

## **RITUAL AND THE BOWER BIRD**

(Art and Religion I) (A)

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The intersection of art and religion is marked by three words: *ritual*, *liturgy*, and *myth*. All ritual is a form of drama. It tends to reinforce social unity, is a symbolic reminder of common ideals, and may have a critical role in the transformation of consciousness.

### **RITUAL AND THE BOWER BIRD**

I don't know whether you have ever heard of the ancient Chinese poet Li Po. He was born about the year 701. He is traditionally portrayed as an old man, like me, admiring the Waterfall of Lushan. In many old paintings, each of his hands is held by little boys, to keep him from falling over, because he was said always to be drunk with either wine or beauty. Now that's my kind of guy, so today I want to talk about beauty.

Specifically, i want to talk about art in the service of religion. While I was thinking about my talk, three related words kept buzzing around in my head, like angry bees. The words were "ritual", "liturgy", and "myth". Each of these words marks an intersection of art with religion. These words are rarely heard in a Unitarian Universalist environment, where they tend to be regarded with contempt, and, of course, as the illusions of somebody else's religion. So Unitarian Universalists and humanists seem to have difficulty coping with these words. Psychoanalysts like Carl Jung, and mythologists like Joseph Campbell use them frequently, and Buddhists, Jews, Episcopalians, and Catholics do not seem to find it difficult to cope with at least some of them. At another time I will consider some of the psychological and historical reasons for our Unitarian Universalist difficulty. For today i will also put liturgy and myth aside, and look only at the art of ritual in the service of religion.

To start with a personal experience, I first want to say thank you to everyone who is responsible for the curtains now hanging on our upper walls. When I came to my first Sunday service here in Fredericksburg, about three years ago, there were no curtains, only what appeared to be dirty walls, and no flowers. It appeared then that no one cared much how the sanctuary looked. After almost fifty years as a fellowship, and twenty years in the present building, this aesthetic indifference seemed a little shocking to me. Like Li Po, I was thirsting for beauty. So I left, thinking I was in the wrong place, and didn't return for more than three years then, this spring,

somewhat reluctantly, I came back. But now there were curtains up, and someone had brought in a bouquet of flowers. It seemed that now somebody did care--at least a little. So, thank you for the curtains and flowers, whoever you are, because this time I have stayed and signed the book. You might say that the moral of my story is that the ritual of curtains and flowers matters in more serious ways than you may have imagined, and that there is a real ecclesiastical penalty for aesthetic indifference. May I suggest that for a church that wants to grow, beauty is not an option, art is never irrelevant, and the drama of ritual is the pre-eminent art of religion.

Recently I've read two books on religious psychology that have made me look at ritual in a new way. One is an older classic, and the other is new but well on its way to becoming a classic. As to the first, in 1953 the German philosopher Karl Jaspers published his famous book on the evolution of religious ideas, entitled ***The Origin and Goal Of History***. (1). His concern was human psychological development over the last 12,000 years. He specified three major periods in history when the human mind underwent radical psychological changes. He called each of these changes a "Transformation of Consciousness". The first occurred at about 10,000 BCE, when mankind discovered agriculture and began to domesticate animals. The second transformation occurred about 4000 BCE, and was signaled by the rise of the great urban, theocratic civilizations, like Egypt, in the Nile, Euphrates, and Indus river valleys. The third and greatest transformation of human consciousness ran from 800 BCE to 200 BCE. Jaspers called it the axial period because the ethical, spiritual, and philosophic ideas which still guide humanity were all formulated at that time. Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and the Hebrew prophets, and Jesus were all alive, in the axial age. This great psychological and religious transformation occurred at about the same time in four widely separated points on the globe, with no chance of reciprocal influence. The change may have been the result of genetic change, or of cultural and linguistic change outside our genes, which biologists call ectogenetic change.

As to the second book, in 2006 the distinguished British historian of religion, Karen Armstrong, published a careful analysis of the axial period. Her book is called ***The Great Transformation, the Beginnings Of Our Religious Traditions*** (2). Armstrong examines the six axial religions, and the four areas where the great transformation took place: Confucianism and Daoism in china; Buddhism and Hinduism in India; monotheism in Israel; and philosophic rationalism in Greece. The new keynote of every axial religion was compassion, or what we now call the golden rule: do not do to others what you would not have them do to you. She then divides each of the six axial religions into the same seven stages. ***Ritual*** is one of these stages, common to all axial religions, *and therefore critical to the transformation of human consciousness, and the history and psychology of world religion.*

Rituals are basically a form of drama. We naturally tend to associate rites, rituals, and ceremonies with religion. Part of what goes on every Sunday in our church is ritual. But rituals are also quite common outside of religion. Probably there are no cultures without rituals, which are symbolic acts that have no direct connection with the survival of the species. A ritual is usually a *precise formal, repeated* pattern of activity. The word *formal* is important here because ritual is at times a way of coping with intense emotions which would otherwise have to be suppressed as psychologically destructive. The *formal* pattern of ritual enables the individual to release the emotion without being destroyed by it, as in the release of grief at a funeral. The word *precise* is important because precision is needed if elaborate rituals are to be made aesthetically effective we tend to use rituals at significant points in our emotional lives, like birth, coming of age, marriage, or death. Rituals are sometimes re-enactments of the myths of a culture, or embody the values of a culture. They may be related to historical events, such as the birth or death of a cultural hero. Sometimes they are related to significant natural events or

changes in the seasons, or to important events in the life of the community or its history. So ritual is both formal and precise—to destroy its formality or precision is to destroy the ritual. But most importantly, ritual is *communal*. Isolated ritual may occur, but the presence and participation of others is usually required for the ritual to be meaningful.

