

Delight and Music: A Confucian Perspective on Christian Liturgy

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Abstract

Over the past decade, analytic philosophers and theologians have examined the significance of Christian liturgical practices (e.g., Cuneo, 2016; Wolterstorff, 2015), asking such questions as, “how, if at all, can liturgy be ‘true?’” (Coakley, 2013: 131). In this paper, I examine the function and significance of Christian liturgies using the lens of pre-Qin Confucian philosophy. I show how liturgies can be a tool for personal and collective transformation. In section 1, I examine Christian liturgy as ritual. Section 2 explores the meaning of rituals in pre-Qin Confucian philosophy, with a special focus on Xunzi, showing how ritual can help us to achieve self-transformation. Section 3 explores two examples of liturgical practice, confession and music, to understand how Christian liturgy shapes the self. Section 4 examines how Christians can achieve self-transformation through liturgy.

Keywords: Christianity, Liturgy, Confucianism, Xunzi, Ritual

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1. More than symbolic: What Christian liturgy does

Any philosophical work on liturgies needs to grapple with the fact that liturgies are not (mere) symbolical enactments of theological principles. In some cases, there is a stark gap between what the theology teaches about a practice and how ordinary practitioners conceive of it. For example, the Catholic Church teaches that the host and wine are the body and blood of Christ—not a lifeless corpse, but the actual substance of a living person. Obviously, Roman Catholics do not believe they are cannibals feasting on the physical body of a living person. They have a sophisticated theory—transubstantiation—which says that the host and wine somehow retain their chemical and nutritional properties, but in addition objectively (regardless of one’s personal beliefs) change into the substance of the body and blood of Christ. This view was heavily disputed during the Reformation, when Protestant churches formulated alternative views, such as the real presence (Anglicanism) and consubstantiation (Lutheranism) doctrines. It is thus a

distinctively Roman Catholic view, of central importance to this Christian denomination.

Surveying American lay Christians without extensive theological training, the Pew Forum found that about half their respondents know that the Catholic Church teaches that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ. The other half (incorrectly) believes that the Catholic Church teaches that bread and wine are mere symbols. Only about a third of the surveyed Roman Catholics accepts that the transubstantiation really happens. Indeed, nearly 70 percent believe that the bread and wine “are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ” (Smith, 2019). So, on a given Sunday in a Roman Catholic church, we have a range of people taking part in the same ritual (the Eucharist) but holding a diversity of underlying views on what the ritual means. What are we to make of this?

In the 1970s, the Dutch linguist and anthropologist Frits Staal studied Agnicayana, an elaborate, large-scale fire ritual performed for the Vedic fire-god Agni in Kerala, India. This ritual involved actions such as transporting the fire from the old to the new altar. Each of these ritual acts consisted of very precise, minute steps that, if performed incorrectly, would invalidate the entire ritual. When Staal asked the brahmins who performed this ritual why they did things in a certain way, they answered “this is how it was done in the past,” or “this is just how it is done.” They did not refer to any symbolic meaning beyond the actions they were doing. This led Staal to conclude that ritual is inherently meaningless. He generalized that when people perform rituals, they “concentrate on correctness of act, recitation and chant. Their primary concern, if not obsession, is with rules. There are no

symbolic meanings going through their minds when they are engaged in performing ritual” (Staal, 1979: 3).

While current scholarship on ritual (see e.g., Seligman, Weller, Puett, & Simon, 2008; Bell, 2009) does not go as far as Staal in denying meaning to ritual, these observations of Vedic rituals nevertheless capture something essential: getting the form right is more important than knowing the meaning. Likewise, contemporary churchgoers are (usually) not steeped in the deeper theological meanings of what they are doing. Rather, they are concerned with performing the rituals correctly. Sitting, standing, kneeling (not in all churches), coming forward to receive the host and wine, responding, singing, are all actions that people in pews perform. Are these actions merely congregants going through the motions? To get a better understanding of what happens in Christian liturgies, I draw on the work of pre-Qin philosophers Kongzi (also known as Confucius) and Xunzi, who argue that ritual practices have deep ethical and metaphysical significance. Drawing on their insights, I argue that liturgy is a skill that helps Christian communities to orient themselves to God and to engage God—i.e., to interact with God in a way that Christian communities believe God finds pleasing. In the process, liturgy transforms them by ordering their desires in what they believe to be the right way.

