

SIR ISAAC NEWTON AND OUR LOST LITURGY
(Art and Religion III) (B)

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In pursuing the scientific mind, Unitarian Universalism abandoned its religious heart. It unnecessarily sacrificed the emotional validity of its liturgy on the altar of supposed scientific truth. Nevertheless, in a surprising way, science has come to the aid of liturgy, and we can now reclaim our lost liturgy without abandoning science.

Sir Isaac Newton and Our Lost Liturgy

This is the third of four talks on art and religion. All are on our fellowship website. In general, I am trying to invite all of you to become artists, and to regard each of our Sunday services as a work of art, as a religious drama. Perhaps you've never thought of our liturgy, our Sunday "*Order of Service*", as an art form. Our liturgy is a lost art form in exactly the same sense that the symphony or the novel might be regarded as a lost art form. It is a religious form because the purpose of our services is the celebration of life, which is another name for worship. It becomes religious, rather than remaining barrenly philosophic, only when we use the full resources of art in enacting a liturgical drama. I am also trying to point out four things: first, the critical psychological and aesthetic importance of liturgy to religious services. Secondly, the fact that Unitarian Universalists in particular need to be aware of the spiritual weakness of an aesthetically inadequate liturgy, because Unitarian Universalism has unnecessarily sacrificed the emotional validity of its liturgy on the altar of supposed scientific truth. In pursuit of the scientific mind we have abandoned our religious heart. As Duke Ellington said, "it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing".

Thirdly, I want to note some of the historical reasons for what I see as our rather narrow contemporary Unitarian Universalist view of liturgy. And fourth, I want to suggest that either traditional liturgical forms or traditional silence can lead to psychological transformation. I am convinced that Carl Jung was right—that the purpose of life is the increase of consciousness. Liturgy can be a means of transforming consciousness, which is why liturgy is important, and why transformation is the primary goal of religion, even if for most of us that transformation is minor or only slightly incremental.

In his book *Breaking the Spell, Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, the philosopher Daniel Dennett suggests that although inadequate liturgy is common, a transforming liturgy is possible: "there is artifice in the design and execution of religious practices, as anyone knows who has ever suffered through an ineptly conducted religious ceremony. A stammering and prosaic minister and boring liturgy, shaky singing from the choir, people forgetting when to stand and what to say and do—such a flawed performance can drive away even the best-intentioned congregants. **More artfully celebrated occasions can raise the congregation to sublime ecstasy**". (1). Our various congregations exemplify a wide variety of religious practices, but we have no real

denominational liturgy, and there is considerable week-to-week variation of liturgical quality in individual congregations. Some older versions of our hymnal contained sixteen orders of service, but the present one does not have any, and we are particularly weak in regard to visual arts, and architecture. Unitarian Universalist leadership has been concerned about our liturgy for many years. Von Ogden Vogt, one of our most distinguished twentieth century leaders, and minister of the first Unitarian church in Chicago, published his book, *art in religion*, in 1921. It may still be almost* the only Unitarian book on the subject. Here is what he had to say about our liturgy: “the average order (of service) that is so prevalent among us is unpsychological, tiresome, stereotyped, ill constructed, neither interesting nor impressive nor beautiful....we have a liturgy but it is a poor one. We use artistry but not good artistry”. (2) Despite Vogt’s efforts to improve matters, our denomination took no effective action. Then, in 1963, forty-two years later, the newly--merged Unitarian Universalist association published its comprehensive review of all aspects of Unitarian Universalism. Their report was called *The Free Church In A Changing World: The Reports Of The Commissions To The Churches And Fellowships Of The Unitarian Universalist Association*. This was not only a major denominational document, but a milestone in the history of American religion. Here is what our leaders had to say in 1963 about religious art under Unitarian Universalist auspices: “among those with a strong sense for the magnitude of art and the potential richness which the arts can bring to religion, there is the recognition, shared by the commission, that our sermons, our services, our buildings, even the way we sing our hymns are foundering in mediocrity of form and performance and are thus debilitating to the vital religious substance we would like to celebrate....nothing could be worse....than complacency concerning what we, as a denomination, have accomplished in the realm of arts to date”. (3) since these words were written in 1963 it does not appear, even in the forty-odd years since Vogt’s book was published in 1921, that there had been much improvement in our liturgy. Since our leaders clearly agreed with Vogt, their failure to act is hard to understand. I have been unable to find any major statement by our denomination about our use of art in religion in the interval between 1963 and 2008, our new hymnal notwithstanding. So what has happened over the long term? What are some of the influences that are likely, over the last two hundred years, to have led to our loss of liturgy? Since *The Free Church in a Changing World* does not suggest any reasons for the artistic failure it deplores, let me note a few possibilities. I can see at least seven reasons for our limited Unitarian Universalist use of art in religion, for our abandonment of liturgy.

