

# LOGOS QUESTIONS

## Why Bother Using Religious Rituals?



University of  
St Andrews



LOGOS  
Institute for Analytic and  
Exegetical Theology

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## A Ritual Life

What comes to mind when you think about what goes on in an average church service? Singing some hymns you don't know the words to? Joining in with a monotonous spoken liturgy? Trudging along a slowly moving queue to take Communion? Trying to stay awake during the vicar's boring sermon? Perhaps your experience is more positive than this. But for many of us, the trappings of Church worship seem woefully out of touch with the rest of our lives—religion seems, to many, to be outdated, overly-ritualistic, and uninspiring.

What we sometimes fail to notice, however, is that our lives are filled with rituals and liturgies. At what time do you brush your teeth in the morning? For how many minutes? And what kind of toothpaste do you use? When do you have your first cup of tea or coffee for the day? How do you make it? What do you do to celebrate your birthday? Our answers to these questions reveal just some of the rituals which make up our daily lives and tell us something about how we think and relate to our world. Human beings are ritual creatures and the things we care about are reflected in the rituals and practices which make up our lives.

One of the reasons we find religious ritual so dull or uninspiring, I think, is because we so rarely devote our attention to thinking about what this ritual is supposed to do. The rituals and liturgies of the Christian Church play an important role in how we relate to, and worship, God.

This booklet aims to highlight four important features of liturgy which can help us to reflect on the question: Why bother using religious rituals?

**“ Human beings are ritual creatures and the things we care about are reflected in the rituals and practices which make up our lives ”**

# Every Church is Liturgical

Sometimes people talk about liturgy as if it is something done only in traditional churches—those with acts of formal, spoken liturgy. This is clearly not true. If you went to a church on Sunday, what did you do? Stand up to sing some songs? Hear a sermon? Have a time of reflection? Take Communion? Or, maybe something else entirely. Was this what you expected to do? Likely, there was nothing particularly surprising about the contents of the last church service you attended, especially if this was a tradition or congregation you were familiar with. The reason for this, is that all churches have a pattern of ritual activity which they perform—some of these may be accidental (like where in the building the coffee is served from), or some may be more intentional (such as how the songs connect to the message of the sermon, for instance), but any community must develop a pattern of practice in order to function.

One of the reasons having an agreed pattern of practice is so essential is because it allows us to act *together*. The New Testament is clear that the Church is comprised of many different members, who are united together by the Holy Spirit (see Paul's discussion of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12, for instance). Whilst there is clearly a diversity of gifts within the Church, Paul describes this diversity as integral to the function of the body as a whole; 'If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?' (1 Corinthians 12:17). And so, in gathering as members of the Church to worship God communally, we are not just given the opportunity to do something we could just as easily do alone in our own homes. We gather together to worship *together*.

**“Liturgy, even if this be of a very basic form, is absolutely necessary if we are to engage in the task of worshipping God *together*”**

Imagine turning up to the performance of an orchestral symphony, or a jazz band, in which there was no agreement about what or how the musicians were going to play. Suppose, they had no written score to play from, or no agreed key from which they would improvise from. The result would, no doubt, be pretty

disastrous. And the same is surely true for how we worship God together in the Church. Liturgy, even if this be of a very basic form, is absolutely necessary if we are to engage in the task of worshipping God *together*.

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<sup>1</sup>This is a point Bruce Ellis Benson reflects on in more detail in *Liturgy as a Way of Life*.

<sup>2</sup>*Worship*, 27-28.

But yet, this formalised, agreed aspect of what liturgy provides cannot be the whole story either. Take the example of the jazz band again. Jazz requires both some kind of agreement, and also the ability to improvise.<sup>1</sup> Without an understanding of the basic rules of jazz music, and some kind of agreement on how one is to play, improvisation cannot take place. What is needed, to improvise well, is an engagement between the players in which they respond to one another, and all of this must take place against the backdrop of some prior agreement. Similarly, in liturgy, a script or prior agreement cannot specify everything we are to do. Even in the most formal liturgical traditions, a script can only tell you *what* you are to say and sing, but not *how* you are to do it. For instance, how loudly or quickly should you read the confessional prayer? This is just not something the liturgical script can tell us, it can only be learned through improvisation. All liturgy, and all Christian worship, whilst requiring a script or a prior agreement, must also include a level of improvisation. Unlike a jazz band however, we need not only attend to one another in acting together in worship, but we must also attend to the work of the Holy Spirit and allow him to lead our worship. It is important to see that both structure and improvisation are crucial for liturgy. As the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian, Evelyn Underhill describes, too much emphasis on structure leads to dull, dry, and lifeless ritual. Too much emphasis on improvisation leads to an unruly, and unstructured expression of worship which cannot possibly maintain a community of worshippers. All worship must find the balance between the two, Underhill thinks.<sup>2</sup>

So, our first answer to the question, 'Why bother with religious ritual?', is that such ritual is essential if we are to act together in worship. .