2. What is ritual? An anthropological and Confucian perspective

In a broad sense, rituals are actions we habitually engage in, e.g., brushing one's teeth and walking the dog in the morning. In a narrow sense, rituals are highly scripted group performances, often of a religious nature. Adam Seligman et al. (2008) offer an anthropological analysis of ritual that steers a middle way between these broad and narrow definitions. In their view, rituals are not merely habits. Rather, they are patterned ways in which we deliberately shape and transform our actions. Ritual actions involve doing something where we "subject ourselves to externally given categories of order" (Seligman et al., 2008: 104). For example, if you come into a house where there is an expectation to remove one's shoes before entering, you will also remove your shoes. Indeed, unless you want to annoy your hosts, you would not even question the rationale for the practice.

This anthropological understanding of ritual can be complemented with theorizing on ritual from pre-Qin Confucian philosophy, where ritual is seen as an aid to transformation. The concept of transformation is denoted by the terms *hua* (化, roughly translatable as "transformation") and *bian* (變, roughly translatable as "change"). As Masayuki Sato (2023) explains, these terms had several meanings. In the *Zhuangzi*, the pre-Qin text where these terms occur most frequently, it can mean the transformation of organisms, the transition between life and death, the transformation of all things, and the transformation of perception. Transformation can happen naturally (as in the

transition between life and death) or as a result of deliberate actions (as in the transformation of perception). Rituals are one type of such self-transformative actions.

According to pre-Qin Chinese philosophers such as Kongzi and Xunzi, rituals are ways to shape your actions through habits in a way that helps you to perceive the world differently. The classical Chinese term for ritual is *li*, 禮, which has the broad meaning of gift, ceremony, religious ritual, etiquette, and propriety. As Amy Olberding (2016) notes, the concept of ritual/etiquette is central in pre-Qin Confucian philosophy, whereas it is of relatively minor importance in Western philosophy. Western ethicists tend to be concerned with big moments, exemplified in trolley scenarios and other thought experiments that involve life-and-death decisions. However, for Confucian philosophers, smaller actions such as how to appropriately respond to someone who is in mourning, or even how to place a mat on which one eats, are central to ethical life. Cumulatively these smaller actions are as important as the life-and-death decisions. Ritual plays an important role in regulating such everyday lower-stakes engagements. The boundary between the moral and the non-moral, as Antonio Cua (1979) observes, is not rigid in Confucian philosophy. Ritual has moral aspects, in that it helps humans to cultivate themselves, but it also has what Western philosophers would classify as non-moral aspects. For instance, it has intrinsic aesthetic qualities: “Just as I can claim that I perceive the grace of a curve in a painting, or joy in a piece of music, in much the same way I can claim that I perceive the grace or joy in a *li*-performance” (Cua, 1979: 382).

Kongzi (孔子, 551-479 BCE, Spring and Autumn Period) argued that when rituals are performed without the right intent and without benevolence, they degenerate into empty show. He believed that rulers and people lost the proper way after the Western Zhou dynasty (a semi-mythical period of prosperity and wisdom, led by the sage kings). He thought instituting the right rituals, and performing them with conviction would bring back peace and prosperity. This was no mere theoretical possibility: the *Lunyu* 論語, also known as the Analects, gives quite some detail of the ritual and etiquette practices he himself performed (particularly in chapter 10), holding him up as an exemplar to be emulated as well as a sage with deep insights. We see Kongzi perform ritual with skill and sensitivity, not rigidity, much like an expert musician or sportsperson is sensitive to external circumstances when they perform their skilled practices (Fridland, 2017). For example, when music master Mian, who was blind, came to visit Kongzi, he guided his visitor—“here are the steps,” “here is your seat,”—informing him who else was present at his residence. Kongzi was challenged and asked “is this the way to converse with a music master?” to which he simply replied “Yes, this is indeed the way to assist a music master” (15: 42). The effortless modification of etiquette to accommodate his blind guest indicates both a sensitivity to the importance of *ren* 仁 (benevolence) and *li* (ritual): he is still true to the etiquette for receiving guests, while accommodating the specific needs of a disabled person.