The first reason for our diminished liturgical drama may be our well-justified democratic rejection of authoritarian religion. But I have to wonder whether we threw out the baby with the bath water when we rejected authoritarian religion, because we seem to have simultaneously rejected the non-authoritarian artistic and psychological components that were a useful spiritual adjunct to the older forms of religion. Sometimes I wonder whether, having left ourselves without an adequate denominational liturgy, we have become vulnerable to contemporary fads and artistic and spiritual incompetence.

A second reason for our loss of liturgy may be our puritan and revolutionary ancestors, who emphatically rejected traditional liturgies and generally the use of art in religion. As they said, they wanted no cross and no crown. Their sentiments were anti-Anglican and anti-catholic, as well as anti-royalist. A rich liturgy, unfortunately, was characteristic in those days of both cross and crown.. . The French revolutionaries were even more emphatic. They said that mankind would not be free until the last king had been strangled in the entrails of the last priest. So along with kings and priests, stained glass windows and liturgy had to go. It is ironic that by rejecting art in religion Unitarian Universalism is unwittingly furthering a puritan and somewhat fundamentalist agenda .

A third reason for our weak liturgy may be that we do not have a Unitarian Universalist artistic tradition--we have nothing comparable to Dante's catholic *Divine Comedy* or Milton's protestant *Paradise Lost*. Nevertheless, as Daniel Dennett notes: "the inventory of the world's great works of art is crowned by religious masterpieces. Thanks to Islam we have the Alhambra, and the exquisite mosques of Isfahan and Istanbul. Thanks to Christianity we have the Hagia Sophia and the cathedrals of Europe....Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* and Handel's *Messiah*". (4) the most Unitarian Universalism can offer in the way of great art is two churches by Frank Lloyd Wright. "

A fourth reason for the limits of our liturgy may be that the religions from which Unitarian-Universalism was derived—Judaism and Christianity—for much of their history were predominantly masculine. You may know of the old Jewish prayer in which men thank god that they were not born women. Catholicism has no women priests, to say nothing of cardinals or popes. Since history does not record many women among our founders; one may doubt that there was much room for the feminine instinct in our Unitarian churches in Massachusetts in 1825. And even our major "free church" document of 1963 barely mentions women, does not use inclusive language, and had very few women on the report committees. At the same time, quite predictably, the report points out the defects in our liturgy. Our own acceptance of women as equals, and even as clergy, is primarily a post-1963 phenomenon, and the Quakers were there ahead of us.

At times it does not appear to be the case, but i can't help wondering whether there is a minor correlation, both positive and negative, between the place given to women in a religious denomination and the richness of its liturgy. The veneration of the Virgin Mary and the number of women mystics, in the Anglican and catholic traditions, in the later middle ages and renaissance, may not be unrelated to the effective liturgies of these traditions. It remains to be seen whether the presence of women at all levels of Unitarian Universalism will result in the enrichment of our liturgy.

So the first four reasons for our loss of liturgy are one, our rejection of authoritarian religion; two, our puritan and revolutionary ancestors; three, our lack of an artistic tradition; and four, our predominantly masculine origins.

I will omit here my fifth and sixth reasons for our loss of liturgy--the liturgical problems caused by new ministers and churches coming into Unitarianism and bringing their own varied liturgies with them, and the problems inherent in our theological schools, in which ministers get only limited training in the design of liturgy and in the psychology of religious art.

