

This is the final pre-publication manuscript of the following article:

Andrews, Jacob J. "Conformed by Praise: Xunzi and William of Auxerre on the Ethics of Liturgy." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, November 30, 2021.
<https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq20211129240>.

The author may be contacted at jandrews2@luc.edu.

Article Title: Conformed by Praise: Xunzi and William of Auxerre on the Ethics of Liturgy

Jacob J. Andrews

Abstract. The classical Confucian Xunzi proposed a naturalistic virtue ethics account of ritual: rituals are practices that channel human emotion and desire so that one develops virtues. In this paper I show that William of Auxerre's *Summa de Officiis Ecclesiasticis* can be understood as presenting a similar account of ritual. William places great emphasis on the emotional power of the liturgy, which make participants like the blessed in heaven by developing virtue. In other words, he has a virtue ethics of ritual closely aligned with that of Xunzi. Xunzi's writings on ritual illuminate and enrich one's reading of the *Summa de Officiis*. But unlike Xunzi, William is not a naturalist with regard to ritual: although much of William's language about the causal power of liturgy can be explained in Xunzian terms, Christian liturgy has an irreducible supernatural element.

In recent decades, analytic philosophy of religion has witnessed a turn from questions of individual belief toward a full-orbed analysis of religion, including a small but growing literature on the philosophy of worship and liturgy, excellent examples of which include Terence Cuneo's

*Ritualized Faith*¹ and James K.A. Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom*.² There has also been a growing literature on classical Chinese philosophy of ritual among historians of philosophy, most notably in the form of studies of the ancient Confucian thinker Xunzi, such as Paul Rakita Goldin's *Rituals of the Way*³ and T.C. Kline and Justin Tiwald's *Ritual and Religion in the Xunzi*.⁴ However, there has been no attempt to bring these two literatures together: classical Confucian thought has not informed contemporary philosophy of liturgy.⁵ Meanwhile, very little work has been done on historic Western philosophy of ritual, and although the religious milieu of the West includes religions, such as Judaism and Christianity, that make extensive use of ritual, your average philosophy professor would be hard pressed to list ancient, medieval, or early modern texts on the philosophy of ritual in the West. This means that contemporary philosophy of liturgy has tried to pull itself up by own bootstraps, unassisted by work that has already been done on the topic by both Christians and Confucians—an irony, since the contemporary work is about a historical tradition, that of Christian worship. Retrieving historic philosophy of ritual, Western and Eastern, should be a priority for contemporary philosophy of religion.

The purpose of this paper is to begin laying the groundwork necessary for such a retrieval. My thesis is that *Summa de Officiis Ecclesiasticis (SOE)*, a commentary on medieval

¹ Cuneo, Terence. *Ritualized Faith: Essays on the Philosophy of Liturgy*, 2018.

² Smith, James K. A. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.

³ Goldin, Paul Rakita, *Rituals of the way: the Philosophy of Xunzi*. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1999.

⁴ *Ritual and Religion in the Xunzi*, ed. Kline, T. C., and Justin Tiwald. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014.

⁵ As Mark Berkson notes, “Modern and contemporary Western philosophers have rarely addressed ritual in their scholarly work (unless they are scholars of Confucianism), and very few have written about the moral relevance of ritual (“Xunzi as a Theorist and Defender of Ritual,” in *The Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Xunzi*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2016, p. 229). And he points out that even the authors of a major theoretical work on ritual note that ritual “receives too much short shrift in the contemporary world” (Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Waller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon. *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. x). Since Berkson's and Seligman's remarks, Colin J. Lewis has considered how a Confucian approach to ritual might inform moral education in today's multicultural world. His work is not focused on religious ritual, but it shares a key concern with mine: the relation between ritual and virtue (*Confucian Ritual and Moral Education*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020).

Catholic liturgy by William of Auxerre (1156–1231),⁶ can be fruitfully read as employing a virtue ethics approach to ritual much like that of the classical Chinese philosopher Xunzi (~310–235 BC).⁷ Using Xunzi to make sense of William presents two benefits to contemporary scholarship. First, it provides a historical benefit, valuable in itself: I show that philosophically interesting thought about ritual can be found in the premodern West. Second, it provides a constructive benefit: it hints at how historic thought, both Western and Eastern, can help guide contemporary work in the philosophy of ritual and worship. Xunzi and William are a natural joint starting point for rapprochement between historical Western and Chinese philosophical thought on liturgy. Xunzi is the earliest Confucian writer to give a clear argument for the importance of ritual, and has been the subject of much scholarly activity lately. William’s liturgical work, by contrast, has received no treatment in scholarship other than the production of a critical edition,⁸ but has been historically influential: although the *SOE* itself was not widely disseminated, almost its entire text was reproduced in William Durand’s *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, a commentary on the liturgy written between 1286 and 1291, whose “dissemination in the 14th and 15th century exceeds all other writings besides the Bible,” according to the *SOE* editor,⁹ who also notes that the *SOE* is quoted frequently by James of Voragine in his *Legenda*

⁶ The editor of the *SOE* has graciously made the entire text available online: Guillelmus Altissiodorensis, *Summa de Officiis Ecclesiasticis*, ed. Franz Fischer. http://guillelmus.uni-koeln.de/tcrit/tcrit_prologus. Translations are my own.

⁷ The English version of the *Xunzi* text used in this paper is taken from *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, trans. Eric L. Hutton. Princeton University Press, 2016.

⁸ To my knowledge, this paper is the first scholarly work on the *SOE* other than the critical edition.

⁹ The introduction to the edition of the *SOE* contains much helpful biographical and historical information, and can be found here: <http://guillelmus.uni-koeln.de/aux/intro>.

In addition, the entirety of William Durand’s *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* is available in Latin, and large parts in English, in the *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* series:

William Durand; A. Davril and T.M. Thibodeau, eds. *Guillelmi Duranti Rationale divinorum officiorum*. 3 vols. Turnhout: Brepols, 1995.

William Durand. *Rationale IV: On the Mass and Each Action Pertaining to It*, trans. T. M Thibodeau. Turnhout: Brepols, 2013.

William Durand. *Rationale V: On the Divine Offices*, trans. T. M Thibodeau. Turnhout: Brepols, 2015.

Aurea (c. 1261–1267), an extremely popular hagiography or book of saints' lives. So the *SOE* is foundational to an influential body of Christian liturgical and devotional writing. By comparing William and Xunzi, then, we are comparing Western and Chinese thought about ritual by going back to some of their most important sources.

This paper will take the following structure. First, I will introduce each of the two authors and their works. We will see that, whereas Xunzi's *Discourse on Ritual* (禮論 *lilun*) gives a clear, philosophical explanation of ritual and how it fits into his ethical system, the *SOE* is, on the surface, quite the opposite sort of work: obscure, unsystematic, and, at first glance, unphilosophical. Second, I will look at Xunzi, who thinks that a primary purpose of ritual is to develop virtue by regulating thoughts and emotions and that ritual is naturalistic in origin and effect.¹⁰ Third (this is the main part of the paper), I will look at the *SOE*. William holds similar views to Xunzi on the purpose and efficacy of ritual: he places great emphasis on the ethical, emotional, and mental effects of the liturgy, with the goal of developing virtue. In other words, he takes a virtue ethics approach to ritual closely aligned with that of Xunzi. As to naturalism and ritual, William is mixed. With regard to ritual's origin, at least some of Christian ritual is divinely inspired (Scripture readings and the core of sacramental ritual), and all of it is a response to supernatural events (the life of Jesus and the heavenly worship of the blessed). With regard to ritual's effects, although most of William's causal language seems to be naturalistic, divine action in the development of the virtues is present throughout. Fourth, we will conclude by briefly considering what this all may be worth for contemporary philosophical work on ritual.

