

# Confucian Shame and Christian Identity in Protestant Free Worship

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This paper approaches questions surrounding Liturgy vs. Free-Worship from a Confucian perspective. Throughout the *Analects* and other works, Confucius promotes the significance of ritual in life, particularly in the cultivation of shame. Although there is renewed interest in the use of Liturgy, many American Protestant churches still engage in non-liturgical worship. Two justifications for this practice suggest themselves. First, there is the reaction against the rigidity and anachronism of ancient church traditions that are over-emphasized in Liturgical worship services. Second, there is the desire to endorse one's emotions, circumstances, and fervent appeal to the Almighty in his/her own voice. However, Confucian philosophy promotes a far different regard for ritual observance in which *Analects* 2.3 et al. suggests not only the promotion of social order through ritual, but also, and perhaps most significantly, the development of *self* that is regulated by a formal attitude of shame. As we continue to develop our sense of self and role in our worship of God, Confucian thought seems to argue for a robust liturgy that socially locates us in that expression.

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Lead the people with administrative injunctions and keep them orderly with penal law, and they will avoid punishments but will be without shame. Lead them with excellence and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves. Confucius' *Analects* 2.3 (Confucius)

This well-known aphorism reveals Confucius' understanding of the relation between ritual practice and a sense of shame; and while these insights certainly have much implication for our lives in a general sense, they may also provide commentary about our spiritual life. As the title implies, this paper seeks to examine Christian worship from the perspective of the Confucian emphasis on ritual and shame.

Liturgical worship services are long-established ceremonial practices shared by the congregation and worship leaders that often include an order of service, specific communal invocations and prayers, reading aloud of long portions of biblical text to support a doctrinal-based sermon, traditional hymns, benedictions and other pre-ordained rites. Of course, this is just one interpretation of a set of worship behaviors whose diversity and dynamism are remarkable and indicative of our American Protestant movements. As Balmer and Winner(2013) explain in *Protestantism in America*, the use of liturgy ranges from absolute adherence to the medieval rituals of the Roman Catholic Church to the variations of such in Lutheran and Episcopalian churches

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to the outright rejection of anything liturgical by today's burgeoning non-denominationalists (Randall Balmer and Lauren F. Winner). But, perhaps, the more useful understanding of the Liturgy is given by Arthur S. Hoyt in *Public Worship for Non-Liturgical Churches*: liturgy is "a fixed form of worship", as opposed to "free worship". (Hoyt)

Indeed, this examination focuses on the non-liturgical worship services so prevalent in contemporary American Protestantism. Confucian philosophy may suggest criticism of those denominations who eschew the ritual of the traditional liturgy. That is, in the effort to avoid the formality and 'stiffness' of the traditional liturgy, it may be that such forms of Christian worship also lose the individual and community identity of the shared spiritual experience as evidenced by a lack of shame in our religious expression and more general conduct as Christians.

### The Non-liturgical Worship

Religious instinct, as ancient as humanity and as fresh as the morning, will continue to enrich the world forever. Although its precise history is unclear, the history of the non-liturgical worship—sometimes referred to as "free worship" attributes its beginnings to the reformed churches of the Puritan period in early colonial New England. The contemporary forms of worship became increasingly prevalent within the burgeoning American Christian denominations during the Second Awakening of the early 19th century and the fundamentalist and evangelical movements of the early 20th century. (Randall and Lauren, 2013, pp. 37-69)

Much of the impetus for "free worship" is driven by reactions against traditional liturgical worship. Such reactions perceive liturgy as a limitation on professions of faith and spirituality borne more of adherence to tradition than authentic Christian devotion. Liturgies are often viewed as rigid and overly formal affairs that ignore the spiritual needs of the individual, focusing on long-constituted ritual rather than relationship. As Hoyt (1911) explains, "Such worship is *historic* rather than *present* [his italics]". He suggests that the formal liturgies do not represent the lived experience of our developing relationship with God. It prevents the spontaneity as expressed in a moment of passion for our God, the act of coming to Christ with a fervent open heart that reflects our experience and emotions at this moment in life. Reliance on expression through liturgy interferes with religion as a living experience, a reality that is in the here and now. Critics often charge that sympathy and supplication to the Lord at moments of great despair and suffering are obscured by practicing rituals contrived centuries earlier with no connection to the circumstances of the present. The liturgical service tends to overemphasize form and tradition at the expense of sincerity and meaning. Again from Hoyt "Where the same words are repeated week after week, the spirit may easily grow insensible to their meaning".