Xunzi’s (荀子, ca. 310-235 BCE, Warring States Period) concern for ritual is even more pronounced than Kongzi’s. He had a sophisticated theory of how ritual and music can help us to achieve self-transformation, which I

will focus on in the remainder of this paper. Xunzi held that ritual was a device invented by the sage kings to transform and correct bad tendencies of human nature, as follows, “In ancient times, the sage kings saw that because human nature is bad, they were deviant, dangerous, and not correct, unruly, chaotic, and not well ordered. Therefore, for their sake they set up ritual and yi, and established proper models and measures” (Xunzi, chapter 23, all translations are from Hutton, 2016). Xunzi uses analogies with artisanship to explain how ritual can transform us:

Thus, the press frame originated because of crooked wood. The ink-line arose because of things that are not straight. Lords and superiors were established and ritual and yi were made clear because of the fact that human nature is bad. Looking at it in this way, it is clear that people’s nature is bad, and that their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort. Straight wood does not await the press frame in order to become straight, because its nature is to be straight. Crooked wood must await the press frame and steaming and bending and only then will it be straight, because it is by nature not straight. Now people’s nature is bad, and so they must certainly await the ordering influence of sage kings and the transformative effects of ritual and yi and only then will they all come to order and conform to goodness (Xunzi, chapter 23).

Xunzi’s views on the importance of ritual were in part a reaction against Mengzi (孟子, ca. 372-289 BCE, Warring States Period), a Confucian philosopher who looked for the origins of virtue within human nature in

“beginnings” or “sprouts” (*duan* 端) such as compassion and shame. Xunzi thought that such a view cannot make sense of the fact that the sage kings instated ritual and righteousness. His views on ritual were not only a reaction against Mengzi, but also against the increasing popularity of other spiritual practices with ritual elements such as meditation and exercises, such as described in works like the Zhuangzi and texts more recently uncovered in the Mawangdui and Zhangjiashan tombs. Alarmed by this spiritual competition to Confucian ritual, Xunzi sought to assert the importance of the traditional Confucian rituals, as performed during festivals and on special occasions such as mourning the dead (Tavor, 2013). For example, he describes with approval a village drinking ceremony, where everyone drinks in order of seniority. This teaches the younger to defer to the elder, which is an important aspect of traditional Chinese culture, and stresses the interdependence of the villagers.

The guest of honor offers a toast to the host, the host offers a toast to the guests of second rank, the guests of second rank offer toasts to the rest of the guests, and the young and the seniors each drink in turn according to their rank in age, ending with the servants carrying the wash water. From this I know that it is possible to treat appropriately those junior and senior without leaving anyone out (Xunzi, chapter 20).

It seems intuitive to think that this orderly proceeding for a visit by an important official or king to a village can help people to “enjoy comfort and relaxation without becoming disorderly” (Xunzi, chapter 20). How can we

extend this to religious or spiritual contexts? Xunzi, unlike many of his contemporaries, did not think that rituals appease Heaven or vengeful spirits. Indeed, he devotes an entire chapter (17, *Discourse on Heaven*) arguing that Heaven is predictable in its workings. A good ruler can foresee and try to deal effectively with rare events such as severe droughts or epidemics by having contingency plans in place. What then is the purpose of religious ritual? Ori Tavor (2013) interprets the Xunzian view on ritual as a cognitive technology. Much like we use physical technology to, for instance, irrigate fields or move more quickly from one location to another, ritual helps us to order social relations. Ritual helps us to regulate our emotions and our actions in appropriate ways, so that we are more in harmony with others.