¹⁰ The naturalistic interpretation of Xunzi is not universally accepted: for example, Edward Machle writes against it in *Nature and Heaven in the Xunzi* (State University of New York Press, 1993). Michael Slater cites Aaron Stalnaker and Paul Goldin as additional defenders of theistic or deistic readings of Xunzi, and gives significant arguments against them ("Xunzi on Heaven, Ritual, and the Way," *Philosophy East & West* vol. 68 no. 3, July 2018). But if the naturalist interpretation turns out to be false, this only strengthens the thesis of my paper: Xunzi and William are even more alike than I proposed.

I. Xunzi and William of Auxerre

Xun Kuang (荀况), known as “Xunzi” (“Master Xun,” 荀子), was born in the early fourth century BC and died in the early to mid-third century. The collection of philosophical writings attributed to him is called, eponymously, the *Xunzi* (note the italics: Xunzi was a man; the *Xunzi* is a book).¹¹ The nineteenth chapter of the *Xunzi*, the *Discourse on Ritual*, is remarkable among early Confucian works for explaining and arguing for the unique role of ritual in Confucian ethics. Take, for example, the opening to Chapter 19:

From what did ritual arise? I say: Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desire, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished. The former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rituals and righteousness¹² in order to divide things among people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking. They caused desires never to exhaust material goods, and material goods never to be depleted by desires, so that the two support each other and prosper. This is how ritual arose.¹³

¹¹ According to Hutton (pp. xxiff.), although it is not clear how much of the *Xunzi* is by Xunzi, the entire text is taken to accurately represent his thought, and chapters 1–26 are often understood to be written by him. Hence we will refer to “Xunzi” and “the *Xunzi*” indiscriminately.

¹² The standard translation of *yi* (which Hutton leaves untranslated), a virtue having to do with fulfilling one’s social function. I have replaced *yi* with “righteousness” when quoting Hutton’s translation. I likewise replace *ren* with “benevolence,” the usual translation for the name of another key Confucian virtue.

¹³ Xunzi 199.

Here Xunzi gives a clear historical explanation and philosophical argument for ritual, based on his view of human nature: because humans must seek satisfaction of their desires, which results in chaos if ungoverned, and because ritual is what regulates and channels human desire, the ancient kings used ritual to govern human desire, and so should we. This account also implies a certain scope for the term “ritual”: it refers to a broad range of human activities used to regulate desires, ranging from grand religious and political ceremonies to minor points of etiquette (shaking hands, holding doors, and the like). We will, of course, be focusing on how Xunzi’s view of ritual compares to William of Auxerre’s view of *liturgy*, of Christian religious ritual, keeping in mind that Xunzi is tackling a much broader range of phenomena than William.

William of Auxerre (Latin: *Guillelmus Altissiodorensis*) was a professor of theology at the University of Paris in the 1220s and died in 1231. The *Summa de Officiis Ecclesiasticis* was probably written between 1208 and 1215. It was immensely influential, albeit indirectly, as noted above. In contrast to the *Xunzi*, the *SOE* contains no clearly argued philosophical account of ritual. Upon opening it we encounter a hodgepodge of genres: history of liturgy, allegorical interpretation of Scripture, disputed questions in the Scholastic style, and practical guidelines for priests: in short, anything but a philosophical treatise as we ordinarily understand it.¹⁴ In short, a 21st century philosopher looking for a Xunzi-esque analysis of ritual might have a difficult time

¹⁴ This esoteric and eclectic way of writing about liturgy is not unique to William. To give one easily accessible example among several, Pope Innocent III’s *De Sacro Altaris Mysterio* (*Patrologia Latina* 217, Jacques-Paul Migne ed. (1855), pp. 774–946) contains, among other features, descriptions of both Old and New Testament vestments, complex allegorical explanations of liturgical practices, and accounts of contemporary theological debates over the Eucharist. On the other hand, a more systematic approach to liturgy was also taken by medieval writers. For instance, Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* III, qq. 60–90 to the sacraments. Question 61 is particularly important as he gives arguments for the necessity of sacraments. And question 81 of the *Secunda Secundae* concerns the virtue of religion, including what external acts are associated with that virtue. In addition, the *Xunzi* itself is a highly varied text, and Martin Kern has called into question the idea of a “single homogenous ‘Xunzi style’” (Kern pp. 1ff.). I don’t mean to take a side in the debate over whether the *Xunzi* as a whole is a tightly organized or argued text. My point is rather that the particular chapter, the *Discourse on Ritual*, contains a clear account of ritual, and that such a thing is lacking in the *SOE*. See Kern, Martin. “Style and Poetic Diction in the *Xunzi*.” In *The Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Xunzi*, 1–30. Dordrecht: Springer, 2016.

with the *SOE*—which is not necessarily a flaw of the text, but a difference in style and expectations. Fortunately, the clarity of Xunzi’s work can help us tease out what William has to say about ritual. In the next section of the paper, I will identify essential features of Xunzi’s virtue ethics of ritual, and then show how some of these principles are reflected in the *SOE* and are key to understanding it.

II. Xunzi’s Naturalistic Ethics of Ritual

There are five key claims about Xunzi’s view of ritual that we will focus on:

- X1. One primary purpose of ritual is to make people virtuous.
- X2. Ritual makes people virtuous by channeling thoughts and emotions properly.
- X3. Intellectual understanding of ritual is conducive to making people virtuous.
- X4. Rituals were invented by human beings in conformity with Heaven.
- X5. Rituals have no supernatural effects.

We’ll take the first two claims together: one primary¹⁵ purpose of ritual is to make people virtuous (X1), and ritual makes people virtuous by channeling thoughts and emotions properly (X2).¹⁶ In the opening to the *Discourse on Ritual*, quoted above, Xunzi says that humans have natural desires that, unrestrained, lead to social chaos. They cannot be entirely suppressed, but they can be channeled in healthy directions. Think of the features of life that, in any society, tend

¹⁵ Not necessarily *the* primary.

¹⁶ The idea is that this is one primary way that ritual makes people virtuous. It leaves open the possibility that there may be other, more supernatural ways. Xunzi himself, as we will see, is not open to this possibility: he is a naturalist with regard to ritual (see X5). William of Auxerre, we will show in the last part of the paper, rejects X5: he is not a naturalist, and indeed thinks that Christian liturgical practice does make people virtuous by supernatural means as well as natural means.

to be ritual-heavy: government and authority, sex and marriage, birth and death. In all these cases powerful desires can be involved (for the success of one's tribe, for a healthy child, for more time with one's parents, for sexual fulfillment, etc.), and it is easy to think of cases where these desires are carried to excess or are lacking in an inappropriate way. It is vital, then, that members of society learn to feel just the right way at the right time, and to act according to proper desires without allowing those desires (and corresponding actions) to go to excess.¹⁷

Xunzi explains at length how mourning rituals allow the ritual practitioner to reach the golden mean of desire. One danger is that grief will be taken too far, impeding one's proper functioning in life: Berkson notes disturbing effects including "loss of appetite, disruption of work activities, loss of interest in things ordinarily interesting, a decrease in sociability, disrupted sleep, and disturbing dreams."¹⁸ So tradition prescribes mourning periods based on one's relation to their departed loved one. For one's parents, the period lasts the longest, during which one wears rough clothing, walks with a cane, lives in a shack, and eats poorly.

