

A Christian *Habitus*: Wittgenstein and Liturgical Formation

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Abstract

What is the relationship between preaching and living the Gospel? It is within the daily habits of those attempting to live out the Gospel together that preaching becomes intelligible and applicable. Sound preaching alone will fail to produce a transformed people whose lives reflect the teachings of scripture. This paper brings together the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the theological anthropology of James K. A. Smith in order to develop an affective pedagogy that takes seriously the socially dependent nature of human persons. The social account of language proposed in the later Wittgenstein suggests that the meaning of concepts arises amongst pre-linguistic, embodied, communal practices. Theological language cannot be detached from its concrete expressions in the world because its meaning is dependent upon a communal form of life in which those concepts make sense. James K. A. Smith builds upon this pragmatist tradition to present a theory of doctrine and preaching grounded in liturgical practices that does justice to human physicality and characterizes all human practices, religious or otherwise, as structures of habitual formation with particular teloi. The Gospel, then, is not just a truth we learn to believe but a way of life that we come to embody contra competing “cultural liturgies.”

Text

Introduction

“What if we thought of the goal of Christian education and formation, not in terms of the acquisition of a Christian ‘worldview,’ but instead as the acquisition of a Christian *habitus*?”¹ Philosopher James K. A. Smith poses this question in his recent *Cultural Liturgies* trilogy. Developing a pedagogy of desire, Smith challenges intellectualist priorities in Christian education by arguing that it is not thinking or feeling that is most basic to human existence but our habits. It is these which cultivate our loves and ultimately determine and explain our behaviors. Smith’s notion of a Christian *habitus* is a theological complement to the philosophy of Ludwig

¹ James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 140.

Wittgenstein. The social account of language proposed in the later Wittgenstein suggests that the meanings of concepts arise amid pre-linguistic, embodied, communal practices. If this is the case, then theological language cannot be abstracted from its concrete expressions in the world because its meaning is dependent upon a historically Christian form of life. As Wittgenstein puts it, “the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.”² The Gospel is not just something we learn to believe but something that we first learn to live with others. Only as we engage in cruciform practices does it acquire its distinctive sense.³ Smith’s liturgical anthropology raises the stakes by characterizing all human practices, religious or otherwise, as structures for habitual formation. This paper explores Wittgenstein’s theological contribution through Smith’s liturgical project in order to address the prevalent disconnect between faith and practice in contemporary Western Christianity.

Competing Forms of Life

If our habits precede our beliefs as foundational for who we are as humans, then we should not expect sound teaching alone to produce distinctive disciples of Jesus. This is because we are constantly being subliminally socialized into alternative and competing ways of life. Consequently, there are US Christians who passionately espouse biblical doctrines whilst simultaneously embodying habits of modern democratic liberalism that are antithetical to those doctrines. American sociologist Christian Smith argues that the contemporary plurality of practices

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 204.

³ Wittgenstein asks: “How do I know that two people mean the same thing when each says he believes in God?”... “Practice gives words their sense.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 85e.

and values results in “competing and blended moral orders” such as a “Biblical tradition, a republican tradition, utilitarian individualism, and expressive individualism” which bleed together into a “Christian-capitalist-democratic-romanticist-libertarian-secular thing.”⁴ “Most people live their lives negotiating the demands of multiple religious and nonreligious moral orders – compromising here, synthesizing there, compartmentalizing elsewhere.”⁵ Hence, modern life looks more like a shifting kaleidoscope of habituated loves than a chess board of intellectual worldviews, and the secular and sacred intertwine as all of these practices cultivate ultimate allegiances.

Such syncretism becomes evident when one analyzes the behavior of American Christians regarding money and marriage. According to Nonprofits Source, despite the New Testament’s models of radical generosity and its admonitions against accumulating wealth,⁶ only 5% of American Christians tithe, and of those, 80% only give 2% of their income,⁷ down even from 3.3% during the Great Depression.⁸ Clearly the discipleship of American Christians is not outcompeting the formational practices of a consumer society. Even the theology of grace embodied weekly in the act of tithing is drowned out on Monday morning as parishioners re-enter the rat-race. Whether it be the physical mall with its sensory enticements, or the potentially more self-indulgent online marketplace with its carefully tailored advertisements, all of our economic practices cultivate in us a commodification of our lives through a liturgy of consumption. These consumer exchanges

⁴ Christian Smith, *Moral Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 57.