Those who cross waters mark out the deep places, but if the markers are not clear, people will fall in. Those who order the people mark out the Way, but if the markers are not clear, there will be chaos. The rituals are those markers. To reject ritual is to bemuddle the world, and to bemuddle the world is to create great chaos (Xunzi, chapter 17).

This notion of ritual has a Durkheimian flavor: Xunzi emphasizes how ritual is useful for communities. Ritual is the way to transform our individual (bad) tendencies, so we can harmoniously live together. Or, as Tao Jiang (2011: 463) puts it, “The Xunzian hua is the transformation of the self so that the self can extend its relationality to include the entire world and transform it from a raw and uncouth world to a civilized one through ritual practices.”

Both Amy Olberding (2016) and Chenyang Li (2007) sees ritual/etiquette as a set of rules, such as dance or grammar, that can help to smoothen social relationships. Like a dancer learns the steps so she can move about the ballroom with ease and not step on her partner's toes, ritual teaches us ways to be harmonious in our dealings with others. Xunzi believed that ritual can bring proper order to the natural world by making appropriate distinctions in the human world. It helps us to negotiate the relationship between heaven (the cosmos), earth (the natural) and our inner lives (our heart-minds) (Jiang, 2011: 482).

Xunzi describes a ritual from the Book of Rites (*Liji*, 禮記). When a man dies, his grandson (if old enough) will pretend he is the deceased, so he pretends he is his own dead grandfather. Meanwhile, the son of the deceased will pay ritual homage and respects (such as bowing) to his own son. This reverses the normal order in ancient China, where it is children who pay their respects to their parents (Chapter 23, sections 75-90). This particular ritual, like others, goes against the natural order but yet is filial. Being filial is not following your nature but in many cases going against it, e.g., when you wait for the older people to take their first helping of food instead of beginning to eat first. Your spontaneous inclination would be to grab the choicest bits for yourself, but you restrain yourself. Engaging in these actions alters our perception of ourselves and others, harmonizes our relationships and thus helps us to increase our moral agency. In this case, it helps us to temper our inborn greed and taking things at the expense of others. I will now examine how Christian liturgy can be interpreted in this Xunzian picture, looking at two examples, confession and liturgical music.

3. What Christian liturgy does

3.1 Confession as apology-facilitation

Nicholas Wolterstorff (2015) notes a few remarkable features of Christian liturgy. In the spoken and sung elements of liturgy, Christians address God directly, and it appears to the congregants God speaks to them too. God not only listens but listens favorably to what they have to say. Let's take as an example the confession, which is said collectively in many Christian liturgies. One version of this is from the Church of England and it said during ordinary time (the liturgical time of year outside of Easter, Advent, and other major celebrations) early on in the order of service:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
we have sinned against you
and against our neighbor
in thought and word and deed,
through negligence, through weakness,
through our own deliberate fault.

We are truly sorry
and repent of all our sins.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
who died for us,
forgive us all that is past
and grant that we may serve you
in newness of life

to the glory of your name.

Amen.

This confession has several interesting features. Implicitly, it acknowledges that humans are able to harm God, or differently put, that God is vulnerable to their sinful actions (Wolterstorff, 2015). This idea is puzzling, as God (in classical theism and in many Christian traditions) is also conceived as all-powerful, perfect, and impassible. If God ultimately is a perfect being, then it must be the case that God possesses perfect beatitude, happiness, and wellbeing, and that creatures cannot impact God's inner life. God cannot suffer, and we cannot make God suffer. God cannot be negatively or positively affected, including emotionally, by anything we do (Mullins, 2018). The notion of divine impassibility is thus—at least *prima facie*—in tension with the ritual avowal that God is vulnerable. Faced with such frequent speech acts on God's purported vulnerability, one might rethink impassibility, as Wolterstorff (2015) does. Or one might say the confession isn't logically incompatible with impassibility. But we can also see confession as a pretend act. If in liturgical context Christians pretend that God is vulnerable, this might help them to think differently about how they interact with God or others.