Non-liturgical worship is perceived as a direct and easy expression of sincerity and spirituality. It speaks to a reverence for direct relations in the lives of actual people in the present moment experiencing all of the challenges, disappointments and sufferings that so often accompany our existence with the grace and mercy of a living God. At the heart of free worship is the exercise of prayer, not intended to express high performance of art and ritual, but a fervent awe for God's work and grace in the lives of individuals. "Prayers are not works of art; they are great spiritual acts". (Robert, 2005, p. 75) Prayers are understood to be the free exercise of one's appeal to the grace of God within that personal relationship with the Father. We should not be deprived by ritual of the inspiration to speak to our God as a flawed human to a friend of ultimate nature and mercy. The great advantage of the non-liturgical denominations is that their worship will reflect the nature of the congregants and their relationships, circumstances and expressions of faith; there is no external coercion

insisting on some formal communion with God. Thus, there is the creative freedom to come together in ways that embrace the spontaneity and fervor of the moment without some historical, albeit oblique, mediation. It is equally important to note that non-liturgical worship need not renounce the common sacraments of Christianity such as Baptism or the Eucharist, however, they must find their expression in the common voice of the particular living congregation, rather than in the rituals of antiquity. Those churches engaged in free worship may seek inspiration from the practices of the past, but resist any externally imposed limit on their creativity and passion for their spirituality and Lord.

### Confucian Shame

“Those who conduct themselves with a sense of shame and who, when sent to distant quarters, do not disgrace the commission of their lord, deserve to be called a scholar-apprentice.” The foundational role of the notion of shame in the Confucian ideals of propriety is unquestionable. As the above excerpt suggests, one cannot even begin on the road to becoming an exemplary person without that sense of shame to govern and inform their character. Confucius comments often about the relation of shame, propriety and individual success in such verses as his response to a familiar hexagram from the Book of Changes: “ ‘A person who is not constant in his character will perhaps suffer shame on account of it’ ... This simply means that such persons need not divine their future”. Hence, a proper sense of shame would appear to be a harbinger for relative success in life. Thus Ancient Chinese culture is sometimes characterized as a “shame culture”. Analects 13.23 (Confucius)

Shame in this context should be understood as much more than the emotional states of guilt and embarrassment, although that is certainly part of shame’s manifestation. The Confucian notion of shame represents the internal awareness that one has violated a well-accepted public expectation of behavior and attitude. This awareness then manifests in feelings, and their external presentations, associated with guilt and embarrassment. Shame elicits such feelings when one’s behavior and attitude, as internalized and integrated norms that determine social roles and their attendant attitudes, violate those norms and expectations. That is, as we integrate the social expectations for our roles in family and community, as they become part of the *self*, we must also embrace the sense of shame that informs of a personal failure in those roles. Hence to lack a sense of shame is to disintegrate one’s familial/community roles; thus no guilt is felt or expressed when one steps outside of those expected roles.

Jane Geany (2003) describes a useful understanding of this concept of shame characterized as “boundary shame”:

Something like a contact-driven, boundary blurring model of shame is what emerges most clearly in an analysis of the fifty-odd references to shame in the Lunyu, the Mengzi, and the Xunzi. In particular, this includes boundaries related to the formation of the self (although it also includes conceptual and geographical boundaries). The shamed human person in early China seems to be one whose personal boundaries have been blurred. (pp. 119-120)