## What Do We Learn From Liturgy?

The second answer we will explore is this: Religious ritual provides us with an opportunity to learn.

Philosophers have sometimes made the distinction between two different kinds of knowing: knowing-how and knowing-that. Think about all the things you know. Take the following, for example: I know that Sheffield Wednesday are the greatest football team in the world, I know that my hair is brown, and that I am socially dysfunctional without at least one cup of coffee in the morning. But not everything we know can be summarised in a sentence of the form, 'I know that \_\_\_\_'. For instance, I also know *how* to make an excellent cup of coffee in the morning, I know *how* to drive a manual car, and I know *how* to make my 2-year-old son giggle uncontrollably.

These two kinds of knowing (knowing how and knowing that) seem to be importantly different. This was painfully brought home to me when I first learned how to drive. As someone who has been through all possible avenues in the education system, I found myself woefully ill-equipped to learn how to drive a car. Although I have no difficulty retaining information and facts, no matter how hard I studied the theory of driving, it took

me a long time to grasp how to find the biting point on my clutch, or how to reverse a car without veering in the wrong direction. Some philosophers have argued that the reason for this, is that knowledge-how cannot be reduced to knowledge-that. No matter how many facts I learned, I would never learn how to drive a car. In fact, knowing-how seems to be something which can often only be gained through practice and repetition. The longer I rehearsed my driving manoeuvres, the more easily these came to me.

This has some relevance in thinking about the point of liturgy and ritual. Christian theology places an important emphasis on the fact that God is a person—and so knowing God needs to be sensitive to this fact. Think about any other person you know—is your

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knowledge of that person easily summarised into information about them which can take the form of knowledge-that? Obviously not. For if this were the case, a detailed Wikipedia page would be enough for helping me to know a person. But just because I know David

Beckham’s Wikipedia page back to front, does not mean that I know David Beckham. What we need in addition to such knowledge, is something we can only gain through experience and practice. Knowing-how plays an important role in all of our relationships; from knowing-how to make someone laugh, how to console them in difficult times, or knowing how to understand their thick impenetrable American accent.

The same is the case for our relationship with God—if we look to the rituals contained in scripture, we can see many examples in which individuals and communities come to learn not just some information about God, but also how to engage with God, how to worship God properly, and how to pray to God. The Lord’s prayer, a form of liturgy which is used in countless Christian traditions provides a good example of this. Jesus’s concern in teaching the words of this prayer was not merely to pass on some information about God, but to teach his followers *how* they should communicate with God. And many of the practices which typically make up Christian worship are no different; the aim of these liturgies is not to teach us *about* God, but to teach us something practical.

Liturgy provides the opportunity for us to learn how to engage God in various ways. Put in this way, we can see that what we are doing when we sing together, read some piece of liturgy together, or pray together is not captured well by describing only the content of these rituals. Instead, just as the Lord’s prayer teaches us to pray, these practices teach us how to worship God, how to confess to God, and how to ask God for the things that we need. Like many of the rituals which pervade our daily lives, the rituals of the Church can teach us how to live and relate to our world.

# Who Are We Listening To?

Thirdly, not only can liturgies and rituals teach us how to relate to God, but they are also closely connected to the things that we value. And so, one reason to engage in (the right kinds of) religious ritual is because they help to shape what we value.

It is often said that one of the most informative ways of finding out what we value in life can be found by looking at our bank accounts. What is more important: take-away coffee or supporting charitable organisations? Having the latest fashion or investing in our health and fitness? The expenditure column of our bank statement can help answer these questions very well. Whether these priorities are intentional or not, the things that we do and the rituals which we build into our daily lives, have immense power to shape the kind of people we are. When Jesus teaches about the importance of building up treasures in heaven, instead of treasures on earth, he tells us that ‘where your treasure is, there your heart will be also’ (Matthew 6:21). In essence, what Jesus tells us here, I think, is that our relationship with money tells us what our heart already values, and that what we do with money changes the things that we value. The relationship is cyclical.

It is thus vital that we are aware of this relationship between practice and value. We are constantly sold a way of living, acting and relating to the world. If we dress a certain way, eat certain

foods, use the right kinds of social media in the right kinds of way, then we will embody a certain way of life. Marketing professionals know all too well that one of the most effective ways of selling a product is to sell a way of life—why else do they send countless products to footballers and social media celebrities to endorse? This is not necessarily a bad thing—perhaps the things we spend our time doing genuinely reflect those things we care about. The key question we must ask ourselves is: ‘Who are we listening to?’<sup>3</sup>

This question is also vital if we are to reflect on what we are doing when we engage in the liturgies of our own church traditions. For every aspect of our worship and gathering instils something in us and reveals something about us. The direction the chairs face dictates how our attention is to be led. The bodily movements we use reflects something of what we value. The liturgy of the Church is, therefore, telling a story about a certain kind of life, and training us to live in a certain way. Reflecting on this can help us not only to see the value of religious ritual, but it can also help us to ask the right kinds of questions about what is and is not included within our traditions and communities.