In his analysis of Eastern Orthodox liturgy, Terence Cuneo (2016: 78) resists the conclusion that Christian liturgical practices are pretense, going as far as to say, "pretense roles have almost no place in the liturgy." Take rituals such as the Eucharist and the foot washing ritual on Maundy Thursday which brings to mind the Gospel account (in John 13: 2-17) where Jesus washes his

disciples' feet. These scripts do not call (in Cuneo's mind) for you to pretend you are present at the Last Supper or a disciple whose feet are being washed. For Cuneo, there is a big difference between pretending, as in the context of theater, and liturgy. He also resists calling liturgy play-acting because liturgy, unlike theater, requires a commitment to various religious ideals. An actress playing Lady MacBeth does not need to subscribe to the political philosophy of Shakespeare's play, but a congregant who receives the host typically has some positive views of the Eucharist, for instance, as an important symbolic re-enactment of the historical Last Supper. For this reason, Cuneo (2016: 80) favors the model of non-fictive immersion as an alternative to pretense, where people immerse themselves in scripts with a narrative structure that embodies important theological insights. They screen off the features that are irrelevant while centering those that are emotionally salient, for instance, the washing of feet brings to mind being of service to others.

However, Amber Griffioen (2018) points out that there are different ways to pretend. A toddler who pretends a banana is a phone knows that the banana is not a phone; she just acts as if it is a phone within the context of pretense. Similarly, the father revering his own son in the Book of Rites ceremony knows his son has not suddenly turned into his own father. Congregants partaking in the Eucharist know that they are not disciples in Jerusalem sharing in the Last Supper. In each of these scenarios, the attitude of the people who are pretending to the scenarios are different, ranging from playful to serious.

Griffioen proposes that some forms of pretense can be classified as identity-transforming pretense. When people engage in this kind of pretense,

they are also having the right intention. They do not believe they are a participant in the Last Supper; rather, the Eucharist transforms their mind and they become more receptive to certain Christian theological commitments, such as the Incarnation. Unlike simple play-acting, this kind of pretense does come with religious commitments. But as we have seen at the beginning of paper, it is still possible for congregants to interpret these rituals in various (including non-orthodox) ways.

This view of pretense aligns well with the transformative role of ritual, as outlined by the pre-Qin Confucian philosophy. Cuneo worries that incorporating this idea of pretense or as-if acting in his explanation of liturgy would somehow undermine the seriousness or sincerity of the ritual. However as we have seen for pre-Qin Confucians, and Xunzi in particular, rituals go against the natural order and can deliberately be in tension with it. They help us to transform our outlook so that we achieve an overall more harmonious relationship with each other and the cosmos. The metaphor of the press frame and other artifactual metaphors used by Xunzi to describe this process indicate how deep and transformative ritual can be.

To see how this works, consider one striking aspect of the Church of England's confession: it is a genuine apology. Real apologies are extremely effective at reconciling victim and transgressor. However, in many cases transgressors withhold an apology altogether, or apologize in a perfunctory manner. Sometimes the apology shifts blame to the victim, e.g., "I am sorry that what I said offended you," or "I'm sorry you feel that way." Many apologies come prefaced or followed by excuses, "Yes, I acknowledge I was wrong there, but I was stressed out and couldn't help it." Sometimes

they depersonalize and de-emphasize agency, e.g., a company might issue a statement that says “mistakes were made,” so as to minimize legal liability.

Karina Schumann (2018) discerns several reasons for why true apologies are rare. Sometimes people fail to apologize because of low concern for the victim or their relationship with the victim. Perceived risk is also a factor: even if the transgressor cares about the victim, she might worry about the loss of status or potential loss of face. There is often a perceived threat of self-image: apologizing brings the transgression vividly to mind, and a sense of shame makes one unwilling to confront what one has done wrong. Finally, some transgressors are pessimistic about the effectiveness of the apology (“She’ll never forgive me, no matter what I say”). In sum, a variety of factors push us toward non-apologies or hedging. Genuine apologies make us vulnerable, legally, morally, and interpersonally.