After the twenty-five months of the three-year mourning period, the sorrow and hurt are not yet done, and the feelings of longing and remembrance are not yet forgotten.

¹⁷ Note the two-sidedness of this claim: in Berkson's words, ritual serves both to "cultivate" certain responses, but also "communicates" correct affective states (Berkson 231). In this essay we are focusing on the former: the power of ritual to cultivate proper affective states and thus develop virtue. But William and Xunzi both ascribe an important role to ritual in *expressing* proper attitudes and dispositions once they have been developed in someone. Berkson (p. 232) provides a much fuller list of the benefits of virtue according to Xunzi. And there is another aspect of ritual which Xunzi and William both touch on, but which space does not permit us to discuss in this essay. It is clear from the above quotation that Xunzi thinks ritual has an indispensable role to play in forming communities: ritual prevents struggle over limited resources and enables people to regulate their desires so as to live in harmony with each other. William also thinks ritual relates to community, but in a rather different way: by generating and nurturing virtue, the Church's liturgy conforms us to the heavenly Jerusalem, making us part of the society of the blessed in Heaven. Besides forming this vertical community, liturgy also has a horizontal community-building function: it links us with God's people on earth, even in the past. The triple nocturns of the Night Office symbolize "the threefold order of the faithful: before the Law, under the Law, and under grace...in order to signify that through praise"—that is, through liturgical worship—"the faithful of every era arrive at eternal praise" (SOE 1.1.9).

¹⁸ Berkson 235, which offers an excellent exposition of the ritual response to grief and loss in the *Xunzi*.

Nevertheless, ritual breaks off the mourning at this time. Surely this is in order that there may be a proper stopping point for sending off the dead and proper regulation for resuming one's normal life, is it not?¹⁹

One may still be grieving one's parents at the end of twenty-five months. But it's counterproductive for people to live out extreme mourning for the rest of their lives: at some point they must return to society. Ritual prescribes a time in which desires can be channeled and expressed in a healthy way. It guarantees that people neither suppress nor over-express their feelings.

On the other hand, we wouldn't want difficulties with mourning to cause people to be apathetic: to not mourn their dead at all. People might also find the presence of a corpse unnerving or distracting. It may impede them from respecting the dead in a virtuous way. Ritual has an answer to this, too:

The standard practice of funeral rites is that one changes the appearance of the corpse by gradually adding more ornamentation, one moves the corpse gradually further away, and over a long time one gradually returns to one's regular routine. Thus, the way that death works is that if one does not ornament the dead, then one will come to feel disgust at them, and if one feels disgust, then one will not feel sad. If one keeps them close, one will become casual with them, and if one becomes casual with them, then one will grow tired of them. If one grows tired of them, then one will forget one's place, and if one forgets one's place, then one will not be respectful.²⁰

¹⁹ Xunzi 213.

²⁰ Xunzi 209.

Ritual makes possible the emotional balance necessary for virtue: it directs emotion without suppressing it: in Xunzi's words, it "cuts off what is too long and extends what is too short...It achieves proper form for love and respect, and it brings to perfection the beauty of carrying out righteousness." The "midway course of ritual" makes it possible for human beings to exercise the virtue of righteousness and fulfill their proper role in society. Ritual allows "love" and "respect" to keep their proper shape, not going to excess or defect. The virtue of ritual is a precondition for the full development of the other virtues: "The gentleman dwells in benevolence by means of righteousness, and only then is it benevolence. He carries out righteousness by means of ritual, and only then is it righteousness."²¹

But ritual does not work automatically, at least not to its full effect. Rather, intellectual understanding of ritual is conducive to making people virtuous (X3). Ethical cultivation requires both practicing ritual and understanding ritual:

Those who nevertheless do not take ritual as their model nor find sufficiency in it are called standardless commoners. Those who take ritual as their model and find sufficiency in it are called men of standards. To be able to reflect and ponder what is central to ritual is called being able to deliberate. To be able to be undeviating in what is central to ritual is called being able to be firm. When one can deliberate and be firm, and adds to this fondness for it, then this is to be a sage...And so, learning is precisely learning to be a sage—one does not learn solely as to become a standardless commoner.²²

²¹ Xunzi 293.

²² Xunzi 205–6.

The “sage” is the ultimate ethical model: the goal of acquiring virtues is to be a sage. So for the full virtuous power of ritual to take effect—for one to be a “sage”—the ritual practitioner must be not only a skilled practitioner, but also able to “ponder what is central to ritual.” And much of the *Discourse on Ritual* consists precisely in what Berkson calls “meta-level reflection” on ritual acts: explanations of the meaning and function of various rituals and how they channel emotion, nurture virtue, and reinforce social distinctions.²³ The attitude is one of reflective action: one neither repeats the rituals blindly nor takes the stance of an outside observer, but rather engages with the rituals both by carrying them out and by seeking to understand them.

The sages are also the originators of ritual. As we saw in the opening to the *Discourse on Ritual*, it is “the former kings” who established rituals. In chapter 9, Xunzi refers to these as “sage-kings” (聖王 *shengwang*).²⁴ These sage-kings chose the rituals they did because those rituals are the ones best suited to restrain and channel human impulses. Xunzi never says that rituals were revealed by Heaven or gods. Rather, they were invented by human beings in conformity with Heaven (X4). The sage-kings did not receive revelation from on high, but instead discerned how human beings can best regulate their lives in accordance with Heaven.

The reader might notice that we have not mentioned what is often taken to be the purpose of religious ritual: supernatural effects resulting from prayer to Heaven or the gods, the use of magical words and objects, etc. As it turns out, Xunzi thinks that rituals have no supernatural effects (X5). In Chapter 17, the *Discourse on Heaven*, he says:

²³ Berkson 233ff.

²⁴ Xunzi 77.

One performs the rain sacrifice and it rains. Why? I say: there is no special reason why. It is the same as when one does not perform the rain sacrifice and it rains anyway. When the sun and moon suffer eclipse, one tries to save them. When Heaven sends drought, one performs the rain sacrifice. One performs divination and only then decides on important affairs. But this is not to be regarded as bringing one what one seeks, but rather is done to give things proper form. Thus, the gentleman regards this as proper form, but the common people regard it as connecting with spirits. If one regards it as proper form, one will have good fortune. If one regards it as connecting with spirits, one will have misfortune.²⁵

It is natural to suppose that the purpose of the rain sacrifice is to convince Heaven to send rain. After all, one “seeks” for rain in the rain sacrifice. But Xunzi says that this is not so: the point is not to “connect with spirits” to convince them to send rain; rather, the point is “proper form.” What does Xunzi mean by this?

