

# Temporary Autonomous Zones and the Power of Ritual

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The Sufi scholar and anarchist Hakim Bey coined the term “TEMPORARY AUTONOMOUS ZONE” to describe autonomous or liberated spaces that flower briefly within society. Temporary autonomous zones are places where freedom and a better world can be experienced as more than just abstract visions, even if for only a moment. Temporary autonomous zones can show people new ways of being through direct experience. They are places where new social modes are “understood in action.” Such experiences will help people to envision a freer better world because only “autonomous can plan autonomy, organize for it, create it.”<sup>1</sup>

Bey thinks that temporary autonomous zones are the primary method of resisting social norms and living out alternative social values. In his essay “The Temporary Autonomous Zone” Bey describes a number of types of temporary autonomous zones. These include pirate utopias, insurrections or “failed revolutions” and dinner parties. What Bey does not include within his understanding of the temporary autonomous zone are church worship services. In this essay I argue that the notion of temporary autonomous zones should be expanded to include church rituals and worship services. Viewing worship services as temporary autonomous zones may allow Unitarian Universalists to look at their power and possibility differently.

Writing about her experience of ritual among the Ndembu of Zambia the anthropologist Edith Turner describes what it can feel like to be part of a temporary autonomous zone. She says that the world that “the lhamba tooth ritual,” a healing ritual, created for her was “a temporary liminal world of reversals that...[are] oddly satisfying, something different from the everyday laws of social custom and political strategies, a special phase.” In other words, it was something out of the ordinary that caused Turner, a materialistic social scientist, to reexamine her beliefs about the spirit world.<sup>2</sup>

Like Turner’s ritual experience, experiences with temporary autonomous zones can be transformative. What occurs in a temporary autonomous zone is akin to what the philosopher John Taber calls “transformative philosophy.” Taber writes, “the language of transformative philosophy defines objects [concepts] much in the same way that the language of parents spoken to their children introduces new things.” This is “naming rather than portraying...establishing an original connection between words and things rather than relying on established connections ... Transformative philosophy...shows us new things with language.” Temporary autonomous zones, on the other hand, show us new things with experience.<sup>3</sup>

Temporary autonomous zones can occur accidentally or be constructed intentionally. When they are constructed intentionally they often have ritual at their heart. Ritual is a series of actions that an individual or group undertakes which involve symbolic words, icons or movements that trigger shifts in the emotional state of an individual or group. A ritual can occur one time or many times. It can be preplanned or occur spontaneously.

When rituals are planned they become liturgical acts. When these are strung together they form a liturgy or “ceremonialized human gathering.”<sup>4</sup> People can be changed during a liturgy. The glimpse of a different world or, for the more traditionally minded, the connection to God that a liturgy can offer can be transformative.<sup>5</sup> Turner’s experience with the tooth changed her from someone who did not believe in the spirit world to someone who claimed to have experienced part of it. If someone is fully invested in the liturgy or ritual it is possible for that person to perceive things that fall outside the realm of what is commonly understood as possible.

It is also through a liturgy that community is created and expresses its ultimate values.<sup>6</sup> This means that liturgy is not always transformative or linked to liminal spaces like temporary autonomous zones. In fact, liturgy can be used to reinforce repressive social norms.

Liturgical theologian Aidian Kavanagh argues that liturgy is where theology—reflection on that concern which is ultimate—actually occurs. This is counter to the notion that theology is primarily the textual work of trained academics. Kavanagh writes:

...theology at its genesis is communitarian, even proletarian; that it is aboriginally liturgical in context, partly conscious and partly unconscious; that it stems from an experience of near chaos; that it is long term and dialectical; and that its agents are more likely to be charwomen and shopkeepers than pontiffs and professors...It is to argue that the theology which we most readily recognize and practice is in fact neither primary nor seminal but secondary and derivative: *theologia secunda*. It is also to argue that doing liturgical theology comes closer to doing *theologia prima* than *theologia secunda* or a 'theology of liturgy'...<sup>7</sup>

Liturgy, then, is the embodiment of theology, or, more precisely, liturgy is theology. The theology found in books is primarily descriptive of the experience that is created through liturgy. The theology of liturgy is practical theology, the theology of direct experience. Liturgy is not the only piece of practical theology. As German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher defines "practical theology... [it is divided] into two parts, church service and church government."<sup>8</sup> That is to say, practical theology is what the church or community does. Secondary theology is what the church says about itself or confesses.

