Alternative liturgy: Social media as ritual

by James K. A. Smith in the March 6, 2013 issue

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Liturgies are covert incubators of the imagination, because they play the strings of our aesthetic hearts. Liturgies traffic in the dynamics of metaphor and narrative and drama; they are performed pictures of the good life that capture our imagination and thus orient our love and longing. By an aesthetic alchemy, liturgies implant in us a vision for a world and way of life that attracts us so that, on some unconscious level, we say to ourselves: “I want to go there.” And we act accordingly.

To perceive the world is always to perceive it as a certain kind of space: as mere “nature” or God’s creation; as the flattened, disenchanted space for human self-assertion or the enchanted, sacramental realm of God’s good gifts; as a competitive arena for my plunder and self-fulfillment or a shared space of neighbors who beckon to me for care and compassion; as a random assemblage for which we now claim “progress” or the stage on which is played the drama of God’s gracious redemption.

The formative power of liturgies is true of liturgies in general. Both secular and Christian liturgies marshal and work on the same imaginative, aesthetic aspects of human being. The fact that we are “liturgical animals”—and hence imaginative, narrative animals—is a structural feature of creaturehood that cannot be effaced or erased, even by sin. Indeed, sinful systems exploit the same reality of our incarnate existence. If discipleship is a matter of Christian formation, and specifically the formation of the imagination, then we need to realize that these same dynamics of

formation also characterize *de*formation. Disordered secular liturgies, ordered to a rival telos, also work on the imagination.

Through a vast repertoire of secular liturgies we are quietly assimilated to the earthly city of disordered loves, governed by self-love and the pursuit of domination. By participating in these liturgies, we become the kind of people who are inclined to a sort of low-grade, socially acceptable greed that makes us remarkably tolerant of inequality and the exploitation of the (global) poor; or we take for granted a mobile, commuting way of life that exploits creation's resources rather than stewards them. We might be passionately devoted to ending religious persecution, without for a moment considering how our "normal" way of life exploits children halfway around the globe; or we think it's just "natural" to turn a blind eye to the suffering of Christians in countries that we bomb in the name of freedom.

A way of life becomes habitual for us such that we pursue that way of life without thinking about it because we've absorbed the habit that is oriented to a corresponding vision of the good life. I fail to resist temptation not because I've simply made a bad decision, but because I've failed to recognize that I'm being malformed by a constellation of cultural "disciplines" that are disciplining me otherwise.

Consider, for example, the pervasive role that certain technologies now play in the everyday life of a middle-class North American. Every technology is attended by a mode of bodily practice. So even if the computer is primarily an information processor, it can never completely reduce us to just "thinking things" because it requires some mode of bodily interface: whether we're hunched over a desk, glued to a screen; looking down at a smartphone, our attention directed away from others at the table; or curled up on a couch touching a tablet screen—in every case there are bodily comportments that each sort of device invites and demands.

Apple has long understood the bodily nature of this interface. In this respect, we already take for granted how revolutionary the touch screen is: a new, differently tactile mode of bodily interface, a heretofore-unimagined level of intimacy with machines. Indeed, working on a laptop feels distant and disconnected compared to the fingertip intimacy of the iPhone or the iPad or other tablets. (Do you ever thoughtlessly try to touch your laptop screen? Then you know what I'm talking about.) The technology affords and invites rituals of interaction.

How you handle your phone might seem to be a rather banal concern. Are the practices of how we interface with a small metal device really worthy of analysis? What's next—a philosophical analysis of how I put on my socks or a ritual analysis of how I hold my fork?

But here we need to remember an insight of the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu: "The hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy . . . can instill a whole cosmology, through injunctions as insignificant as 'sit up straight' or 'don't hold your knife in your left hand.'" The seemingly innocuous manners of a society extort what is essential by commanding what seems insignificant.

If we follow Bourdieu's insight, then what appear to be micropractices have macro effects: seemingly inconsequential microhabits are, in fact, disciplinary formations that begin to reconfigure our relation to the wider world—indeed, they begin to *make* that world.