One way to understand what Xunzi is saying is to consider an analogous question from Western philosophy of religion: how can prayer be efficacious if God’s will never changes? One answer is that prayer does not affect God, but us: it doesn’t change God’s mind, but makes the one praying more sympathetic to the one prayed for (or more devoted to God, submissive to God’s will, etc.). This is, roughly, Xunzi’s answer to the question of the effects of ritual. When we ask Heaven to send rain in the rain sacrifice, we are acting as if we think we can convince Heaven to send rain.²⁶ But actually, the rain sacrifice influences the state of mind of its

²⁵ Xunzi 179.

²⁶ See Seligman et al., *passim*, for an insightful treatment of the “as-if” nature of ritual.

practitioners, not of Heaven.²⁷ And knowing this is vital to getting benefit from ritual (see claim X3 above): someone who thinks of ritual in this way will have “good fortune,” while someone stuck in magical thinking will have “bad fortune.” Xunzi seems to think that ritual is efficacious not through mere rote practice, but rather when it is accompanied by intellectual analysis of the ritual by the practitioner.

III. Ritual and Virtue in William of Auxerre

Claims X1–X3 are shared by William of Auxerre. First, William endorses claim X1: one primary purpose of ritual is to make people virtuous. He begins the *Summa de Officiis* thus:

The Jerusalem that is above is called our mother (Gal 4:26)... We are her children by conforming to her... But we ought especially to be conformed to the Heavenly Jerusalem by praising God. This is seen in Apocalypse 4: The beasts with eyes all over say without rest: “Holy, Holy, Holy,” and so on.

The Church Militant here on earth is supposed to become like the Heavenly Jerusalem, the Church Triumphant in Heaven. The main way we imitate the Church Triumphant is by praising God, because those in Heaven praise God incessantly. William continues:

But the Church Militant can’t fully imitate the Church Triumphant, because... people sometimes have to focus on what is necessary for the body. Since it can’t unceasingly

²⁷ This, as we will see, is a key difference between William and Xunzi: William does think that prayer is efficacious outside of its effects on the one praying.

praise God, it does what it can by praising God at prearranged hours, eight times in the natural day.²⁸

We're supposed to imitate the denizens of heaven, who praise God unceasingly. But we can't think about God all the time: we have to eat, sleep, say good morning to our neighbor, and do our taxes. So we do the next best thing: we designate times throughout the day during which to praise God. In other words, we give our worship a ritual structure that allows us to imitate the incessant praise of heaven.

One of the primary functions of liturgy, then, is to become like the Heavenly Jerusalem. In later discussions of particular liturgical practices, William articulates this function in terms of *purpose*: one of the primary purposes of liturgy is to become like the citizens of Heaven by developing virtue. William says that by singing praises to God we “arrive in the company of the nine orders of angels”²⁹—indeed, he says that we sing nine psalms *so that* we may attain to their heavenly company. William says that one reason we engage in religious ritual is to become like those who are, after God and Jesus, moral exemplars *par excellence*: the blessed in heaven. He offers a soteriology of praise: “through the praise of God the faithful...arrive at eternal praise.”³⁰

Throughout the rest of the *SOE*, William clarifies how liturgy makes us like the denizens of heaven: by developing virtue. Indeed, his primary focus throughout the work is on how liturgy shapes the thoughts, attitudes, and character of its practitioners, leading to salvation: “There is no salvation except from the Lord, and especially through the virtues.”³¹ When discussing the allegorical meanings behind various ritual actions and texts, William's use of Latin grammar

²⁸ *SOE* Prologue 3–4.

²⁹ *SOE* 4.9.11.

³⁰ *SOE* 1.1.9.

³¹ *SOE* 3.47.1.

indicates that ritual actually effects what it represents. He does not simply say that a certain liturgical action “signifies” something, but uses *ut* + subjunctive clauses, which indicate purpose or result: the ritual action is performed *so that* some effect may follow, or *in order to signify* some truth (*ut notetur quod...*). For example, in the passage on the midnight office of Matins, quoted earlier, William says that we pray Matins for three reasons: first, “in order to not be like Esau” who symbolizes “the wicked” who trade salvation for carnal pleasure; second, “in order to be grateful for [Christ's] birth,” which occurred at night; and third, “that the nights of our faults would be illuminated,” which seems to refer the forgiveness of sins. The morning prayer of Lauds also leads to salvation: it was in the morning that the Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea, and “therefore at that hour we praise God, so that instead of drowning in the sea of this world with the Egyptians, we may be saved after the likeness of the Hebrews.”³² His commentary on Lent in particular stresses the power of liturgy to develop virtue toward salvation. During the service for the First Sunday of Lent, “the Lord arms His soldier with the four cardinal virtues.”³³ During Lent the Devil is more active than usual, so as “strengthening medicine” (*quasi confortatium*) the Church sings the end of Psalm 91 (“He called upon Me, and I will hear him: I will be with him in trouble,” etc.), and “when this is heard, one becomes brave.”³⁴ And “the Church arms its soldiers [i.e. the faithful] with the four cardinal virtues” by reading 2 Corinthians 6 (*SOE* 3.29.3–8). It seems clear, then, that for William one primary purpose of ritual is to make people virtuous (X1).

³² *SOE* 1.2.1.

³³ *SOE* 3.36.1.

³⁴ *SOE* 3.29.3. Ritual and music are closely connected for Xunzi as well as William. Space does not permit a full treatment of the topic, but see Eric L. Hutton and James Harold’s chapter “Xunzi on Music,” in the *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Xunzi* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016). Their discussion (p. 271) on the symbolic nature of music is worthy of comparison with William’s allegorical use of music theory in, e.g., *SOE* 3.50.22–31.

A natural assumption is that this happens through divine action: when we perform certain rituals, God steps in and makes us brave, loving, immune to the temptations of the world, etc. Although William, unlike Xunzi, holds that this does sometimes happen, William thinks that, typically, the way ritual makes its practitioners virtuous is by channeling thoughts and emotions properly (X2). This is the most remarkable similarity between William and Xunzi, and where Xunzi's approach to ritual helps explain some puzzling passages of the *SOE*. William and Xunzi agree not only in the purpose of ritual, but one of the major means by which that purpose is achieved: the regulation of the practitioner's inner life through external words and actions. Unlike Xunzi, William does not think that this is the only way ritual achieves its purpose. But throughout his work he spends as much or more time discussing the rhetorical and emotional power of liturgy as he does its supernatural effects, and consistently discusses the former as if it has actual causal power over the participants: it produces virtue in them. What William shows implicitly over numerous passages, Xunzi states as an explicit principle: and so, despite their differences, Xunzi's *Discourse on Ritual* illuminates the philosophical principles behind William's *Summa de Officiis*.

