## Against Belief, or, the Liturgies of the Classroom

Matt Miller, 2017

What are compositionists to do with religion? Pedagogical scholarship has often envisioned the religious student as a problem, as best illustrated by Douglas Downs, who responded to a conservative Mormon’s argument against gay adoption as follows:

Congratulations! You’ve just written the most indoctrinated, close-minded, uncritical, simplistically reasoned paper I’ve ever read! (39)

Though Downs may offer the most extreme example in the literature, many faculty will recognize the situation: politically and emotionally charged interactions between skeptical faculty and devout students. Scholars of composition and religion like Downs have been reflecting upon this fraught situation for some time, and doing so in a self-critical and irenic mode, yet larger cultural factors make it unlikely that these encounters will go away or grow more peaceful. [According to Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martínez of Pew Research](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/), “fully eight-in-ten self-identified white, born-again/evangelic Christians” say they voted for the notably irreligious Donald Trump. Such a political climate hardly turns down the stakes in the conversation between teacher and religious student. And indeed, since the 2016 election, conflict between conservative (often religious) figures and higher education has been constant, with notable lowlights including social media attacks upon a Muslim professor for failing a Christian student, as reported by [Chris Quintana of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*](http://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Professor-Reflects-on-Her/239808), and the shouting down of conservative writer Charles Murray at Middlebury College, as reported by [Scott Jaschik of *Inside Higher Ed*](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/03/middlebury-students-shout-down-lecture-charles-murray).

Given the past and like future antagonism between composition and religion (particularly but not exclusively evangelical Christian religion), then, I will argue that the field needs a new understanding of *why* such antagonism takes place in the classroom. In particular, I will argue that composition, Christianity, and the modern university derive their self-understandings not just from differing (or sometimes rival) worldviews but from differing *liturgies*—kinaesthetic-aesthetic structures that inculcate a narrative about the world and the good life. My polemical title thus makes a case for understanding conflicts between composition and Christianity not on the basis of beliefs, but of practices, habits, and aesthetics.

The need for such a new understand becomes apparent from looking at Patricia Bizzell’s “Faith-Based Worldviews as a Challenge to the Believing Game,” which argues for a non-antagonistic understanding of religion in the composition classroom to help instructors think through their own views. Far from reinforcing the conflict between composition and religion, Bizzell is a model of irenic dialogue. She sees students’ religious ideas as challenging Peter Elbow’s believing game, and thereby pushing instructors to consider more carefully the role of emotion in their work. Reflecting self-critically on her own profession, she writes:

The academic can play the believing game up to a point. . . . But what if he is asked to inhabit a position that arouses emotion in him? This is disturbing, by the very fact that emotion of any kind is being aroused–emotion is taboo [in academic modes of thought]–but even more so if the emotion is repugnance or fear. (Bizzell 29)

Bizzell argues that religious arguments, which can spark strong emotion in academics—as Downs well illustrates—challenge our habitual styles of thought in academe by provoking taboo emotions. This implies that composition must better theorize emotion in academic discourse. Bizzell thus uses the encounter with an obstreperous religious student not to attempt to “fix” the student, but to examine how religion challenges composition. The relationship between composition and religion here involves a search for understanding and mutual sympathy, yet note that conflict—“repugnance or fear”—continues to lie near its heart. For all that Bizzell insists that teachers should learn from their religious students rather than engage in conflict with them, hostile encounters still seem to hold a significant place in her thought. Why should that be? After all, if a student’s religious belief is merely a matter of “students’ rights to their own language,” as she claims, we ought not to find a given student’s desire to think with and within a particular religious tradition more troubling than a desire to think with and within a particular cultural tradition (34). Yet many within our field would likely still find it emotionally challenging to respond appropriately to a paper that assumed the truthfulness of, say, young-earth creationism. Why is that?

Some of the answer, no doubt, has to do with very particular circumstances of our cultural, political, religious, and legal situation, as mentioned above. If we could transplant the interaction between compositionist and Christian student to a less polarized political context, for instance, we might find it much less loaded. Yet if we understand the liturgies of the classroom, I will argue, we will find that this emotional pitch to the discussion is not surprising. If the classroom is not merely a place of competing worldviews but competing liturgies, then a high degree of emotional involvement is not only to be expected, it is built in. Understanding these competing forces will not free us of them (not that we want that), but it may help us restructure our habits to pursue more constructive interactions.

In the remainder of this essay, then, I will define my understanding of liturgy; briefly exposit four key liturgical communities I see acting in the composition classroom; and conclude with two implications for our understanding of religion in the classroom and a gesture toward a new liturgy of the classroom.