Understood in this perspective, shame is a much broader experience than the mere personal feelings of guilt over the exposure of one’s personal failings and violation(s) of acceptable behavior. Instead, shame contains a community experience that need not even identify a specific external authority who has become aware of such violations; it is enough that one is aware that some boundary of expectation has been “blurred” by some individual behavior or attitude. Hence, while guilt is personal and can only be felt as a personal failing, it makes sense that we feel ashamed for the violations of established boundaries for others. To have no sense of shame, then, is to have a developing sense of self without the clearly delineated boundaries that one’s family

and community expect. “When shame is exemplified by blurred boundaries, the body seems to lack a core or firm delineation. Indeed, it seems porous and open to contagion.” (NA Glover, 2012, p. 102) Thus this view of shame elicits a damning invective that the person without a sense of shame is a fouled, underdeveloped person whose behaviors and beliefs cannot be counted on within any acceptable social situation.

### Ritual and Shame

Having a sense of appropriate conduct as one’s basic disposition, developing it in observing ritual, expressing it with modesty, and consummating it in making good on one’s word: this then is an exemplary person. Within Confucian philosophy, ritual provides for the attainment of a sense of shame. One internalizes that sense of propriety, both filial and communal, through the practice of public and private rituals intended for the development of the roles that define behavioral expectations and our personal boundaries. Establishing personal boundaries makes us worthy of community by identifying our own needs and desires within those norms. “The ancient kings hated such disorder, and therefore they established ritual principles in order to curb it, to train men’s desires and to provide for their satisfaction”. Indeed, as a sense of shame is defined as establishing the boundaries of self by identifying one’s discrete roles; ritual propriety (*li*) is regarded as creating the distinctiveness of individual action within the expectations of community. As KarynLai comments, “Likewise, *li* as norms of appropriateness governing social behavior involve discipline in individual action according to what counts as normative within the context of the community.” ; The connection between ritual propriety and role seems well-established by passages in the *Analects* such as at 2.5 and 15.5 where Confucius manifests one’s role, and thus one’s relations with others, by the observance of various rituals. Furthermore, Confucius leaves no doubt that the mere performance of ritual is not enough; one must perform such rituals in an authentic manner reflecting of the internalized feelings for community expectation that forms the self. As Confucius comments, “What could I see in a person who in holding a position of influence is not tolerant, who in observing ritual propriety is not respectful, and who in overseeing the mourning rites does not grieve?” *Analects*, 3.26 (Confucius)

However, it is a caution that the self should not be understood in the substantive conceptualization as understood in Western Philosophy. Indeed, as with any Asian commentary on Western concepts and practices, we must be willing to “shift” our paradigm. That is, while our western conception of personhood assumes some unchanging, intrinsic substance or “being” that accounts for our duration over time—perhaps even eternity—and then must explain change and movement, the self as understood within the Confucian context is the ever developing locust of relationships, roles, and experiences. Ritual defines this context and our “way-making” or *dao*; ritual provides for the creative formation of the self that is neither random nor subject to the whims of chance. Our creativity, thus, exists within the boundaries of ritualized role-making that defines us as evolving individuals. As Ames (n.d.) notes, “Although accordance with ritualized roles and behavior requires personalization such that each daughter is uniquely ‘this one and only daughter’, the disciplining effect of the formal aspect of ritual that makes growth and refinement possible cannot be overstated.”

However, effective ritual is not a cadence of rigid anachronistic behaviors that admit of no flexibility or adaptation. Indeed, although Confucius continues to call for adherence to the practice of long-accepted ritual, as at *Analects* 6.25 and 7.1, he also suggests that such rites may be adapted to the circumstances and realities of the present. Thus there seems to be some fluidity in the accepted observance of ritual as Confucius notes:

The use of a hemp cap is prescribed in the observance of ritual propriety. Nowadays, that a silk cap is used instead is a matter of frugality. It would follow the accepted practice. A subject kowtowing on entering the hall is prescribed in the observance of ritual propriety. Nowadays that one kowtows only after ascending the hall is a matter of hubris. Although it goes contrary to accepted practice, it still kowtow on entering the hall.