Consider, for instance, William's commentary on the Mass for Septuagesima, the beginning of the Pre-Lent season. The purpose of Pre-Lent was to ease the faithful into the penitential season before the rigor of Lent began. William is careful to explain how the choice of Scripture readings for Septuagesima are conducive to the season's purpose. First, the Church motivates the faithful to gain the prize of salvation through the virtues:

Because people don't freely take up the burden of penitence unless they see the prize, [the Church] displays the prize in the epistle, taken from 1 Corinthians 9: *Do you not*

know that those that run on the track, etc. The reward is the prize of those who run, by which eternal beatitude is signified, which is the prize of those who run toward paradise. This is displayed so that people will freely do penance and, indeed, so that they will weep all the more.³⁵

Paul compares the journey of life to a race.³⁶ By reading this passage, the Church introduces to the faithful the purpose of the penitential season, and the great reward that awaits those who follow through with it (another effect of ritual—penance produces salvation!). This affects people’s feelings: they feel more sorrowful for their sins, so that they do greater penance and thus are more secure in their salvation. But in order to be successful in this, the faithful must navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of slothful presumption and paralyzing desperation. The liturgy is designed to help:

After the responsory comes the tract,³⁷ “Out of the Depths” [Psalm 130], in order to signify that the Church leads its life with groans and sighs, that is, out of the depths of sin and punishment. But for comfort, the words of mercy are interpolated—*For with Thee is reconciliation*. But because the Church by no means wants her children to fall into sloth, after the tract follows, for the Gospel reading, the parable of the laborers earning the denarius,³⁸ that is, eternal life, which [the Church] displays to her children so that they will do penance joyfully.³⁹

³⁵ *SOE* 3.21.18.

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:24ff.

³⁷ The tract is a short chant before the Gospel reading that replaces the alleluia during penitential seasons.

³⁸ See Matthew 20:1–16. The point of the parable is that everyone, no matter when they repent and convert, earn the same reward: eternal life.

³⁹ *SOE* 3.21.23–24.

Excessive penance results in hopelessness, but excessive comfort results in spiritual laziness. The liturgy helps keep the faithful from falling into either vice by keeping their emotions from swinging to extremes, enabling them to “do penance joyfully.”

Even William’s more prosaic remarks about the liturgy, strange in their allegory-heavy context, are rooted in this idea. For instance, he says that “the versicle is said in order to wake up the lazy, which is why it’s said loudly.”⁴⁰ A versicle is a quick call-and-response by the leader and the people, like “The Lord be with you—and with your spirit.” William seems to be saying that such versicles are nothing but a spiritual “if you can hear me, clap once.” But elsewhere he says more:

After the antiphon the versicle is said loudly, in order to wake up the lazy. For lots of people are lazy about understanding divine things and about praising God. When they’re supposed to focus on what’s being spoken, they think about trifles...And through the versicle, begun loudly, one is exhorted to return to one’s heart in order to focus on the Lord’s Prayer, which follows the versicle. This is why it’s called a “versicle” [*versiculus*], from “revert” [*verto*]: it admonishes us to revert from trifles to spiritual things.⁴¹

Human beings naturally tend to be distracted by trifling earthly things and to lose focus when it comes to the things of God, and so “because we are slow to believe the promises, the versicle precedes [the canticle] loudly proclaimed, to spur us toward believing the promises of

⁴⁰ *SOE* 1.4.5.

⁴¹ *SOE* 1.1.14.

God.”⁴² The loudness of the versicle, and its requiring us to make a response, jolts our memory of God’s promises, increasing our faith. Understood in the context of William’s larger view of liturgy, as illuminated by Xunzi, these passages make a point about human nature and aspiration: about an inborn flaw we all have, and how liturgy supplies a remedy to that flaw.⁴³

Because ritual develops virtue by channeling thoughts and emotions, attention to and intellectual understanding of ritual is conducive to making people virtuous (X3): “because it is not enough to pray with the mouth if we do not also pray with the heart, the hymn follows...[which is] the exultation of the mind.”⁴⁴ One must “play [music to God] wisely” (*psallite sapienter*).⁴⁵ Here, again, what William implies in several places, Xunzi states more explicitly in a single treatise, and so helps us understand William. The purpose of the *SOE* is evidently to explain the meaning of the various rituals of the Church, which meaning usually involves developing and displaying virtues which conduce toward salvation. But the meaning of those rituals is often esoteric: it is not always clear how the rituals could have the effect William claims they do unless the practitioner were already aware of their meaning. It is easy to see how reading Psalm 130 helps strike a balance between contrition and hope in its movement from verse 1 (“Out of the depths have I cried”) to verse 4 (“For there is reconciliation with Thee”). But it’s not obvious how praying at night makes us like Jacob rather than Esau,⁴⁶ and what that has to do with the virtues or with eternal salvation, or how singing nine psalms in the morning

⁴² *SOE* 1.2.6.

⁴³ Although this paper does not focus on this topic, it would be fruitful in future work to compare William’s view of original sin and Xunzi’s view of the badness of human nature, and how these affect their approaches to ritual. Aaron Stalnaker compares Christian and Confucian views of human nature in his book *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine* (Georgetown University Press, 2006).

⁴⁴ *SOE* 1.1.4.

⁴⁵ *SOE* 1.1.6. This idea is, of course, not unique to William: the Apostle Paul also emphasized the importance of “praying with understanding” (1 Corinthians 14:15).

⁴⁶ *SOE* 1.1.8.

helps us join the company of the nine orders of angels.⁴⁷ Neither the ritual actions themselves, considered simply as actions, nor the words considered as words, have this kind of power. But if someone prays the Night Office, for example, and keeps in mind that Christ was born at night, that Esau symbolizes those in the night of sin, etc., then the mere act of praying at night can have this significance, and so serve as an encouragement toward virtue. Someone who is educated in William's school of liturgics will think of the nine orders of angels when he prays the nine psalms of Matins and will aspire to join them through the theological virtues. Ritual has a rhetorical causal power: for someone who is properly educated in the meaning of ritual, and is otherwise properly disposed, ritual practice develops virtue. But it does this not by implanting virtues directly into its practitioners, but by directing their thoughts, emotions, and imagination. The strong causal language William uses with regard to ritual practice indicates that for William, as for Xunzi, it is actual participation in the liturgy, not intellectual analysis of the liturgy, that develops virtue.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, some level of liturgical education seems to be necessary in order for liturgical practice to bear fruit.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *SOE* 4.9.11.

⁴⁸ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this distinction.

⁴⁹ How much education is necessary? I doubt he would say that one must be a liturgical scholar to get any benefit out of going to Mass, or that liturgical practice does not benefit a theologically-illiterate lay Christian. Perhaps even a very rudimentary education suffices for some benefit, but a greater understanding (such as William himself displays in the *SOE*) enables even greater benefit. On the Xunzian side of things, Berkson reads Xunzi as presenting a "hierarchy of understanding." Although Xunzi "advocates the fuller, richer understanding" of ritual possessed by "gentleman and sage," he acknowledges that those with a weaker understanding of ritual can also benefit from the practice of ritual. I suspect William would say something similar, although he does not directly address the point. Indeed, in passages of the *Summa Aurea* such as the Treatise on Faith (*Summa Aurea* 3.12) William describes the Christian virtue of faith as fundamentally an intellectual perfection: our mind is perfected so as to see God in the "mirror" of our soul, and eventually to understand God, as a foretaste of the ultimate vision of God in the life to come. So it would be reasonable to say that for every faithful Christian, participation in the things of faith (such as liturgy) has a rudimentary intellectual character, and that theological and liturgical education does not impart something brand new, but refines and enhances the intellectual virtue already possessed. This is certainly William's view with regard to theological education in general. But, again, William does not directly speak to this issue with respect to liturgy.