### Liturgy as Habit

In the broadest definition liturgy is simply acts of public service to God or gods. However, these acts of worship exist and have significance in no small part due to what they do to the worshippers. James K.A. Smith argues that “a liturgical anthropology is rooted in both a kinaesthetics and a poetics” (*Imagining the Kingdom*, 101). That is, liturgical worship employs bodily practices (kinaesthetics) to inculcate a narrative (poetics). Liturgy works upon the body to spark the imagination, creating an embodied orientation toward an imaginative vision of the good life. On Smith’s account, such kinaesthetic-aesthetic schemes are not just characteristic of religion, but of any cultural project. Entering a stadium shares with entering a cathedral a bent toward bodily practices that involve participants in a story. Going to a mall involves submitting oneself to a cultural liturgy, a kinaesthetics (that is, architecture, bodily motion, light, sound, smell) aimed at fostering participation in a story (I am the kind of person who buys X, Y, or Z). According to this liturgical anthropology, to be a human is to be one who participates in liturgies shaping one’s desires—whether those liturgies are openly religious or not. Furthermore, identity is not largely shaped by worldview, beliefs, or ideas about the world—it is rather shaped by the liturgies, the habits and practices, that people give themselves over to.

In the classroom, then, we should worry less about the various worldviews held by students and instructors, and more about the competing liturgies they participate in. The encounter between offended academic and hostile student is not just a clash of worldviews, but an encounter of people habituated by different practices and different stories. Moreover, multiple liturgies operate in such an encounter. In the most general terms, we can identify four liturgical traditions that have purchase in the encounter between composition instructor and religious student. Understanding the interplay of these liturgies—the “liturgical situation,” as we might call it—is a necessary step for refiguring the role of religion in the classroom.

### Understanding the Liturgical Situation: Four Liturgies

First and most obviously, any religious student holds not only to a worldview, but to a set of kinaesthetic-aesthetic practices or liturgies. Her beliefs and their articulation are shaped not only by dogmas, but by bodily habits and aesthetic associations: church assemblies, Bible studies, hymns, and so forth. These habits, even more than any consciously held beliefs, shape the student’s response to ideas and practices which are foreign to her. Ideas from outside the religious community challenge not just the student’s ideas, but the very shape of her life.

Second, the instructor’s identity as a composition teacher has been shaped by similar forces. These are somewhat more variable and less easy to identify, but we might look at graduate school as a starting point—Timothy Burke has called grad school [“cotillion for eggheads,”](http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/tburke1/gradschool.html) which I think gets at its liturgical aspects: that is, it includes ritual elements (meetings with advisors, social events, annual conferences) designed to create a shared identity among the students. Though Bizzell and others have described that academic identity as located in critique, we might also note that its critical posture is formed by social ties and ways of living. In other words, the teacher’s identity as teacher has much of the same formational power as the student’s identity as a religious person.

Third, consider the liturgy of the modern university. Students and instructors alike move through a carefully (or not-so-carefully) designed environment, receive common messages from the administration, follow a calendar particular to their community, and may even eat in the same places. Since these habits are shared and pervasive, and since the class takes place quite literally on the university’s turf, this may be the most powerful influence of all. Both teachers and students see themselves to one degree or another as members of the university community, and while that commonality may offer value in mediating conflict, it can also feel like a threat to the previous two identities mentioned. Moreover, since the university mandates a number of classroom rituals—handing out grades, taking attendance—it can create its own conflict internal to the academic liturgy.

Fourth, consider the pervasive habituating force of modern capitalism. Here the actors and influences proliferate, but one valuable area to discuss might be what Smith calls the “micropractices” of certain technologies. The smartphone, in particular, invites certain “rituals of interaction” that foster a certain story (Smith 142). For a compelling visualization of this, Smith cites “a rather inane Michelob Ultra commercial in which the world obeys the touch commands of an iPhone screen. Don’t like that car? *Swipe* for a different one. . . . Wish you could be somewhere else? Just *touch* the place you want to be” (143). Our habits and our students’ habits alike are shaped by such liturgies alongside our more formal religious or professional identities.

Each of these four liturgies exercises influence on the interaction between skeptical instructor and religious student, as do others, and we need to account for them. I can’t now think through such a complex situation fully, but by way of conclusion let me offer two implications of a liturgical understanding of the situation and a concluding sketch of considerations for the liturgy of the classroom.

### Toward a New Liturgy of the Classroom

The liturgical understanding of the classroom helps us answer the question I started with—why interactions with religious students may be so fraught. If the encounter is merely one of divergent worldviews, well, we think through differences of worldview all the time. It is rather the liturgical grounding of our attitudes about religion and education that make them so intense—the experience is not a meeting of mere ideas, but of two ways of living and two visions of the good life. Even if neither person has any intention of proselytizing for their way, encountering a different liturgy puts our own perspective into question: Charles Taylor argues that such an encounter produces “fragilization” in our views (304). Though understanding the necessarily fraught nature of the interaction will not guarantee us a positive conclusion, we must have this more frank view to proceed appropriately.

