

*A Royal Waste of Time*, by Marva J. Dawn

reviewed by [Donna Schaper](#) in the [January 5, 2000](#) issue

Marva Dawn excels at demonstrating how good worship and good liturgy meet the very needs that drive us to their substitutes. The genuine splendor of worship can free us from our preoccupation with consumerism, our addictive behaviors and our anxieties. At worship one does nothing more nor less than to give oneself fully to God.

Dawn has expanded her rich work in the field of contemporary worship into considering the concerns of Generation X—which she sees as a media-saturated and "dumbed down" crowd. But she finds its members eager for genuine worship—an activity which she aptly describes as a royal and splendiferous waste of time. Dawn points to Generation X's odd conjunction of reverence and irreverence as the nub of the spiritual situation of postmodern culture, which can neither dismiss religion nor embrace it wholeheartedly. This paradox leads to the inevitable commodification of worship: it gets used, bought and sold.

Among the many well-respected sources on whom Dawn relies, Edward Farley is a favorite. Farley argues that many of our current social problems arise partly as the result of a loss or diminishment at the very heart of culture. "Some would say the loss of culture is itself . . . a loss of the society's powerful deep symbols. Without such things a society becomes alienated from past wisdom, develops institutions that have little connection with sources of humanization, and instigates styles of everyday life whose primary function is ephemeral entertainment and trivial comforts."

As the antidote to lost culture Dawn relies on metanarrative. This term refers to an overarching story that gives focus, cohesion, commonality and meaning to life. Dawn warns against the affront the useful gives to genuine worship. "We dare never let our responsibilities for leading worship cause us to forget that what we do is not intended to be utilitarian, even though it is momentarily significant," she writes. She remembers Romano Guardini's definition of worship as "zwecklos aber doch sinnvoll"—useless, but at the same time full of meaning or signs. "If our worship is to be truly a waste of time in focusing on God as the Infinite Center, then that goal at

the same time necessitates some practical choices about the meanings and signs that help us never lose sight of that paradox." For Dawn, "the community is healthiest when it sings. Singing is the process of creating a communal voice. Singing together expresses the community on a level that goes beyond anything you hear, see, or say." She wants people to feel that "if they don't sing, they are going to die."

Dawn rightly fears that our worship has not been "deep enough to equip people to lay down the world's follies and shoulder the cross." She has the problem right: in general, the mainstream churches have entertained rather than so equipped their congregations. Lay leaders often demand such entertainment—and pastors comply. But despite the pertinence and importance of Dawn's critique, her schoolmarmish, finger-wagging tone may put people off. Making people feel guilty may not be the best way to get them to make their worship experiences more splendid.

Though worshipers do need to learn new songs, many find spiritual meaning more easily in the old favorites. Dawn is so much an advocate of the more complex and classical in music that she is not able to understand her learners' need for steps on the way to "great" music. They should not be put down for their lack of musical education and experience. If Dawn really believed her own argument that culture is dead, she would understand how radical and enormous a rebuilding job she faces.

Dawn is at her best when she protests the current confusion between evangelism and worship. She rightly shows how the sneaky utilitarians are using worship to grow churches instead of just worshipping for their own—and God's—sake. Dawn states that her primary reason for "protesting the confusion of worship and evangelism that characterizes much contemporary discussion in churches is that it violates the biblical directives which form the Church." The splendid chapter she devotes to looking "at a few biblical texts in order to sketch some principles of faithful evangelism" deserves a careful reading by all denominational church-growth departments and local-church growth committees. Readers may leave this book feeling genuinely depressed (a common result of a good scolding), but they are also likely to be radicalized by it. We can have the worship we want, especially if we don't dilute its grandeur by attaching other purposes to it.