My calling this kind of efficacy “rhetorical efficacy” should not be taken to imply that such efficacy is limited only to the power of words as such. Granted, William talks almost exclusively about ritual words: prayers spoken, Scripture passages read, songs sung, and so on. And in many places, the rhetorical efficacy of the ritual can be reduced in large degree to the rhetorical efficacy of the words read.⁵⁰ But William in several places talks about liturgical words in a way that makes it clear that they are being used as objects, not merely as words.⁵¹ As a secular example, take the phenomenon of passwords. Suppose I want to join a closed-door meeting at a restaurant. I can do this in two ways: I can either pass the hostess a special coin, or I can say the word “marionette” to her. I left my coin on my desk, so I say “marionette,” and the hostess takes me to the meeting. The former case involves manipulating a material object, while the latter case involves saying a word. But even in the latter case, I am not using “marionette” as a word: I am not intending to communicate the meaning of the term “marionette” to the hostess. Any word could have been chosen beforehand by the parties to the meeting: the meaning of the word used is irrelevant. By saying “marionette” I am not communicating any meaning to the hostess which convinces her to take me to the meeting. Rather, I am using the word in precisely the same way as I would have used the coin. I am using the word as an object.

With this in mind, look at what William says about psalms and hymns:

A hymn is praising God in song. Now, a song is the exultation of the mind concerning eternal things bursting forth orally...Further, because praise of the heart and the mouth are not enough unless works follow, the psalms follow, by which good works

⁵⁰ See, e.g., *SOE* 3.21.23–24, on Psalm 130

⁵¹ In *Rituals of the Way*, Goldin (pp. 55ff.) cites J.L. Austin’s concept of illocutionary acts as an example of Western philosophical thought on ritual. This concept was influential on my reading of William in this section. See Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.

are signified. Hence David says, *On a ten-stringed psalter I will strum to Thee*. For on the aforesaid instrument David used to play, in order to signify that we ought to play to God on the spiritual psalter (i.e., the spirit brought to life by faith) by fulfilling the Ten Commandments of the Law. But before the psalm, we begin the antiphon, because it is from charity that all meritorious work begins. But it is said in part. After the psalm it is said in full, because charity is incomplete in this life, but will be completed in the life to come, through good works and after good works...Also, the antiphon is begun by one person and finished by several, in order to signify that charity begins from one person—Christ—and is completed by Him in His members...After the antiphon comes the jubilus. The jubilus is an exultation of the mind concerning eternal things, when the mind can neither be entirely silent nor fully expressive...It occurs by means of a single letter at the end of the antiphon, in order to express that it is praise of the ineffable and incomprehensible God.⁵²

In this passage William is describing the section of the Night Office after the opening call-and-response and before the Scripture reading. This section of the office focuses on praising God. The ritual proceeds in the following order:

1. The hymn.
2. The opening words of the antiphon.
3. The psalm.
4. The entire antiphon, ending in...

⁵² *SOE* 1.1.4–7.

5. ...the jubilus.

William interprets this sequence as representing the structure of praise. Praise is the “exultation of the mind” as it thinks about God and eternal things. This mental worship, along with its natural expression in language, is symbolized by the hymn. But it is not enough to express our praise of God in words: we are hypocrites if we do not also express it in good deeds. These are symbolized by the psalm, because the psalter, an ancient Israelite instrument like a harp, had ten strings, symbolizing the Ten Commandments. All meritorious good works begin with charity, symbolized by the antiphon, a short phrase the congregation sings. Charity is incomplete in this life, but gives rise to good works, which in turn lead to the perfect charity of beatitude: hence the order of partial antiphon, psalm, full antiphon. We end with the jubilus, a long, drawn-out melody sung to only one syllable. In effect, this syllable becomes meaningless, merely a vehicle for the voice singing the melody of the jubilus. This wordless music symbolizes God’s transcending human language. It is hard not to see here an echo of the beatitude which perfect charity will accompany in the next life: “No eye hath seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God hath prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). So the sequence from hymn to jubilus is an image of William’s soteriology of praise: we begin with inner praise, proceed to outer praise and good works, and end with praising God in the Heavenly Jerusalem.⁵³

⁵³ William S. Sax, in his discussion of the question of ritual efficacy—i.e., whether rituals can be said to do anything at all—endorses the view that, in the Middle Ages, Christian ritual was seen not as a way of expressing one’s beliefs, but as a method for making one virtuous. It is only later, after the Protestant “separation of humanity from nature,” that theologians began to “interpret ritual (e.g., the Christian liturgy) in terms of what it ‘symbolizes’ rather than what it actually does” (“Ritual and the Problem of Efficacy,” in *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 5). He concludes that “to analyze rituals as ‘expressing’ inner states...or ‘symbolizing’ theological ideas or social relations...is to neglect the question of how they might be instrumental, how the might actually *do* things” (p. 6). I hope that our discussion of William has shown that, although there is a lot

Items 1–4 in the sequence are verbal. Item 5, the jubilus, is verbal only in the bare sense that it consists of a spoken (sung) syllable. Clearly in this case, the meaning of the ritual does not arise from the meaning of the word spoken: the melismatic syllable in itself is meaningless. Rather, the very meaninglessness of the word used impresses on the properly educated worshipper the incomprehensibility of God. The word used is not important, but rather the position of the word in the ritual: its following the complete antiphon, and its being sung to a complex piece of music. But the same thing is true of items 1–4. Psalms do not symbolize good works because of what they say, but because of the placement of the recitation of a psalm in the ritual. Some psalms are about good works, but many are not. Some hymns are about praising God apart from works, but some are not. They symbolize praise not because of their verbal content, but because of their place in the ritual. Antiphons, meanwhile, can be about almost anything. The hymn, psalm, and antiphon are not being used as words in this ritual, but more like ritual objects, manipulated in esoteric ways that remind educated ritual practitioners of important religious teachings. It is not the texts as such that have this meaning, but the use made of the texts by the worshipper.⁵⁴ This, I think, is why William almost always introduces the hidden meaning of liturgical actions with *ut notetur*, “in order to signify.” He does not say that certain words or actions signify certain truths, but that they are done “in order to signify” those truths.

of truth in Sax’s view, it ultimately trades on a false dichotomy. Even though William lived long before the Reformation, the bulk of his work is taken up with “analyz[ing] rituals as... ‘symbolizing’ theological ideas.” Yet William is also quite clear about the real causal power of ritual. For William, it is precisely by symbolizing theological truth and encapsulating it in action that ritual is able to “do things.” The two are inseparable.

⁵⁴ That’s not to say that the words of the texts are not important at all. As we saw in the case of Psalm 130, in many places William is careful to explain how the words of the psalms have important meaning for different liturgical celebrations. All I am saying is that psalms, hymns, etc. symbolize the things that William says they do in this passage not as words, but as ritual objects. In the words of the authors of *Rituals and its Consequences*, “the meaning of ritual is the meaning produced through the ritual action itself” (p. 26), even if the words play an indispensable role in the enactment of this action. On the other hand, William would probably resist the conclusion of these authors that, since the meaning of ritual is found in the action itself ritual “cannot be analyzed as a coherent system of beliefs” (ibid.). After all, William spends much of the *Summa Aurea* doing just that.