Additionally, understanding our own perspective as one which arises from cultural liturgies can empower us as teachers to proceed with greater teacherly (I almost wrote pastoral) sensitivity. Christian liturgist Aidan Kavanagh argues that “Liturgy . . . exists to undercut and overthrow the very structures it uses” (40). By this Kavanagh means that social structures tend to become oppressive on their own, yet the Christian liturgy undercuts those oppressive tendencies with its spirit of high play and commitment to memory. This liturgical antistructuralism ought to characterize any liturgy, not just a Christian one, which seeks the social good rather than oppression or profit. We cannot trust the archbishops of the university or the market to so check their own practices—the liturgies of the iPhone aim not to undercut themselves, but rather quite the opposite—yet for the health of our own community of teachers we must maintain such liturgical antistructuralism in the habits we build into our teaching practice. Even where we believe that our methodologies lead to better learning or even to justice, we must create habits that undercut the tendency of our own practices to become oppressive.

An antistructural liturgy for the composition classroom, like other healthy liturgies, will necessarily be contextual and likely quite detailed. Characterizing such a liturgy in full thus not only lies beyond the scope of this essay, but outside its purview. However, compositionists who seek to conduct a “liturgical audit”1 of their classrooms in pursuit of a more intentional classroom liturgy might ask themselves some of the following questions:

* What phrases and terms do the instructor and students use most frequently in the classroom? Whose liturgies and visions of life do they most reflect?
* What other liturgies do the instructor and students participate in outside their life in the classroom? How do these shape their complementary or conflicting identities and desires?
* What habits of movement do teachers and students participate in while in class? How do those rituals shape the purpose of the class?
* What aesthetic factors (the appearance of the room, presence of media, etc.) shape the liturgy of the classroom? Whose goals do they serve?
* How do the liturgies of the university enter the classroom? What are their effects on the goals of the class? Are there ways teachers and students could participate in those liturgies differently in order to forge mutual understanding and a common vision, or to produce more productive disagreements?
* How do the liturgies of the market enter the classroom, whether through the micropractices of digital technologies or other means? What are the effects of those practices on the liturgy of the classroom?

Composition instructors who wish to forge a productive liturgy of the classroom must consider these and many other factors. Looking beyond beliefs and worldviews, we must begin with the insight that teachers and students alike are liturgical animals, subject to kinaesthetic-aesthetic regimes as well as ideas and values. By such habits of thought and action, we can begin to construct religion in the classroom not as an external, disruptive force, but merely another aspect of life together as a community of human persons. And only through that task of liturgically enabled understanding can we achieve a more helpful, irenic encounter between composition and faith.

## Note

. I borrow the phrase “liturgical audit” from Smith’s *You Are What You Love: the Spiritual Power of Habit,* 53.

## Works Cited

Bizzell, Patricia. “Faith-Based Worldviews as a Challenge to the Believing Game.” *JAEPL* vol. 14, Winter 2008-2009, pp. 29-35.

Burke, Timothy. “Should I Go to Graduate School?” *Easily Distracted,* http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/tburke1/gradschool.html. Accessed 17 Mar. 2017.

Downs, Douglas. “True Believers, Real Scholars, and Real True Believing Scholars: Discourses of Inquiry and Affirmation in the Composition Classroom.” *Negotiating Religious Faith in the Composition Classroom,* edited by Elizabeth Vander Lei and Bonnie Leonore Kyburz, Heinemann, 2005, pp. 39-55.

Jaschik, Scott. “Shouting Down a Lecture.” *Insider Higher Ed,* 3 Mar. 2017, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/03/middlebury-students-shout-down-lecture-charles-murray. Accessed 3 Mar. 2017.

Kavanagh, Aidan. *Elements of Rite: a Handbook of Liturgical Style.* Pueblo Publishing, 1982.

Quintana, Chris. “A Professor Reflects on Her Time in the Eye of a Social-Media Storm.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* 16 Apr. 2017, http://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Professor-Reflects-on-Her/239808. Accessed 25 Apr. 2017.

Smith, Gregory A. and Jessica Martínez. “How the Faithful Voted: a Preliminary 2016 Analysis.” *FactTank: News in the Numbers,* Pew Research, 9 Nov. 2016, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/#. Accessed 25 Apr. 2017.

Smith, James K.A. *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works.* Baker Academic, 2013.

—. *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit.* Brazos Press, 2016.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age.* Belknap, 2007.