One could suggest that our interface with the iPhone (or any other smartphone) is just this sort of microtraining that subtly and unconsciously trains us to be more like Milton's Satan, rather than conforming us to the image of the Son—not because of the content communicated via the iPhone but because of how I interact with the device and the subtle pedagogy of the imagination effected by that intimate interface with a tiny machine.

The iPhone brings with it an invitation to inhabit the world differently—not just because it gives me access to global Internet resources in a pocket-sized device, but precisely in how it invites me to interact with the device itself. The material rituals of simply handling and mastering an iPhone are loaded with an implicit social imaginary. To become habituated to an iPhone is to implicitly treat the world as available to me and at my disposal, to be selected, scaled, scanned, tapped and enjoyed.

As is so often the case, this zeitgeist is succinctly pictured in 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 the scenery was different? Swipe for an alternative. Wish you could be somewhere else? Just touch the place you want to be. Wish you could see her just a little better? Zoooooom with the slide of a couple of fingers. A way of relating to a phone has now become a way of relating to the world. The practices for manipulating a small device are now

expanded to show how we'd really like to manipulate our environment to serve our needs and be subject to our whims.

While we don't go around swiping our hands in front of us to change the scenery, we perhaps nonetheless unconsciously begin to expect the world to conform to our wishes as our iPhone does. Or I implicitly begin to expect that I am the center of my own environments and that what surrounds me exists *for* me. In short, my relation to my iPhone—which seems insignificant—is writ large as an iPhone-ized relation to the world, an iPhone-ization of my world(view).

Now at this point I'm supposed to make the obligatory observation that no cultural artifact is necessarily evil—that cultural systems and products are latent with possibilities that can be used, proverbially, for good or ill. Such provisos and qualifications put the onus for disorder on users: if Facebook, say, becomes a problem for me—if it begins to function as a disordering liturgy—then the problem lies with me as a user.

But cultural artifacts also come loaded with the intentions of their creators, and they also take on a life of their own that can outstrip the intentions of even their creators and users. Cultural phenomena and systems can be laden with an implicit vision of the good life that is inscribed in the very structure, in the warp and woof, of the cultural artifact itself. In that case, not even the best of intentions on the part of users will be able to undo the teleological (dis)order that is built into the system. Or at the very least, users can severely underestimate the (de)formative power of cultural artifacts, approaching them with just a little bit too much confidence, assured that they are masters of the technology when it might be the technology that is slowly mastering them.

Social media—despite the good uses to which it can be put—might be just this sort of disordering liturgy. Both Facebook and Twitter can seem to foster habits of self-display that closely resemble the vice of vainglory. Or at the very least, they amplify the self-consciousness and ironic distance that characterizes late modern capitalism—to a debilitating degree.

Indeed, I do not envy teenagers: far from carefree, their adolescence is a tangled web of angst that is, I think, qualitatively different from that of past generations. The difference stems from a unique constellation of cultural habits that has exacerbated their self-consciousness to an almost paralyzing degree.

Granted, self-consciousness is part of the rite of passage that is adolescence. The hormonal effects on teenaged bodies make them realize they *are* bodies in ways that surprise them. They inhabit their bodies as foreign guests, constantly imagining that all eyes are upon them as they go to sharpen their pencil or climb the stairs at a football game. Such self-consciousness has always bred its own warped ontology in which the teenager is the center of the universe, praying both that no one will notice and that everyone will. The advent of social media has amplified this exponentially.

In the past, there would have been spaces where adolescents could escape from these games, most notably in the home. Whatever teenagers might have thought of their parents, they certainly didn't have to put on a show for them. The home was a space in which to let down your guard, freed from the perpetual gaze of your peers. You could almost forget yourself. You could at least forget how gawky and weird you were, freed from the competition that characterizes teenagedom.

No longer. The space of the home has been punctured by the intrusion of social media such that the competitive world of self-display and self-consciousness is always with us. The universe of social media is a ubiquitous panopticon. The teenager at home does not escape the game of self-consciousness; instead, she is constantly aware of being on display—and she is regularly aware of the exhibitions of others. Her Twitter feed incessantly updates her about all of the exciting, hip things she is not doing with the "popular" girls; her Facebook pings nonstop with photos that highlight how boring her homebound existence is. And so she is compelled to constantly be "on," to be "updating" and "checking in." The competition for coolness never stops. She is constantly aware of herself—and thus unable to lose herself in the pleasures of solitude: burrowing into a novel, pouring herself out in a journal, playing with fanciful forms on a sketch pad. More pointedly, she loses any orientation to a project. Self-consciousness is the end of teleology.

