Lessons from the Music of the Global South

By Swee Hong Lim | Volume 4.2 Fall 2018

_Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God—Luke 6:20_

According to the report by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Africa is now the vanguard of World Christianity. There are currently 599 million Christians in Africa compared to 597 million in Latin America and 550 million in Europe.[1] The report projects that by the year 2050 the number of Christians in the global south (Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania) will surpass those in Europe and North America. In another report, the World Bank highlighted the fact that the majority of the world’s extreme poor live in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The report noted that although “over 1 in 10 people live in extreme poverty globally, in Sub-Saharan Africa, that figure is 4 in 10, representing 389 million people—that’s more poor people than all other regions combined.”[2] Through these two sets of data, it seems Jesus’s proclamation in Luke 6:20, “blessed are the poor,” has a bearing on the life of the church beyond one’s individual faith practice. Concern for the poor was well articulated in the previous issue of this Review, in which Don Saliers and Adam Tice provided us with thoughtful reflections and musical examples of standing in solidarity with the poor.[3] I would like to augment these reflections with musical examples that come from the global south, and consider their meaning and importance for the entire church.

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It is a challenging undertaking to understand music from the global south within its proper context. Too often, the church situated in the global north has defined what “global music” is and embraced such artifacts without being aware of the issue of stereotyping non-Western congregational songs.[4] To address this, I would like for us to experience music-making that arises from the global south and appreciate their songs of faith within their socio-cultural context. The task is to learn from the poor and to experience the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims is theirs.

From the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria, we have the “African Credo—I Believe,” composed by Jude Chicka Nnam.[5] Though this work is in English, the African musical devices of “call and response” and the incipit ostinato “Do you believe” are unmistakably present throughout the song. Their presence dramatically transforms a lengthy liturgical text into one that is both readily singable and conducive to body movement that serves as a mnemonic device for holistic learning.

Far more significant, however, is the metanarrative of the song—one that calls for a personal response: taking a stand and staking one’s life on belief. The notion of personal faith commitment is ubiquitous
throughout the global south. Indeed, the price of faith is costly in many instances, with persecution and martyrdom increasingly common.

In recent months in the United States, the ethical value system foundational to Christianity has been severely challenged in the public square (by separation of families, lack of truth-telling, growth in racism, etc.), yet the church has failed to stand together in response. Instead it has splintered, with some resisting but others keeping silent or condoning such acts. Might this be the time for the church at home to return to its existential purpose? Here, the lesson we can learn from the poor is that we must demonstrate unconditional love of God and neighbor.

An important gift that African Christianity has shared with the world is its embodied worship experience. While churches in the global north experience celebrations of the Eucharist that might be overly somber, our African sisters and brothers live out the joyful dimension the Eucharist wholeheartedly. “Yamba Yamba Yamba Yahweh” is a song in the Kikongo language from the Congo region. Despite the fact that material poverty is common in the land, this short song revels in the salvific work of Christ:

Take, take, take with God / Take the bread with our Lord / Take the wine with our Lord / Receive our incense oh Lord.[6]

Its call and response and closed harmony singing are idiomatic of African church music. The brief text hints at one’s dependency on God. Indeed, such dependency has life-or-death implications in their social context, a situation far different from the challenges faced by those of us who are better situated in the global north. Does “give us our daily bread” in the Lord’s Prayer take on a physical life-or-death meaning for us? It certainly does for those facing extreme poverty. How desperate for God are we? The very question can help us learn a lesson from the poor.

At the other end of the Christian worship-music spectrum, contemporary worship songs are also flourishing in the global south. Here, we have the song Kulungile Baba (It is well, Father) by South African gospel singer, Sfiso Ncwane (1979–2016).[7] In this song, Ncwane affirms the goodness of God, regardless of circumstances. He sings,

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Kulungile Baba (It is well, Father) / Kulungile somandla (If it’s your will, almighty) / Kulungile Makuyintando yakho Baba (If it’s within your will, Father) / Kulungile Konkw’okwenzekayo Baba (Everything that is happening, Father) / Kulungile Baba (It is well, Father).[8] In the brief profile of Ncwane, we learn of his difficult childhood; yet through it all, we read how God blessed him.[9] The Apostle Paul in the Letter to the Romans declared:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35–39).

It is this sense of assured destiny and purposeful living that enables the poor to withstand hardship, distress, persecution, peril, and even martyrdom. Perhaps it is this bold sense of hope and trust in God’s strong love that enables the poor to make heart-wrenching decisions. This sense of conviction is a suitable lesson for us to learn from the poor, who are often without options except to step out in trust and hope for God’s deliverance. May we also learn to sing Kulungile Baba (It is well, Father).

Research into behavioral psychology has investigated how poverty in various forms influences the mindset and health of people. It makes a difference. I wondered if Jesus was thinking of this when he proclaimed, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” Might the poor perceive the kingdom of God differently? I have offered three musical examples from the African continent and suggested what we could learn from the poor as they sing in their socio-cultural settings. Without romanticizing poverty, it is possible to discern in such musical expression the people’s willingness to assert their stance of faith, the immediacy of their desire to encounter God, and the unconditional trust that they have for God’s goodness, regardless of their real burdens and struggles. Perhaps these embody lessons that the church in the global north can learn in order to remain effective witnesses in the new reality of our own socio-cultural landscape, where the institutional church is increasingly marginalized by lack of credibility, and where its relevance fades as society turns away from organized religion. Indeed, for the poor, the kingdom of God is not located in an earth-bound religious institution, but is found in the realm of personal faith in a powerful God that acts. Might this be what we need to rediscover?

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