A sense of shame, then, develops from the supplication to rituals that impose the norms of the present community, as well as its history, both externally and, perhaps more significantly, internally. Ritual behavior instills a sense of reverence for the self as an evolving set of relations and roles, an experience bounded and defined even with the ebbing and flowing of *dao*. To feel shame, then, is to feel a blurring of the boundaries of self in a way that represents a violation of personal and community expectation, even if the violation is entirely private. Hence, it makes sense to speak of the private shame and personal embarrassment that one has in some way broken the commitments as established by the practices of public rituals even though no external authority may be aware of the infraction.

A lack of shame, then, is the sense that there are no boundaries to *self*, an uncertainty of one's role in context and so no proscriptions on personal behavior. It is to feel no public or private censure even as one's public behavior and private attitudes fail to conform to commitments in particular relationships or roles. Personal creativity lacks any anchor or form; rather than the creative act that delineates and individualizes, there are only random accretions of experience and emotional catharsis. Indeed, reverence for one's relations and roles in society seems replaced by a casual attitude of undeserved familiarity tempered by some shared emotional experience(s). Family becomes a set of accidental and, to some extent, temporary relationships that can be ignored or even disposed of within various contexts. Friends are the momentary associations of shared experiences whose introductions and dissipations are given little thought or respect. Social responsibility devolves into the liberties of unfettered desires masquerading as "individual rights" and the prerogatives of personal autonomy. Authority that imposes the expectations of propriety foremost by their own example becomes a competition to satisfy the desires of as many as possible for as long as possible.

### **Free Worship and Shame**

This paper seeks to examine whether the forms of 'free worship' characteristic of non-liturgical Christian denominations can impose that sense of shame understood within the context of their expressions of spiritual experience and the developing Christian self. This question, of course, must be approached with a tenuous and circumspect assessment since there is a wide spectrum of worship services and associated behaviors that would be regarded as non-liturgical. However, there are enough common experiences and behaviors that we may make some, at least tentative, assessment within the current context. Again, Geany's account of shame as "boundary blurring" provides a useful tool for such analysis; that is, if it does not seem that there are behaviors or practices associated with free worship that would constitute a blurring of one's personal boundaries, i.e., a violation of one's role or community expectations, within the context of the religious experience or one's identity as a Christian, then we may very well have reason to suspect such a lack of shame and the subsequent blurring of the Christian identity. So what are the more common features of the non-liturgical service (again, understanding that these features cannot, in and of themselves, be considered as necessary or sufficient to characterize "free worship")?

A frequent component of contemporary free worship is the form of music characteristic of today's popular music—rock and roll, rap etc. . There is a performance stage with the usual instruments for such music, e.g., a trap set, electric guitars, a bass guitar, keyboard, etc. An often youthful, even pierced and tattooed, vocalist sings into the microphone obviously performing for an audience. The congregation, much like a concert audience, sways with the music, waving hands, sometimes hooting, whistling and clapping at the conclusion of each number. For those wishing to sing along (which may not even be expected in some instances) projection

screens showing the lyrics have replaced the traditional hymnal. Of course, such musical performances seek to prove the Christian service relevant to today's youth and those of us who grew up in the 'rock and roll' era of the past few decades. Certainly, enthusiasm engendered by this music is infectious and familiar; but does it establish our identity and roles within our Christian experience? Although the lyrics speak of Christian faith, love of God and redemption through Jesus Christ, are we listening to and participating in the uncommon experience of spiritual communion? It does not seem that we are supplicating to our God with the reverence for a unique and sincere spirituality that identifies us as God's children. Does this experience in music seem any more identifiable of my personhood *as a Christian* than my enjoyment of a favorite popular musical band? More to the point, it is difficult to imagine what would constitute a blurring of some constitutive boundary within this aspect of Christian free worship. What musical presentation would be deemed inappropriate for Christian worship?

