the church is not one of love and acceptance. Rather they are spurned and rejected, told to repent of their sins in a way which is wholly disproportionate.

The church has nothing to say to the reality of the majority of people in this country.

Which is, of course, why they have voted with their feet.

Or should I say hind legs? For the Velveteen Rabbit knew all along that he did not have hind legs. He knew that his being Real was only in the boy's imagination. The meeting with the rabbits in the wood confirmed to him that it was actually the Nursery which was a Strange Land.

And like Aslan,<sup>17</sup>

like Obe Wan Kenobe,<sup>18</sup>

like Romero<sup>19</sup>

like Jesus

it is only when the Velveteen Rabbit is set free from the Strange Land that he is able to begin his wild, whirling ecstatic dance.

And become Real.

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<sup>16</sup> Manchester Pride is an annual celebration of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered life, see [www.manchesterpride.com](http://www.manchesterpride.com)

<sup>17</sup> CS Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Geoffrey Bles, 1950. Aslan is killed by the white witch, but inspires the children from beyond the grave through the rest of the adventure.

<sup>18</sup> *Star Wars* directed by George Lucas, Lucasfilm, 1977. Obe Wan Kenobe is a Jedi knight who teaches the hero, Luke Skywalker. However, it is only after Obe Wan gives up his life at the hand of the villainous Darth Vader, that Luke is able to take on the role of Jedi Warrior as Obi Wan continues to inspire him to "Feel the Force"

<sup>19</sup> Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador was murdered saying mass in March 1980. He has become mythologized as the *Voice of the Voiceless* (trans. Michael Walsh, Orbis, 1985) and is known popularly as *San Romero de las Americas* in contradiction of the stalled official process of canonization.