

*The articles are excerpts from Ruth Jacobs' notebook, selected and edited by Helen Kemp. The original articles were written sometime between 1949 and 1959, when Ruth was guiding the young and growing Guild by her convictions, her thoughts and the inspiration of her personality.*

# A Singing Religion

Christianity is a singing religion. There are other powerful religions in the world and always have been, but no great religion has ever been a singing religion except Christianity and its ancestor, the Hebrew religion.

A singing religion differs from any other primarily, I think, in spirit. A singing religion indicates a joyful religion. A singing religion implies beauty of worship rather than grimness of worship.

While other religions have made much of bloody sacrifices, Christianity has made much of song. While other religions have made much of gloomy prayers, Christianity has made much of great praise. And I suspect that we modern Christians are missing the melody of our faith. We sing, to be sure, but we do it almost as if it were an arduous duty. We are reluctant to sing the hymns that may not be familiar, and often in our worship we lack the joyousness, the high praise that belongs to a singing religion.

This singing of our religion began far back in the dim past of the Jewish people. The oldest religious song recorded for us in the Bible goes back to the time of the Judges, but that song did not resemble Christian singing. It was grim and forbidding, a song of battle and blood, of vengeance and hatred.

But as the years came and went, the Hebrew prophets received great insights about God and revealed them to the people. The songs of the people gradually evolved and took on a different character, while at last in the book of Psalms, which covers a period of about 600 years of Jewish history, we have the highest hopes, the noblest aspirations, the most eloquent expressions of praise and thanksgiving to be found in all literature.

Let me ask you to imagine a Sabbath Day in the temple in Jerusalem. The people have gathered there as a vast congregation from all about the region. To the Jews the Sabbath Day was indeed a holy day, meant for just one thing - the pilgrimage to the Temple, there to meet and worship God.

The congregation assembled and waited with eager hearts, believing that now, as at every service in the temple, God was present and would be revealed to them. Suddenly the sound of music burst forth upon the silence. The three choirs of the temple began their stately procession to the altar, singing as they went, to the accompaniment of harp and cymbal, flute and lyre, played by the chief musicians. They were followed by one hundred and twenty priests blowing upon rams' horns.

Choirs, instrumentalists and priests were dressed in robes of gorgeous colors and elaborate decorations. But this was something more than formal ritual; this was not a performance. Music was not used for music's sake, but only for the purpose of praising God. Robes were not worn for the sake of dignity or show, but as a symbol of dedicated lives. And as the music caught hold of the hearts of the congregation, the Scripture says, "The glory of God filled the temple."

How far we have departed from that high expectation, I do not need to tell you. When we come to church - let's be honest - we want a beautiful and pleasing service. We want an interesting but brief sermon. We want to get out by 12 o'clock. We want to sing the hymns that are easy and singable, whether or not they praise God worthily. But we should be most amazed if "the glory of God should fill the church."

It was not always so, and it ought not to be so at any time. The only purpose of coming to the House of God is to meet God, and to experience a revelation of God's glory.

## ***Thought for the Month:***

The purpose of music is to help us find a more adequate expression of our adoration, our thanksgiving, our praise, our needs, and our hunger. To the extent that we have lost that purpose, we have lost the radiance of our faith.

(from Ruth Jacobs' notebook)