Liturgy allows a way out of this dilemma. Its fixed structure orders the actions of the confessor. The confessor does not need to express or confront her ambiguous feelings. The Church of England confession specifies that the sin has happened, that the person saying it has done it, and specifies that God and others are the victims. It further points out that negligence, weakness, or deliberate fault, can be causes, thus undermining any exculpatory excuses or hedging. It then goes boldly on to ask God for forgiveness and expresses hope of being reunited with and closer to God (“serve you in newness of life”). This pre-empts any pessimism on the part of the confessor. By pretending to say sorry to God (irrespective of any theological notions of divine impassibility), the confessor is transformed. This does not happen in

one fell swoop, but gradually, as the confessor applies themselves with sincerity to the ritual. Note that this performance of the ritual may shift the perception of the confessor, but does not automatically repair the relationship with the (human and other) victims. The ritual presents a potential first step in mending relationships; it is not a quick fix. This is why Xunzi insists that rituals are done with *cheng* 誠, which can be translated as sincerity, integrity, or commitment, as we will see below.

3.2 Music as liturgical mood management

In many Christian liturgies, music plays an important role. In some traditions, such as the ancient Gregorian rites of the Catholic church and Eastern Orthodox services, the liturgy is entirely sung. Xunzi recognized the importance of music as a form of mood-management, and we will see how this applies to liturgical music.

Music is joy, an unavoidable human disposition. So, people cannot be without music; if they feel joy, they must express it in sound and give it shape in movement (Xunzi, book 20).

This defense of music is a direct response to Mozi (墨子, ca 470-391 BCE, Warring States Period) who thought the elaborate music and the lavish spending on burial items and the specified mourning duration (i.e., three years) for rulers to be excessive and inefficient. Underlying Xunzi's proposition is the broader idea that music has the power to form character (an idea we also see in Plato's Republic), and so that the cultivation of proper, appropriate music is important (Harold, 2016). Moreover, Xunzi thought that

music possesses a unique function to help the population at large to voluntarily adopt etiquette and social norms. Music thus plays a crucial role in the moralization of the population, by promoting order and preventing disorder (Sato, 2003: 362).¹

Music is self-transformative, because it influences our mood and, in this way, our appraisals. Psychologists make a distinction between mood and emotion. Compared to emotion, moods are longer-term, more diffuse, not clearly directed at an object, and they can persist long after what caused them has disappeared. Moods color the way we experience everything around us. For example, a happy mood makes tasks look more feasible, a sad mood can make them appear insurmountable. A sad mood helps people pay more attention to detail, and more able to critically evaluate arguments, whereas a happy mood makes people less critical, but also more creative and more global-thinking (Bless, Bohner, Schwarz, & Strack, 1990; Gendolla & Brinkmann, 2005). In this way, music has the power to transform our dispositions, and our sense of possibilities (for more on this see De Cruz, in press, chapter 3).

We will often shape our own mood by listening to music that we enjoy. For instance, people will put a song on repeat, even when they know it well, because of how it makes them feel. Music has what Erik Rietveld (2008) calls “affective allure,” by which he means we are often irresistibly drawn to music in a powerful way. Music fulfills an important role: it helps us regulate our moods and emotions, and scaffolds them (Krueger, 2014). This role of music in liturgical practice has been long recognized by Christian

¹ I thank an anonymous referee for helping me develop this point.

theologians and philosophers, including John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards. Edwards identified sweetness and tenderness as a spiritual delight. If these feelings are a way to bring humans closer to God, and music can bring people in the mood to realize these feelings, then music can be an important road to God. As Edwards (1746 [2017]: part I, section II, 9) puts it “The duty of singing praises to God seems to be appointed wholly to excite and express religious affections. No other reason can be assigned why we should express ourselves to God in verse rather than in prose, and do it with music, but only that such is our nature and frame that these things have a tendency to move our affections.” Expressing awe and admiration for God can be more effective in a rousing hymn, because it helps attune our emotions to more aptly feel and express this sense of awe and admiration.