With the expansion of social media, every space is a space of mutual self-display. As a result, every space is a kind of visual echo chamber. We are no longer seen doing something; we're doing something to be seen.

In a world in which we are always and everywhere seen—where camera phones are ready to capture every gaffe and failure, and Jon Stewart is at the ready to cynically mock us in front of a broadcast audience—who would ever venture to *do* anything? When you have grown up watching 24-hour highlight reels on ESPN, your halting attempts to hit a golf ball become excruciating embarrassments better avoided by

inaction. You no longer feel permission to be an amateur because in our age of mutual display, everyone is on television. And so you are never free to learn a craft or master a new skill because the horror of someone seeing you fail paralyzes you. When your whole world is one giant YouTube clip, every action is an act of self-display—and hence fodder for criticism, mockery and rejection. Constantly conscious of being watched, you freeze like a deer in the headlights: “Maybe if I don’t move, they won’t notice me.”

Gary Shteyngart’s disturbing and satirical novel *Super Sad True Love Story* can be read as a prophetic mirror showing us where such a culture of self-display and voyeurism might be headed. A quirky, dystopian story set in the not-too-distant future, consisting of the diary of Lenny Abramov interspersed with the “GlobalTeens” (Facebook?) communications of his girlfriend, Eunice Park, the book extrapolates from our current cultural trends. The novelist imagines a world in which people are publicly identified by their credit ranking, where nation-states have been replaced by corporations and where the debt-riddled United States has become entirely enfolded into China (with sections parceled out to Norway).

Shteyngart posits the ubiquitization of a Facebook sensibility: everything is made public—our credit rankings are displayed on “credit poles” that line the street; our emotions and thoughts are made public on devices dangling from our necks; shopping is the great globalized pastime; and nothing is left to the imagination as all the young women are wearing transparent “onionskin” jeans.

The stark effect of all of this is the loss of any sense of a common good: moneyed tribes retreat into walled enclaves while many individuals retreat from civic life for private fulfillment and entertainment. The social imaginary of this body politic is the end of the body politic: the sinews of social interaction have dwindled to fiber-optic tethers, and any notion of a social good has gone the way of the American dollar, a distantly remembered dream.

Twitter and Facebook are not just “media” that are neutral, benign conduits of information and communication; they are world-making and identity-constituting. They invite and demand modes of interaction that function as liturgies. Like so many formative liturgies, they extort the essential by the seemingly insignificant, precisely by telling us a story, capturing our imaginations to perceive the world in ways we aren’t even aware of. We imagine more than we know.

Christian worship invites us into a very different social ontology through a different set of rituals—a counterliturgy. Whereas the technological rituals we have considered reinforce a social imaginary in which I am the center of the universe, only related to others as an audience for my display, Christian worship is an intentionally decentering practice, calling us out of ourselves into the very life of God. That worship begins with a call is already a first displacement that is at the same time an invitation: to find ourselves in Christ.

If the rituals of social media and smartphones are involutional, the practices of Christian worship are fundamentally ecstatic—calling us out of ourselves and into the life of the triune God, not to lose ourselves but to be found in him. Granted, there is still a call to vulnerability, even a kind of display in the call to confession. But this is not a competitive display. It is rather a vulnerability that is met with mercy and grace: you confess your sins and are reminded once again that “you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3).

In a society of mutual self-display and debilitating self-consciousness, it is a special grace to be invited into a story in which we are hidden with Christ in God. And being found in him, we are called out of ourselves to love neighbors and enemies, widows and orphans. In the performed story that is Christian worship, we are related to others as neighbors rather than as an “audience.”

And herein lies a central aspect of Christian worship: it is an alternative imaginary, a way that the Spirit of God invites us into the story of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself. If such a story is really going to capture our imaginations, it needs to get into our gut—it needs to be written on our hearts. And the way to the heart is through the body.