So the three basic characteristics of ritual are that it is *formal, precise, and communal*. Churches are usually silent, like concert halls, because the formality of ritual, like that of music, requires a background of silence and expectant attention on the part of all members of the congregation. Informality tends to be disruptive. Ritual is useful because it “tends to reinforce social unity and is a symbolic reminder of common ideals”. (3). At times religious ritual, usually called liturgy, may have a critical role in the transformation, either natural or self-induced, of individual or communal consciousness,

Ritual in religion might be less important if ritual did not intersect with many other aspects of human experience, and these intersections in turn tend to emphasize the importance of religious ritual. For example, the black robes of judges are a part of legal ritual. At a college commencement the processions, music, and robes are examples of academic ritual. Athletic ritual is evident in the uniforms of football teams. The military uses ritual extensively in parades, flags, uniforms, and bands. The swearing-in ceremonies at presidential inaugurations are examples of political ritual. So ritual is a prominent feature of many aspects of our lives, and not restricted to the rites and ceremonies of religion. To eliminate ritual—hymns, robes, processions, *etc.*, from religion, or to practice ineffective ritual, is to behave quite contrary to the way we behave in the rest of our lives. There is nothing about ritual in religion that makes it inappropriate there, while remaining perfectly appropriate everywhere else in life. Religious art, or ritual, has no necessary theological or supernatural connections. It is entirely *naturalistic*. It does not involve any belief or disbelief. So we do not judge it as either true or false. We judge it *only* as art, and thus require *only* that it be aesthetically and psychologically effective. It may seem surprising to find instances of ritual behavior in many non-human species, but apparently bees and cranes, among other species, exhibit ritual behavior.

Then there is the famous Australian bower bird. As a part of its mating ritual, the male builds on the ground a little house of sticks and grass, and maybe bits of tinfoil or colored glass. This bower is not a nest, but if a female likes it they become a pair. No eggs are laid in this bower, and the birds don't live in it. Its only purpose is symbolic, as part of the mating ritual. So, ritual behavior is not limited to religion, or even to the human species. I doubt that we would accuse the bower bird of being superstitious or irrational for using ritual. It would, therefore, be a mistake to think that human beings who engage in ritual are superstitious, irrational, or supernaturally inclined. Ritual is radically naturalistic art, not supernatural mumbo-jumbo. Religion has every right, and an urgent psychological need, to use art to further its ends however, when ritual is *substituted* for religion it becomes idolatry. That's what all the great axial teachers would have called it. But the great teachers generally support the proper use of ritual. Jesus never advises anyone to ignore the temple ritual. When he restores a blind man's sight he tells him to “go to the temple and make the offering Moses commanded”. In other words, “perform the proper ritual”. Just before he died, Socrates, who was falsely charged with teaching the youth to believe in new gods, asks a friend to offer a cock on his behalf to Aesculap, the god of healing. Again, “perform the proper ritual”. Confucius urged his contemporaries to perform the proper rituals to honor ancestors. As a good Hindu, Gandhi respected India's sacred cows. Albert Schweitzer participated in ritual by building organs and playing them in religious services. (there is some evidence that late in his career he became a Unitarian). Buddha, we are told, wore a yellow robe as a ritualistic symbol of his monastic status, as his followers still do. So, if you find the art of ritual acceptable in religion you are in

good company—the company of Buddha, Gandhi, Confucius, Jesus, Socrates, and Schweitzer. Beyond ritual, the larger complexes and structures of religious art are usually called liturgy, such as those included in our own order of service, or the Roman Catholic *mass*, or the Episcopalian Holy *Communion*.

So, to return to the story with which I started, I came back. I'm glad I did. And I am grateful to those of you who provided the curtains and who continue to provide flowers on occasion. But as I look to the future I am concerned that if our young people leave us, because of an unslaked thirst for beauty, like me or Li, they will never come back. Imagination is the great agent of moral good, and the ultimate effects of art are moral. Children conditioned to artistic indifference are unlikely to find moral indifference objectionable. Just as children conditioned to ugliness in their religious environment are being taught that they too are ugly, which is why an artistically indifferent church cannot grow. We need a new building, but not just because our Sunday school is overcrowded. And not just because our sanctuary is small, as sanctuaries often are. Our adult spirituality, no less than that of our young people, requires the rigorous discipline of beauty. Most importantly, we need a new church because our spiritual welfare is currently impoverished by the aesthetic limitations of our present building.

Since we are planning a new building, let me close with a comment on religious architecture. In every religion, the church building is the focus of art. The artistic rituals which collectively make up a church service constitute a liturgy, and all liturgies are religious dramas. The church sanctuary is the stage on which the dramas of liturgy are enacted. So architecture speaks. Sometimes it even sings. Like Li Po, like me, you all naturally seek beauty. When we look at Washington cathedral, its characteristic and distinctive appearance speaks to us, and we immediately say to ourselves, "this is a Christian cathedral". We may recognize, at other times and places, an Islamic mosque, a Shinto shrine, a Zen monastery, or a Greek temple. Over the centuries these buildings speak of those who put them up. What will our new building say of us, hundreds of years after we are gone? Our new church will speak then only what we say today in putting it up. Will it be so characteristic and distinctive, like Washington cathedral, that anyone will be able to look at it and say to themselves, "This is a Unitarian Universalist church"?

So if you stop to think about it you may agree that all of us here today are facing a great challenge, in building a new church, a new bower. And you may also agree that in fact we are all bower birds. So I thank you again for the curtains and the flowers, whoever you may have been. And Li Po thanks you.

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. New Haven, Yale University Press.
2. New York, Knopf.
3. Encyclopedia Of Religion, Virgilius Ferm, Ed., Philosophical Library, New York, 1943, P. 665, "*Ritual*".
4. *ibid.*