Christian liturgical music spans a wide range of moods. It can be joyous, uplifting, sad, or contemplative. Lists of well-beloved hymns include *Amazing Grace*, *How Great Thou Art*, and *Morning Has Broken*. Listening to such music already lifts the spirits of churchgoers, actively singing them has an even greater effect. Cuneo (2016) argues for the significance of liturgical singing: it is a particularly apt way to express worship of God because congregants do it communally and adjust to each other as they sing. Singing together demonstrably improves mood, and gives a greater sense of connection with fellow singers. This has been empirically demonstrated: put total strangers together in a choir, and they feel more connected both during and after singing (e.g., Weinstein, Launay, Pearce, Dunbar, & Stewart, 2016).

Xunzi sees music as a way to cultivate our emotions and moods, and connects it specifically to a joyful mood. He plays on 樂樂, the characters for “music” and “delight” which are the same in Classical Chinese². The basic underlying thought is that people have a natural propensity for joy that, if not properly cultivated, would lead to disorder. Since joy is inevitable, it is important to scaffold it in such a way that it does not lead to disorder. Xunzi’s moral psychology holds that our emotions naturally lead us to clash with those of other people. Given that joy has the roots of disorder within it, it is important to manage this mood so that it does not descend into chaos.

Xunzi’s proposal resonates with recent work in religious studies by Ariel Glucklich (2020), who proposes that religion has an important role in instilling and managing joy. Religion does so in part by helping to scaffold mood so that people are willing to attain more cognitively demanding forms of pleasure over simple hedonistic ones. Glucklich (2020) draws a distinction between three kinds of pleasure. We experience replenishment pleasure when immediate, basic needs are fulfilled, e.g., sex, food, a drink after a long, thirsty hike. Play pleasure is the joy felt at doing things for their own sake, such as games of chance, rituals, experiencing a state of flow when doing something skillful. Mastery pleasure is the pleasure that comes from conquering and mastering something difficult, e.g., solving a difficult puzzle, reaching a mountain’s summit. Music plays on all three of these levels. It’s often just fun to listen to a musician play skillfully in a masterful way. Music is so important in religion because, as a mood-scaffolder, it opens up human

² Though they are not homonymous, at least not in modern Mandarin, wherein they are pronounced *yuè* and *lè*, respectively.

thinking to more difficult-to-attain, elusive pleasures such as the sweetness and tenderness Jonathan Edwards hinted at.

4. Liturgy as self-transformation

We have seen in the previous section how Christian liturgy can help to transform the self, and connected this to a consistent theme throughout Xunzi's work that ritual helps people to shape themselves, and in this way, harmonize their society and their relationship to the broader cosmic order. In this section, I will offer some speculations on how this self-transformation might work. People sometimes reflect on who they are, and who they want to be. They then decide they want to change, but personal change is difficult: exercising, being more gracious in one's social relations, stopping a debilitating addiction, spending less time on social media, are all hard changes to make permanently. There is often a conflict between one's first-order desires (e.g., for alcohol) and one's second-order desires (e.g., the desire to no longer be addicted to alcohol). In such situations of tension, we choose for changing selves, as Richard Pettigrew (2020) calls it. But how do we follow through on our choice? Some experiences have a large impact on us; they fundamentally alter who we are. Such events are transformative experiences (Paul, 2014). For example, someone decides to have a child. Deciding for adoption or biological parenthood will change this person in one go: his life changes radically, he will now know what it's like to be a father. His values also change: whereas he might before have valued traveling abroad, he now prefers to spend time at home with his family.