William is not saying merely that those words and actions signify truths, but that the worshipper signifies the truths by means of the rituals. It is not mere understanding of the ritual that produces virtue, but the performance of the ritual with that understanding in mind: the ritual texts signify these truths not merely as texts with a certain linguistic meaning, but insofar as they are acted out by the practitioner.⁵⁵ Signify to whom? I think William means, to the practitioners themselves: not because they are unaware of the truths in question, but because they need to be reminded of them in order to progress toward virtue.

This tells us what the purpose of the *SOE* itself is: to provide practitioners of Christian liturgy with the education they need to develop the virtues through liturgical practice. Without prior instruction, someone listening in on the hymn and psalm in a medieval morning prayer service would not conclude that the hymn symbolizes mental praise and the psalm good deeds, for as noted above, the texts of the hymn and psalm may have nothing to do with such themes. This is something you have to know in advance: you have to be taught it. But once you have been taught it, the complicated sequence of texts in the Daily Office becomes a powerful encouragement to praise God in word and deed so as to attain perfect communion with the incomprehensible God. It is precisely a work like the *SOE* that provides the worshipper with the kind of education he or she needs to get the full benefit of the liturgy.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ In *Acting Liturgically: Philosophical Reflections on Religious Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Nicholas Wolterstorff (pp. 12–13) makes two distinctions: first, between a liturgy being enacted and the text for enacting a liturgy; second, between a liturgy as such, understood as an act-type, and particular liturgy-tokens (i.e., particular instantiations of a liturgy). In Wolterstorff's terms, William thinks that what produces virtue is not mere understanding of a text for enacting a liturgy, but rather the tokening of a liturgy when accompanied by intellectual understanding of the corresponding liturgy act-type.

⁵⁶ I don't mean to say that all of these interpretations are unique to William or can only be found in the *SOE*. I have not done the research needed to make that claim. The identification of the ten strings of the psalter with the Ten Commandments is ancient, going back at least to Augustine. So I can't say much about the currency of these interpretations prior to William. After William, however, things are different. Since much of the *SOE* was copied *verbatim* into Durand's *Rationale*, the most popular liturgical commentary from the 13th century onward, it is safe to say that a great many literate practitioners of Western Christian ritual in the centuries after William did, in fact, receive an Auxerrian ritual education, even if they didn't realize that William was their teacher.

IV. Ritual, the Church, and the Sacraments

There are two more Xunzian claims to assess in relation to William's philosophy of liturgy:

X4. Rituals were invented by human beings in conformity with Heaven.

X5. Rituals have no supernatural effects.

With regard to these two claims, William either does not give an answer or clearly thinks otherwise. So it is with regard to X4 and X5 that we see differences between Xunzi and William of Auxerre's philosophies of ritual. While Xunzi's clear articulation of his view of ritual helps us understand and organize William's more scattered remarks on the subject, it is important to see where the two thinkers differ.

First, X4: Rituals were invented by human beings in conformity with Heaven. William never discusses the origin of the liturgy explicitly, but he does identify "the Church" as the originator of various liturgical practices. Not only does the Church act through the liturgy (e.g. above, "the Church arms its soldiers with the four cardinal virtues"⁵⁷) but the Church has intentions in the liturgy. Commenting on the communion chant for Quinquagesima, William says that "the Church does this to make us remember" how God's people were destroyed by their sinful desires in the wilderness.⁵⁸ So "the Church" is the originator of the liturgy. That means that human beings are the originators of the liturgy—perhaps like Xunzi's sage-kings. But this doesn't exclude, as it does for Xunzi, a supernatural element in the origin of liturgy. I assume

⁵⁷ *SOE* 3.29.3–8.

⁵⁸ *SOE* 3.23.13.

William would want to say that the Church's liturgical decisions were guided by the Holy Spirit in some sense. Much of the text used in the liturgy, as well as some of the actions—standing, bowing, singing, baptizing, taking communion, and the like—come from inspired Scripture, and the Sacraments were instituted by Christ. So William would agree with Xunzi that much of the liturgy originated with human beings, but deny that this excludes a supernatural component in the origin of liturgy.

What about X5: Rituals have no supernatural effects? Again, William is mixed.

Obviously William thinks that at least some Christian rituals have supernatural effects: the sacraments, such as Baptism and the Eucharist, at least. And although I have argued that William thinks that ritual develops virtue by rhetorical means rather than directly, there are places in the *SOE* where he clearly attributes the effect of ritual to divine action. He says that prayer is effective because God answers prayer: “by prayer the promise [of salvation] is obtained,” and so we pray for the priest “that his prayer be accepted by God, so that God gives him grace.”⁵⁹ William says that the entire service of the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost is devoted to praying for the salvation of the Jews, presumably not by some rhetorical power of the prayers (I doubt any Jews were listening), but because God can save them.⁶⁰ Indeed, in his theological work, the *Summa Aurea*, William makes it quite clear that salvation comes not from virtues that human beings develop by repeated actions, but by virtues which are given supernaturally by God. In fact the latter are the only virtues in the proper sense of the term: virtues are God working in us.⁶¹ But

⁵⁹ *SOE* 1.2.13.

⁶⁰ *SOE* 3.119.

⁶¹ William makes this quite clear in the opening to *Summa Aurea* 3.12, the Treatise on the Virtues. Guillelmus Altissiodorensis; Jean Ribailier, ed. *Summa Aurea*. Paris: Centre National De La Recherche Scientifique, 1980. (7 vols.)

in the *SOE*, William rarely talks this way, instead focusing on the rhetorical and emotional influence of ritual, as we have seen.

Probably his view is that even when liturgy develops virtue by rhetorical means, God somehow cooperates in that process: perhaps by working in the rhetoric, or by giving the initial spark of grace that allows the practitioner to be emotionally effected by the liturgy, or by illuminating the practitioner's mind to understand the ritual's inner meaning, or by some other means. William does not go into detail here, although an examination of what he says about grace and human freedom in the *Summa Aurea* would be illuminating in this regard. Suffice to say that his picture of the causal relation between God (or Heaven) and ritual practice must look very different from Xunzi's.⁶²

V. Philosophy of Ritual Today

William and Xunzi together provide a helpful beginning for a contemporary philosophical model of ritual. This model is composed, roughly, of claims X1–X3 above, which Xunzi and William share:

- X1. One primary purpose of ritual is to make people virtuous.
- X2. Ritual makes people virtuous by channeling thoughts and emotions properly.
- X3. Intellectual understanding of ritual is conducive to making people virtuous.

⁶² Another major difference between William and Xunzi, not treated in this paper, concerns the social aspect of ritual. Both think that ritual is used to build community, but the community built in each case differs greatly: for Xunzi, it is natural human community; for William, it is a supernatural community, the citizenry of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Such a model has the advantage of being both descriptive and normative. It tells us, roughly, what rituals are: actions whose purpose is to direct the thoughts and emotions of the practitioner. This is too broad to be a good definition, but it is a start. This model also tells us what ritual is for: developing virtue. So there is a normative aspect to this model of ritual: rituals that develop virtue are good; rituals that don't are neutral or bad (the latter if they develop vices).⁶³

This normative aspect can also help us understand why ritual is so pervasive in human culture: because it helps develop character traits necessary for social stability, because it fosters a balanced emotional life, and so forth. This account of ritual can be applied to different kinds of ritual—religious, political, academic, family, etc.—from different cultures and religious traditions. Philosophers may have an important contribution to make to topics in the domain of anthropologists and psychologists.