Today's free worship also seems to elicit a decline in ministerial authority and expectation. It appears that many of today's pastors do not tend to identify themselves as such outside of the church environment. The air of dignity and high expectation seems deflated into the sort of casual association expected of anyone among many professions. The high moral expectations particular to religious authority and feelings of shame when those expectations are violated seem diminished (although the recent moral failings by some in the Church continue to attract special attention, at least within the popular media). While some can still be expected to wear vestments and "the collar" that so easily mark their status and our expectations for them during worship, many Protestant pastors show little difference in their dress and demeanor from the rest of us outside of the special environment of the church and its specific activities. But, more significantly, they present themselves less as moral and religious authorities and more as "life advisors" and the administrative authority for the particular institution of worship. And while for some, the mere presence of their pastor elicits respect for their office, reverence for our spiritual experience and fear of any deserved or undeserved censure, generally, a parishioner is often just as unsure as to the appropriate manner of interaction with their pastor. Ministerial authority often asserts itself only when one is pulled aside into private conversations, "counseling" and explicit criticism concerning a shortfall in tithing or behavior that is simply beyond the pale in any context. Their overall countenance and appearance invites one to perceive them more often than not as an equal among equals; one is as likely to approach with a slap on the back and a humorous statement as with a profound respect for a spiritual authority. Yet Confucius makes clear the importance of an expectation for authoritative countenance, "If anyone could be said to have effected proper order while remaining nonassertive, surely it was Shun. What did he do? He simply assumed an air of deference and faced due south". Thus Confucius seems to suggest that leadership manifests itself with a sense of dignity and bearing particular to the office. Since there is a lack of well-defined ritual and protocol in the non-liturgical churches, one can be excused for treating the pastor like any other member of the congregation. Formal behaviors toward this particular authority seem to require internalizing the difference such an office ought to impose on the rest of us. Thus the pertinent question within the present discourse: Is there a clear line of demarcation for appropriate and inappropriate behavior that is any different from our usual interactions when in the presence of one's pastor? Is there the worry over a *particular* shame associated with one's possible conduct around the pastor?

Another common attribute of such worship is, of course, notions regarding acceptable attire among congregants. Albeit a superficial, and perhaps less significant, aspect, Confucius seems to find it worthy of comment as noted above in *Analects* 9.3. Now, to be sure, acceptable dress within our society as a whole has

become more casual (The author certainly does not object to the necktie becoming merely optional in most contexts). However, congregants who show up to services wearing casual attire such as shorts, t-shirts and ball caps (worn even within the sanctuary), and all manner of athletic apparel, are becoming the norm rather than the exception. Although casual wear certainly has its place in our society, the point of such clothing is to relax and to *show* that one is relaxing and enjoying a brief respite from the serious work of living. Can one say that on a Sunday morning it is clear that the congregant in t-shirt and sweats is intent on the serious communion with his/her God? Again, it seems difficult to identify what attire would constitute a violation of the public experience of worship in so many non-liturgical denominations as particular beyond the usual violations for public decency.

Finally, the sermon, itself, in these non-liturgical services seems to have achieved a remarkably broad range of topics and concerns often more connected with contemporary life and the struggles of the World than scripture. No doubt all religions wish to remain relevant and vibrant by connecting to our lives; however, today's sermons seem far more reminiscent of Dr. Phil than the Holy Spirit. Pastors freely engage in popular sociological/psychological reflections on contemporary subjects of social ills and even politics; each tortuously interpreted through the scriptures of antiquity to deliver a particular judgment. It is not unheard of for the Pastor to sprinkle his sermon with jokes and humor, no doubt intended to enliven and demonstrate that we can worship Jesus and still have "fun". Such is the nature of popular performance and presentation, suggestive as much of a college speech class as the renditions of reverent supplication. Without the common liturgy of Old Testament, Epistle and New Testament readings bounded by invocations, doxologies and benedictions, the free worship sermon seems to meander "unanchored" with a splash of scripture here, pop psychology and light-hearted fun there—not forgetting the usual reminders for tithing—all infused with sincere and passionate prayer. Frequent interruptions of "amen" are a shout of approval for the pastor's performance. Altar calls and testimonials give one ample opportunity to publicly confess one's failings and emotion-laden petitions for forgiveness; as opposed to a private supplication to God for forgiveness and mercy, mediated and well-bounded by prescribed ritual. Indeed today's public confessions seek as much to form bonds of sympathy with other congregants through the display of similar transgressions and emotional distress as to plea for submission to God's will. Indeed the entire worship service bespeaks more of the 'revival tent' experience that is a punctuated, purely evangelical expression than the on-going worship practice that integrates one's faith into their daily life. Thus without the common boundaries established by liturgy, many of today's sermons and services seek social and emotional identifications for self within the church body. Again, one may sensibly ask: Is there any topic or manner of presentation that would violate the decorum of today's non-liturgical service?