Instead, let me go directly to a seventh reason for our loss of liturgy. Somewhat surprisingly, it is science. Probably science is the most significant reason for our loss of liturgy. But it's not science, exactly. Rather it's our attitude towards science. Our historic puritan horror of liturgical art has been reinforced by our literal commitment to an overly mechanistic view of science, even though Sir Isaac Newton died in 1727. The influence of science on our origin and history is suggested in that the first Unitarian church in England was the Essex Street Chapel, established in 1774 by Theophilus Lindsey in a London warehouse, with the scientists Joseph Priestly and Benjamin Franklin in attendance at the first service. But with Einstein in the twentieth century, and Stephen Hawking in the twenty-first, science changed. Unfortunately, we weren't looking. For modern science, rather than remaining simply literal, had become metaphorical. One recent scientific definition of matter, for example, is "waves of probability vibrating in nothingness"

And religion had also changed, but again, we weren't looking. We were the prisoners of both our scientific and religious past. Instead of remaining supernaturally oriented, the

study of religion had become radically naturalistic. The science of psychology had replaced theology as the primary religious discipline. And psychology is now forcing us to cancel our unscientific Unitarian Universalist contempt for ritual, liturgy, and myth, and instead to take them seriously. The American mythologist Joseph Campbell would have been pleased when *Scientific American's* new magazine, *Mind*, recently reported research in "unearthing the roots of religious feeling in the neural commotion that accompanies the spiritual epiphanies of nuns, Buddhists and other people of faith....neurologist Mario Beauregard, of the university of Montréal, using Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), seeks to pinpoint the brain areas that are active while the nuns recall the most powerful religious epiphany of their lives, a time they experienced a profound connection with the divine....thus the nuns' forays into the tubular brain scanner did not undermine their faith. On the contrary, the science gave them an even greater reason to believe."(5) yet in many ways we Unitarian Universalists are still the victims of a mistaken allegiance to an incomplete scientific rationalism. So we sometimes regard myth, ritual, and liturgy as the delusions of someone else's religion. But our own older, literal, scientific certainties have become probabilities, and the language of modern physics has come to approximate the metaphors of religion. "wave" theory, and "particle" theory, are both ultimately metaphorical. So we UUs missed the boat regarding changes in *both* science and religion. We missed Higg's boson in physics, sometimes called "the god particle", and Jung's archetypes in psychoanalysis. We now read Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, rather than Thomas Aquinas, knowing that science, especially psychology, not only does not require us to jettison the use of art in religion, but in fact supports it. We can now be both scientific *and* religious. We no longer need to sacrifice the emotional validity of our liturgy on the altar of supposed scientific truth. Members who leave us, and even others who remain, unhappily, sometimes give as a reason for their discontent our "lack of spirituality". Is this their way of saying that they find our liturgy lacking in emotional validity? Are they being too polite? Are they really telling us, in Duke Ellington's words, that our liturgy ain't got that swing, and consequently don't mean a thing? Are they saying that liturgically, as a denomination, we have made ourselves unnecessarily unbeautiful?

Nevertheless, in a surprising way, science has come to the aid of liturgy; we can now reclaim our lost liturgy without abandoning science. Moreover, science can galvanize our inert liturgies, and thereby show us more beauty in the universe than we previously have been able to imagine. In giving us a larger island of knowledge, science has also provided us with a longer shoreline of wonder. Perhaps, as Jacques Maritain has said, *beauty is the splendor of truth*. Perhaps now we can agree with Edna St. Vincent Millay, that Euclid alone looked on beauty bare. Perhaps we are no longer being unscientific in asserting, with Dionysius, a fifth century Greek writer, that "from the divine beauty the being of all things is derived". And neither are we being unscientific in asserting, with Einstein, that "cosmic **mystery** is the most beautiful experience we can have, the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science"

*but see W. Arnason and K. Rolenz, **Worship That Works**, Boston: Skinner House,2008.

Footnotes

1. New York: Viking, 2006, pp. 153-54.
2. Boston: beacon press, 1960, pp. 39-40.
3. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, p. 78.
4. Ibid., pp. 251-2.
5. .David Biello, "Searching for God In the Brain", *Scientific American Mind*, October/November 2007, pp. 39-45.