This model also paves the way for a contemporary appropriation of the (to modern Western people) somewhat obscure Confucian virtue of ritual propriety (*li* 禮). The term *li* refers not just an external set of ceremonies (“ritual(s)”), but also to an internal character trait that someone who wants to be virtuous needs to acquire (“ritual propriety”). Why exalt ritual propriety to the rank of virtue, along with wisdom, benevolence, faithfulness, and the like? On

⁶³ Or perhaps ritual may have other purposes which make them good (or neutral, or bad) regardless of whether they develop virtue. This would be an interesting question for contemporary philosophers elaborating this model. This model can also be fruitfully compared with the “ritual as subjunctive” view expressed by the authors of *Ritual and its Consequences*. Although neither William nor Xunzi quite express these authors’ view that ritual involves the creation of “possible social worlds” distinguished from the actual world (p. 20), a virtue ethics of ritual can be described in this way. For William, for example, liturgical worship is one of the means by which we develop the virtues prerequisite for joining the company of Heaven, but worship precisely involves imitating that company—that is, acting *as if* we were already in heaven. On the other hand, William would not take an “as if” attitude toward the actual existence of heaven or the blessed, or the actual possibility of attaining to that company through worship. He would resist the idea that the “common idea of the sacred” shared by the Christian community is a “shared ‘could be’” (p. 24) and not a shared “is.” William and Xunzi, compared with Seligman et al., are deeply optimistic about the efficacy of ritual in turning subjunctives into indicatives. Rituals, in their view, are not “always doomed ultimately to fail” (p. 30): the rituals established by the Sage Kings inculcate virtue and social order; the rituals taught by the Church bring Her children to the society of the blessed.

this model, it is quite clear why this is so. Ritual serves a definite purpose, and ritual practitioners can be better or worse at allowing it to achieve that purpose: they can be more or less attentive to rituals, more or less emotionally engaged, more or less skilled at performing certain rituals, more or less educated on the purpose of ritual and of specific rituals, and so forth. In other words, getting the full benefit of ritual practices requires having a certain character trait or collection of traits, which can be referred to as the virtue of ritual propriety. This model tells us what a virtuous ritual practitioner looks like: physically, emotionally, and intellectually engaged, focused on the ritual action at hand while also given to reflection and eager to learn.⁶⁴

This model also focuses our gaze on interesting philosophical questions about ritual that it does not itself answer. Given that ritual has a certain purpose, how do we judge whether specific rituals fulfill that purpose? Who gets to decide which rituals should be performed and which should not? How, exactly, does ritual accomplish its purpose? (A question for psychologists and cognitive scientists as well as metaphysicians and ethicists.) When ought rituals be changed, and who gets to change them?

A Christian version of the model can be developed by supplementing X1–X3 with some of the specific Auxerrian claims about the role of virtue in salvation and the liturgical goal of imitating the blessed in Heaven. This supplemented model provides a solid starting point for a Christian philosophy of worship. It tells us what liturgy is for: imitating the worship of God in Heaven such that one acquires and sustains the virtues requisite for joining the company of Heaven. It gives us a criterion by which to judge good from bad liturgical practices: liturgies that

⁶⁴ But couldn't you be focused on the wrong rituals? Wouldn't someone who has proper attitude to ritual, but who directs that attitude toward evil rituals, rituals that generate vice, only become more vicious? So perhaps ritual propriety is more of a disposition toward developing virtue rather than a virtue in itself. Or we could say that it is a virtue, but only when guided by a higher-order virtue like prudence. These are important matters to consider. Chapter 2 of the *Xunzi* seems aware that paying attention to rituals, in itself, does not produce the virtue of ritual propriety: studying ritual without understanding its purpose causes the practitioner "act too rigidly," while a flesh-and-blood "teacher" is needed to "correct your practice of ritual" (p. 14).

conduce to this end are good; those that do not are, at least, suspect. It indicates that skill and practice in worship are not neutral for Christians, but a vital part of Christian development. And it raises further questions about liturgy: how, exactly, does liturgy make us virtuous? Does it do so only for Christians, but for anyone who participates? Do rituals in other religions have similar or different roles or effects? Where does human causal efficacy end and divine influence begin? Who gets to decide whether a given liturgy accomplishes its goal, and who gets to legislate change? And so on.

This model also raises important questions about the purpose of ritual. There are some modern writers who would be sympathetic to the claim that the purpose of liturgy, or at least one of its most important purposes, is to develop virtue. James K.A. Smith, for example, emphasizes the role of Christian rituals in shaping “virtues” or “dispositions of desire” (*Desiring the Kingdom* pp. 68ff.). But other authors identify the primary purpose of liturgy as something like glorifying, worshipping, or otherwise relating to God in some special way. Nicholas Wolterstorff does not highlight virtue development as a primary purpose of ritual, but “being directly engaged with God.”⁶⁵ He would probably resist the notion that the purpose of liturgy is self-improvement. Dietrich Hildebrand opposes the idea explicitly: “The Liturgy is not primarily intended as a means of sanctification or an ascetic exercise. Its primary intention is to praise and glorify God.”⁶⁶ For my part, I am not sure William would have seen the two aims (developing virtue and engaging with or worshipping God) as incompatible, or even separable. On his view we engage in liturgical practice not for the mere sake of self-improvement, but because the development of virtue prepares us to join in the eternal praise of the Blessed; and in the *Summa Aurea* William says that the virtues are the result of grace (i.e. of God’s engaging us), empowering us to delight

⁶⁵ Wolterstorff 28.

⁶⁶ Hildebrand, Dietrich. *Liturgy & Personality*. Second English Edition. Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1960, p. 2.

in and cling to God.⁶⁷ Alexander Schmemmann, similarly, says in one moment that “the real function of the liturgy” is “to change [man’s] mind and heart,” and a page later that “its very function” is “to put man in direct contact with Reality,” i.e. God.⁶⁸ So it seems that an Auxerrian-Xunzian view of ritual raises questions about the purpose of liturgy (or ritual in general), and can be put into dialogue with modern discussions of the question, with potentially fruitful results.

Finally, this study shows that contemporary philosophers of religion working on questions of liturgy and ritual need not do their work in a vacuum, for the Christian tradition contains resources to help them: not just liturgical texts, but texts about liturgy that contain philosophical insights. We only needed help from a Confucian to uncover them.

Covenant Classical School

Naperville, Illinois

⁶⁷ See especially *Summa Aurea* 3.12 and 3.14, the Treatises on Faith and Charity. See also Boyd Taylor Coolman’s *Knowing God by Experience: The Spiritual Senses in the Theology of William of Auxerre* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2004), which is a study of William’s theology of mystical experience and says much about his view of the virtues.

⁶⁸ Schmemmann, Alexander. *Problems of Orthodoxy in America*. St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly, 1964, vol. 8, #4, pp. 164–185.