⁵ C. Smith, 106.

⁶ Jesus says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.” (Matt. 6:19, ESV). Alternatively, in Luke 19:8, Zachaeus’ conversion is expressed by his giving away “half” of what he owns, a model replicated in Acts 2:45 where members of the early church sold their possessions so that everyone would have enough.

⁷ Strictly speaking, 2% is not a tithe, but this term is being used colloquially.

⁸ “Charitable Giving Statistics,” Nonprofits Source, accessed 30 November 2018, <https://nonprofitssource.com/online-giving-statistics>.

reinforce in us the disposition that our resources are private goods that exist for our personal fulfillment. Human flourishing itself becomes defined in terms of material abundance and financial self-sufficiency.⁹

In regards to marital habits, the Barna Group found that not only are US divorce rates highest in the Bible Belt, conservative Protestant Christians, on average, have the highest divorce rates.¹⁰ Although there are some confounding variables, George Barna cautions skepticism because “of more than seventy other moral behaviors [they] study, when [they] compare Christians to non-Christians [they] rarely find substantial differences.”¹¹ Whether we attribute this inconsistency to a failure of discipleship or simply a false positive response bias for Christian self-identity,¹² the perpetuation of Christianity as a catalogue of propositional beliefs or emotional experiences might contribute to this discontinuity. Similar to tithing, contemporary Christian teaching on biblical sexuality may inadequately compete with, and even reinforce, cultural perceptions of marriage as

⁹ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church: Participants Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 182. “When human beings give their heartfelt allegiance to and worship that which is not God, they progressively cease to reflect the image of God... Those who worship money increasingly define themselves in terms of it and increasingly treat other people as creditors, debtors, partners, or customers rather than as human beings.”

¹⁰ B. A. Robinson, “Divorce and remarriage: U.S. divorce rates for various faith groups, age groups, & geographic areas,” *Religious Tolerance*, accessed 30 November 2018, http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm. Some qualifications must be noted such as younger marriages on average, lower household incomes in these states, and a lower percentage of Roman Catholics who prohibit divorce or technically receive an annulment instead of a divorce. Another factor is a lower education achievement with only twenty-three percent of Texans completing a college degree compared with more than one-third of Massachusetts residents, a state with comparatively low divorce rates. Interestingly, of the more than eight-thousand married by the Unification Church in two mass pre-arranged marriage ceremonies in 1982, 82.6% are still married to their original partner.

¹¹ Christine Wicker, “Dumbfounded by Divorce: Survey Inspires Debate over why faith isn’t a bigger factor in marriage,” *The Dallas Morning News*, 2000, accessed 30 November 2018, http://www.adherents.com/largecom/baptist_divorce.html.

¹² Studies published by Pew cast some doubt on the idea that this data is distorted by the inclusion of “nominal” Christians. According to their research, 91% of divorcees claim belief in God, 69% claiming their belief is “absolutely certain”. 61% say they pray daily; 64% believe the Bible is the word of God; and 60% believe in hell. Perhaps the evangelical focus on authenticity has only contributed to a denial of the failure of discipleship, assuming that these must be the actions of inauthentic Christians rather than asking whether emotional authenticity might be the wrong metric. See “Divorced or separated adults: Religious composition of divorced or separated adults,” Pew Research Center, accessed 30 November 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/marital-status/divorcedseparated/>.

primarily a romantic source of individual happiness.¹³ Rather than an arena for sanctification and spiritual maturity, marriage becomes another consumer product promising self-fulfillment. Didactic teaching alone is inadequate to counter the powerful allure of eroticism for a people little practiced in the disciplines of self-denial.