Christian liturgy is not transformative in this sense. It does not transform its adherents in one fell swoop, but works slowly. Most religious rituals are not high arousal (though some are, see e.g., Whitehouse, 2004). Low-arousal rituals are frequent, are not physically taxing and employ our semantic and procedural memory—we learn how the different steps of the ritual go without any decisive autobiographical memories of one particular instance of the ritual. Yet, though the literature on transformative experience has focused on high-arousal events, quiet and unassuming rituals also have the potential to transform human beings. They do this by gradually shaping and reordering desires, so as to bring first-order desires in line with second-order ones. Blaise Pascal (1670 [2004]) recognized the power of ritual in his famous passage on the wager. As is well known, the wager provides a pragmatic argument for an unbeliever about why they should become a religious believer. The potential benefit—eternal salvation—is so large that it offsets any minor inconveniences you might have by living as a religious believer, such as getting up early on a Sunday. Suppose that one is convinced by Pascal’s argument, but one just can’t believe, even when trying one’s very best. Pascal channels the unbeliever as follows: “I am made in such a way that I cannot believe. What, then, would you have me do?” (214). The solution for the willing unbeliever is to act “as if they believed, took holy water, had masses said, etc.” (214), in order to shape their habits and emotions so that their first-order desires align with their second-order ones. Empirical evidence on conversion agrees with Pascal’s speculation that conversions typically do not happen all at once. They tend to be gradual,

slow, and involve extensive socialization in the new religious context (De Cruz, 2018; Kox, Meeus, & Hart, 1991).

This DIY aspect of liturgy is further emphasized by Cuneo (2016), who proposes that liturgy is a form of knowing-how. It is a kind of practical knowledge akin to baking a cake or being able to play a piece of music. It is not always possible to put this know-how into words, even though we can become skilled practitioners. Many Christians claim that their main reason for attending liturgy is that it helps them to come closer to God, but they can't always articulate how liturgy does this (Pew Research Center, 2018). In Cuneo's view, partaking in liturgy engenders know-how to engage God. He compares this skill of engaging God to other interpersonal skills. He speculates that there is an epistemic and affective gap between humanity and God because of the noetic effects of original sin, a propensity that we inherited (socially, biologically, or both) to be insensitive to God. Liturgy helps to surmount this distance between religious believers and God. Liturgies embody this know-how and help believers to overcome what they perceive as an affective and epistemic distance. In analogy to Xunzi's know-how, transmitted from the sage kings, the tradition of the Church transmits the proper know-how. Indeed, in many Christians traditions (Catholicism, Anglicanism, Lutheranism, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Methodism), the traditions are valued as an important transmitted form of know-how.

We can further draw on Xunzi to see how Christian liturgy, like other forms of ritual, is able to achieve this. Xunzi held that ritual practice helps us to transform ourselves by elevating the nobler moral inclinations and

intellectual capabilities while sublimating the base instincts such as greed, jealousy, and selfishness. It does not accomplish this by fundamentally altering these instincts (as Xunzi famously held that human nature is bad and unalterable), but by internalizing and showing integrity in performing rituals. “Integrity” or “sincerity” are approximate translations for *cheng*, 誠, which is the unwavering commitment a gentleman (*junzi*, 君子) shows in carrying out rituals:

For the gentleman’s cultivation of his heart, nothing is better than integrity. When you have achieved integrity, there is nothing more to do than to cling to ren and to carry out yi. If you cling to ren with a heart of integrity, then you will come to embody it. If you embody it, then you will have spirit-like power. With this spirit-like power, you can then transform things. If you carry out yi with a heart of integrity, then you will become well-ordered. If you are well-ordered, then you will become enlightened. When you are enlightened, then you can adapt to things. To transform and adapt in succession is called Heavenly virtue (Xunzi, chapter 3).

Hutton’s translation of *cheng* as “integrity” is apt here (rather than the more usual “sincerity”), because it helps us to resolve the paradox of ritual we have examined earlier: how can rituals be both pretense and identity-transforming?

To conclude, in this paper I have examined practices in Christian liturgy through the lens of Xunzi’s philosophy of ritual. This examination has brought to light how liturgy may be a form of know-how, and how it can be a

tool for individual and collective self-transformation even if the people who engage in the ritual do not subscribe entirely to its theological underpinnings. As we saw, ritual is pretense, but it is not fakery. As Pascal remarked, you can initially be doubtful about the meaning of a ritual or its truthfulness or efficacy, but that is no problem if you have integrity when you engage in it. A religious person engaging in ritual is aiming for identity-transforming pretense.

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