The liturgy provides for one's role within the service, and more generally the Church, through a learned set of specific and shared behaviors, the non-liturgical denominations can only rely on the emotive and temporary experiences of passion, guilt and camaraderie to establish the identities and roles of congregants and leaders. It is noteworthy that many such free worship denominations offer "open" communion, allowing any and all to partake of the body and blood of Christ; the implication of which is that we are all, at least momentarily, Christians. Perhaps it is a caution that when everyone counts as Christian, no one counts as Christian. Within such a setting, the boundaries between being and acting as a Christian, as opposed to the non-Christian, seem to lack the capacity to be blurred since such roles are ill-defined and tenuous at best. Indeed, more to the point, how does one count oneself as Christian? Without ritual practice, i.e., the liturgy, the Christian locates himself in the faith and emotion of personal commitment to Jesus Christ. But this faith and

commitment are, themselves, more public expression than integrations of the public expectations and roles within the Christian self; while the demonstrations of communal spirituality are uplifting, there does not appear to be a necessary relation between the “doing” in the regular worship and the “being” as a follower of Christ. Absent a liturgy to exercise and internalize of our faith, expressed faith in God can become little more than a superficial catharsis rather than an integral part of the self.

### **Liturgy and the “Christian Self”**

Confucian philosophy locates appropriate living through the performances of long established rites and rituals of family and community. One’s *dao* or “way-making” is guided by acquiring a sense of shame through ritual propriety. That is, practicing the rites and rituals identifies and establishes one’s role both publicly and, more significantly, personally. Personal identity is the continuous development of the internalized expectations of role and appropriate behavior, determined through ritual, of family and community such that to violate those expectations is to experience shame. As Geany and others argue, the Confucian account of shame is a matter of blurred boundaries of self; when someone acts in ways contrary to the public and personal expectations for who they are, both publicly and personally, and they feel no shame, no sense of an important personal boundary blurring, the self seems ambiguous, even amorphous. Hence, they appear as unreliable in relationships, a person whose role in any context seems dissolute and unfathomable. This general account of ritual and shame is applicable to the more specific context of our religious experience. Those Christian denominations that reject ritual practice, i.e., the non-liturgical churches, may be expected to struggle to impart any particular sense of shame regarding the special context of the Christian life. The important task of developing a sense of the Christianself is made more difficult, with the risk of producing Christian ‘roles’ as ill-defined both publicly and personally, manifested only by momentary punctuations of evangelism and public confession. Thus, Confucian thought suggests that the Liturgy in Christian worship, as ritual propriety, is an important exercise in the acquisition of that sense of shame that identifies us and our reverence for that domesticated spirituality we call religion.

However, again, we should be circumspect in our conclusions. Certainly, there are Christians dedicated to the exercise of “free worship” whose identity and role as a Christian with clearly delineated boundaries of appropriateness for a follower of Christ is without question. Furthermore, merely “going through the motions” of the Liturgical experience does not make for a Christian. That is, there is nothing in Confucian philosophy that suggests that observing ritual alone is sufficient for the formation of the appropriate self; nor can the Confucian philosopher make the case that ritual is necessary for the acquisition of shame. However, Confucius does invite us to consider ritual an important tool for the formation of community and self. Today’s Christian denominations may do well to consider Confucius’ advice for their own persons and communities.

I end this paper with The Apostles' Creed (2004): I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from there He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

It still dances off the tongue with an amazing grace and reverence, as well as a certain pride in its recitation.



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