In contrast, Wittgenstein's theories suggest that what it means to be religious is not simply to *have* a particular set of beliefs, but to live within an integrated religious form of life held together by a whole web of communal practices. This does not degrade the reflective and contemplative capacities of humans, but situates them within a larger network of cultural traditions. This dependence of doctrinal beliefs upon daily behavior is often overlooked because liberalism's primacy of the individual has seeped into the Western Christian ethos, producing the illusion that people are autonomous agents who choose their beliefs and actions through some rational or intuitive process of internal deliberation. James K. A. Smith concludes that any "philosophical anthropology that fails to appreciate that we are liturgical animals and thus fails to appreciate the central role of practices in formation...will tend to either reduce Christianity to a belief system or an emotivist experience."¹⁴ A Christian education focused on simply teaching theological truths may succeed in cultivating Christian minds yet fail to shape these deeper narratives tied up in the rest of life, stopping short of actually transforming the whole person by reshaping the object of their loves and reorienting the *telos* of their habits towards the person of Christ.

¹³ In his recent recanting of his book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, prolific evangelical author Joshua Harris critically confesses the ways in which evangelical purity culture, popularized by his book, contributed to the pervasive cultural narrative that life is about achieving personal happiness. It simply added the caveat that marital fulfillment was achieved through pre-marital abstinence, rather than teaching and displaying marriage as a formational arena for the self-denial of sanctification. This statement can be read at <https://joshharris.com/statement/>.

¹⁴ J. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 224.

The Social Embodiment of Knowledge

In contrast to such a reduction, Wittgenstein offers a picture of human knowledge and belief that begins with a basic pre-linguistic interaction. “Language - I want to say - is a refinement. ‘In the beginning was the deed.’”¹⁵ Drawing upon language acquisition, “the child, I should like to say, learns to react in such-and-such a way; and in reacting it doesn’t so far know anything. Knowing only begins at a later level.”¹⁶ Before learning abstract concepts, we must begin with shared recognizable patterns of behavior that convey basic judgments. Wittgenstein invites us to imagine: “What would it be like if human beings [showed] no outward signs of pain (did not groan, grimace, etc.)? Then it would be impossible to teach a child the use of the word ‘tooth-ache’....When one says ‘He gave a name to his sensation’ one forgets that a great deal of stage-setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense.”¹⁷ Basically, everything we do inside our heads is already dependent on our inclusion in a historic community.¹⁸ Roman Catholic priest Fergus Kerr summarizes, “one is unable to get hold of something independent of one’s being initiated into certain common practices. The only *a priori* is *lebensformen*.”¹⁹ Nancey Murphy writes to the same effect with regards to theology that “we do not know what [doctrine means] unless we can see how it is enfleshed in human life.”²⁰ “Concepts like ‘being redeemed’, and ‘being spoken to by God’, and so on, are made intelligible and

¹⁵ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 31e.

¹⁶ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 538.

¹⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen: Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P. M. S Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. G. E. M Anscombe, 4th rev. ed. (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 257.

¹⁸ Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1997), 76.

¹⁹ Kerr, 104.

²⁰ Nancey Murphy, “Introduction,” in *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, and Mark Nation (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 17.

‘teachable’, not on the basis of private existential experience but on the basis of a public tradition of certain patterns of behavior.”²¹

Wittgenstein even claims that “Faith is simply a thing we do and only in the myth of a mental process does the believer doubt whether or not he has it.”²² Believing the Gospel is not a private experience but a culture we come to adopt through the recognizable patterns of faith in the lives of the faithful. We see this in the challenge of James: “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith *by* my works” (James 2:18b, ESV. Emphasis mine). This is not a juxtaposition of two equally viable options, but a rejection of unobservable faith as not only impossible but absurd. Wittgenstein captures this understanding of faith when he says that “believing...is a kind of disposition of the believing person. This is shown to me in the case of someone else by his behavior.”²³ It is in the routines of generous giving, for example, that the nature of God as provider and the title “Father” begin to make sense. It is as we forgive those who sin against us that we actually begin to understand what it means to be forgiven and only then can we be said to have understood. “The signs of authenticity of anyone’s faith lie in their manner of living it out,”²⁴ not some internal conviction that accompanies their confession. Only in the context of practicing the Gospel life can we be said to believe it.

²¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 383.

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics,” *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (1965): 3.

²³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 191-192.

²⁴ David B. Burrell, “Convictions and Operative Warrant,” in *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, and Mark Nation (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 46.

Liturgy as Enculturation

When we examine the pedagogies present in the New Testament and the early church, we see similar conceptions of this relationship between belief and behavior. In his book on the *Didache*, Thomas O’Loughlin describes of catechumens that “one had to learn how to live this new lifestyle, one had to be shaped and formed, one had to be gradually initiated into its values and activities, as well as its beliefs.”²⁵ New adherents were socialized into a set of rituals²⁶ and then educated in the system of beliefs which find their sense within those practices.²⁷ This pre-modern pedagogy beckons the contemporary church to re-imagine its liturgical practices as holistic means of enculturation. This allows it to reflect critically on how it might unwittingly be producing capitalist consumers and democratic citizens rather than generous disciples of Israel’s messiah king. Smith’s cultural analysis unmasks these alternative habituating forces as “secular liturgies” which shape not only how we think and feel but what we desire most. In an increasingly pluralistic society with growing fears over exclusion and incommensurability, what we need is a more robust and ancient community that offers an alternative and cohesive form of life.²⁸ Christian churches enact this enculturation process by carefully attending to the rich liturgical traditions of the faith.

²⁵ Thomas O’Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 11.

²⁶ O’Loughlin lays out a fascinating explanation of how these basic rituals play out in daily routine: “There are human signals that operate within societies at so basic a level of interpersonal communication that we are unconscious of them, or even that such signaler to a large extent beyond our rational control. Thus a gesture that is a fixed part of a formal ritual may equally be a basic gesture that only takes on its most formal aspect when used within that specific ritual: a nod to a passing acquaintance in the street is a ritual action, yet the same notion of acknowledgement can take on a formal ritual form in a salute. Rituals are everywhere in life — not just in musty ceremonies frequented by those who like that sort of thing— because they show us and those around us who we are and what are our most pressing concerns. Our rituals create the world we inhabit and call ‘our culture’. So any group who adopt a way of life, link themselves with a particular view of the universe, choose to follow a teacher, or seek to exist with a definite view of themselves and their history— these are the basic forms of all religions — will develop, whether they set out to or not, a set of rituals that give shape to that lifestyle, that commitment, that vision and that world-view.” O’Loughlin, 54-55.

²⁷ O’Loughlin, 65. “Rituals are events in themselves. . . the actual custom of the community is the fact, the new life is the reality, and the ‘explanations’ are always secondary.”

²⁸ This is not to exclude those outside but in order that the church might actually have a way of life substantial enough to offer a world desperately in need of something real.

KOPACK: A CHRISTIAN *HABITUS*

Not only do the various embodied elements of a worship service introduce counter-formational habits, the Christian year as a whole socializes the church into a cruciform way of life. This calendar is not governed by economic profit, state allegiance, or overconsumption, but fasting, generosity, and humility. In a marketplace of competing practices and ideologies, a distinctly Christian community rooted in its ancient traditions will offer a vibrant and compelling challenge to the values of the present *saeculum* and might succeed in producing citizens of the kingdom of heaven whose lives reflect the Gospel they claim to believe.

Drawing together the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the liturgical anthropology of James K. A. Smith, this paper presents the need for a more ancient pedagogy by which Christian discipleship might better integrate teaching and living the Gospel. Reductionist tendencies that prioritize the intellectual and the internal ignore the de-formative power of secular liturgies always at work in our lives. Conscious attention to all of our daily routines can elucidate the *telos* of each of these rituals and the allegiances they cultivate. Alternatively, a holistic pedagogy that situates doctrine and theology within the habituated practices of the historic Christian church may cultivate a distinctive community through which the Gospel can assume its visible embodiment in the world.

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