Rituals, liturgical acts and liturgies shift the emotional states of groups. As the ritual begins, the group starts to conduct an activity, such as singing a hymn, in unison. This coordinated action, which philosopher William Benzon calls "coupling," in turn causes individuals to enter into similar physical states.<sup>9</sup>

Physical states are linked to emotional states as humans are embodied beings. A change in the oxygen flow to the brain can produce a change in emotion.<sup>10</sup> The collective shifting of physical states create a collective shift in emotional states. Michael Franz Basch, the psychotherapist, calls this "affect attunement." Affect attunement is a "reflex action" by which the "inner affect state" of two individuals becomes aligned. This can be witnessed in their similar facial expressions and gestures. Basch claims that affect attunement is basic to human beings. In fact infants experience affect attunement with adults before they learn to speak.<sup>11</sup>

Affect attunement is then the basis for a collective experience of unity. This sense of unity "reduces one's sense of isolation and attaches one to the group."<sup>12</sup> It is at the core of many religious experiences and the ultimate goal of many liturgies. It can lead to experiences of spiritual ecstasy or "the feeling of absolute dependence," as Schleiermacher describes it.<sup>13</sup>

The repeat participation in ritual and liturgy causes the individuals involved to develop certain conditioning or triggers around the symbolism of a particular liturgical act. The symbolic object or word in the liturgical act is associated with a particular emotional state and when the individual is exposed to it she may shift from one emotional state to the one she experienced during an earlier ritual. This shift in emotional state is one of the reasons why sacred objects are held in such high value. They are associated with the emotional state that accompanies the shift from the ordinary everyday world to the liminal world of worship.

Precisely what an individual experiences in this liminal world depends in part on what emotions become attached to. The shift itself is value neutral. It can be used both by liturgists who

intend to liberate and those who seek to oppress. The Nazis, for example, placed great importance on ritual precisely because it allowed them to manipulate people and convince them to identify with National Socialism and the Reich. "Conducting ceremonies is not another name for entertainment, but rather a serious task affecting the worldview and political life forms of the community," wrote the Nazi propagandist Hannes Kremmer.<sup>14</sup>

Whether liturgy will have liberating or oppressive effects depends both on the intention of the liturgist and the way participants in the worship service react to the symbols that she chooses to use. Harnessing the power of ritual to create temporary autonomous zones requires, to quote Bey, that we "must know in what ways we are genuinely oppressed, and also in what ways we are self-repressed or ensnared in a fantasy in which ideas oppress us." Armed with this self-knowledge a worship service can be transformed into a space where we can both conceive of and experience a better world.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hekim Bey, "T.A.Z., The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism" (New York: Autonmedia, 1985); available on-line at <http://www.spunk.org/library/writers/bey/sp000058.txt>, accessed May 30, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Edith Turner, et al, *Experiencing Ritual* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 6.

<sup>3</sup> John Taber, *Transformative Philosophy: A Study of Sankara, Fichte, and Heidegger* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 99.

<sup>4</sup> Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 73.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 74-75.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, trans. and ed. Terrence Tice (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 82.

<sup>9</sup> William Benzon, *Beethoven's Anvil: Music in Mind and Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 90.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Franz Basch, *Understanding Psychotherapy: The Science Behind the Art* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 100-101.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

<sup>12</sup> Benzon, 90.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. and ed. H. R. Macintosh and J. S. Stewart (New York: T&T Clark; A Continuum Imprint, 2003), 26.

<sup>14</sup> Hannes Kremer, "Neuwertung 'überlieferter' Brauchformen?," in *Die neue Gemeinschaft* 3 (1937), 3005 a-c; available on-line at <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/feier37.htm>, accessed March 17, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Bey.