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<sup>3</sup>Dru Johnson explores this question in more detail in his book *Human Rites*. .

# The Chameleon Effect of Social Rites

Finally, religious ritual allows us to be shaped by a community in our understanding and experience of God.

As we have seen, there is an importantly social dimension to Christian worship. In participating in a religious community, we are joining together with the Church worldwide to participate in worshipping God. It is important to see, then, in answering the question: 'Who are you listening to?', that the answer is not simply, 'God'. Religious rituals and liturgies are an opportunity to learn how to engage God by participating in a group activity, but they are also an opportunity to be shaped by the other members of our community, for better or worse. And so, unless we think that our own individual understanding of God could never be improved upon, then engaging in such rituals is of vital importance. Let me illustrate this point by outlining two recent discussions in psychology.

First, as parents of young children will attest to—children are especially quick at shaping their behaviour to those they spend time with. An afternoon spent with obnoxious company is more than enough to change even the most precious angel into a spoilt brat. We talk of the importance of 'getting in with the right crowd', and often go to great lengths to protect our children from harmful influences. This is something psychologists have described as 'The Chameleon Effect'; put simply, human beings demonstrate a remarkable capacity to subconsciously mimic the behaviour of those we spend time with. This capacity is especially prevalent in more empathetic individuals – we all have a friend or family member who unintentionally and, sometimes, embarrassingly, mimics the accent of whoever they speak to.

**“ a community has immense power to encourage one another in faith and worship, but also to discourage and undermine one another. ”**

Another way in which social interaction shapes how we relate to the world can be found by looking at another topic in contemporary psychology; that of 'mutual object perception'. It is common-place to share our perception of the world with others—sitting in the passenger seat of a car, watching a football game with friends, or investigating a strange noise in one's back garden with someone else, all provide good examples of cases in which our experience is shared. When we engage in this kind of *shared experience*, we don't just experience the object of our experience (e.g. the football game, the strange noise), but our fellow observers also feature as a part of our experiences, even when we're not directly attending to this. In functioning as fellow observers, we have a great power to shape the content of one another's experiences: small acts of communication, whether these be verbal (e.g. don't miss the left turn coming up), or just through certain bodily postures

(e.g. looking towards the location of the strange sound). Experiencing the world together means that we become influenced by others.

All of this to say: who we engage with in a religious community is an important question to consider and can help us to see the value of shared religious rituals. In spending hours of our lives every Sunday worshipping God with a certain community, we will be shaped by the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of those within that community. Moreover, in worshipping together, we allow others to shape our experience of liturgy, and, more importantly, our own experiences of God. The way in which we engage with others in worship will influence what and how we attend to God. In a very real sense, then, in liturgy we are listening not only to God, but also to the community we worship alongside. And of course, this can have both its positives as well as its negatives—a community has immense power to encourage one another in faith and worship, but also to discourage and undermine one another.

# Conclusion

None of what is said may dissuade you from thinking that the majority of religious rites and liturgies are boring, irrelevant, or disconnected from our ordinary lives. But I hope I have persuaded you to see such rituals in a different light. First, some kind of liturgy is essential if we are to take seriously that worship is an act for the community of the Church to engage in, and not just some individual. Just what the content of this liturgy is, will vary significantly from tradition to tradition. Secondly, liturgy and ritual can be immensely valuable in training us to relate rightly to God. Just as learning to drive a car requires practice and repetition, the practices of the Church can give us opportunities to know how to engage with God. Thirdly, liturgies are importantly connected to the things which we value; the things that take up our time and energy can be a very revealing way of seeing just what it is we value, and who we allow to shape our values. Lastly, liturgy is not just about engaging with God—a religious community plays a vital role in shaping our experience of God, and the attitudes we hold.

## Further Reading

1. Benson, Bruce Ellis. 2013. *Liturgy as a Way of Life*. Baker Academic
2. Johnson, Dru. 2019. *Human Rites*. William B. Eerdmans
3. Smith, James K.A. 2016. *You are What you Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. Baker Academic
4. Underhill, Evelyn. 1937. *Worship*. Harper. (Reprint James Clarke and Co., 2010)

## Author Information

Joshua Cockayne is a research fellow at the Logos Institute and a trainee priest in the Anglican church. His research focuses on the philosophy of Christian spirituality and spiritual practices. You can read more about his work here: [www.joshuacockayne.weebly.com](http://www.joshuacockayne.weebly.com)



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