CARING LITURGIES: THE PASTORAL POWER OF CHRISTIAN RITUAL

Susan Marie Smith
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Reviewed by Elaine Ramshaw
Branford, CT

This is the book I have been waiting for. I had been hoping someone would write a clear, accessible, theologically informed argument for and guide to the creation of "custom-made" Christian rituals for the wide variety of occasions that call for ritual care. I had found pieces of what I was looking for—what I believed Christian leaders needed in this area—in several books: some relevant principles in Anderson and Foley's *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Ritual*; a fine chapter on designing pastoral rituals in Janet Peterman's *Speaking to Silence*; many good examples of occasions calling for ritual care in Roy Oswald's *Transforming Rituals*; and a most excellent guide to ritual care in the last transition of life in Megory Anderson's *Sacred Dying.* None of these quite served the dual purpose of both motivating Christian leaders to co-create situation-specific rituals of healing and transition and beginning to shape the leaders' competence to do so. Here is the book that does these things: *Caring Liturgies*. Susan Marie Smith states that "*rituals are desperately needed to enable human growing and maturing, both through times of suffering and through times of transition. . . . It is the role of the churches . . . to learn, teach, and practice the conducting of such rites with life-giving competence*" (p. 17, italics original). Her goal is "to awaken ritual awareness, invite ritual competence, and build practical theory, which are needed both for carefully planned rites as well as for quickly determined improvised rites" and "to awaken a liturgical spirituality with an application in ritual practice" (p. 21). Her book largely accomplishes these goals.

Smith does a fine job of laying out reasons why Christians should create rituals of care addressing particular situations of transition or crisis: why humans need rituals at such times, why we in the church should provide such ritual care. These arguments are theologically grounded in the mission of the church and the nature of the Christian story and will speak also to Christians who think they are ritual-averse. She does well at addressing resistances to meeting ritual need, especially that which arises when there is tension between someone's ritual request and the official theological understanding of what the requested ritual is for and when it is appropriate.[1] Her example here is of a soldier facing

deployment who requests (re)baptism (p. 27). Smith turns this tension into one of the best arguments for creative ritualizing: we can resolve the tension when we find or create a ritual that both meets the person's need and honors the church's understanding of ritual meaning (in this case, a form of baptismal renewal).

Smith also does very well at describing who needs to be involved in the planning of a caring liturgy. She argues—theologically—that there needs to be a community of at least three, preferably four or five involved. She then discusses both the attributes and the roles necessary among those planners. The only confusion here comes in her discussion of the "focal person" (the person whom the ritual is for): she says there can usually be only one, but two of the rites she describes theoretically have two (a married or divorcing couple); and the question of whether the deceased is the focal person of a funeral surely doesn't clarify anything (p. 54).

The explication of what "ritual honesty" entails in this creative process is, again, excellent. Smith discusses the need to identify the dominant emotional tone—a counter-cultural act when the main theme is lament—and simultaneously to make room for the welter of conflicting feelings. She argues that the real spiritual/emotional process of change must be attended to, and that it must be remembered that everyone involved in the ritual will be affected.

One of the great strengths of the book is its baptismal spirituality, its grounding of all Christian care for people in crisis or transition in their immersion in Christ's dying and rising. The chapter on the "paschal mystery" beautifully sets the ritual-studies understanding of passage in the theological and spiritual context of the Christian story, which takes death seriously while it holds out resurrection hope.

There are two main ways the book could have been better. First, it would have been helpful to have at least twice as many stories or vignettes of real-life rituals co-created with persons in transition or crisis.[2] Additional examples would have been more useful than some of the upper-level theory (Suzanne Langer, Paul Ricoeur, Louis-Marie Chauvet) Smith includes.

Secondly, while Smith is conversant in liturgical and ritual studies, she does not turn to one field which has very helpful experience relevant to the task in question. The family therapists who co-create with clients rituals of passage or mourning as part of treatment have written fascinating case studies and helpful how-to guides for other therapists.[3] Religious caregivers, of course, would have a different starting point, since they would share with the focal persons common stories and symbols and a theological worldview which places human crisis in a larger context of meaning. Even so, religious ritualizers can learn much from the work of ritually-minded therapists.

There are points on which I take issue with Smith: her contention that created rituals nearly always should take place when most of the emotional work of the transition is done[4]; pieces of her discussion of the divorce-related ritual she describes[5]; her take on the concept of sacrifice (ch. 5). None of these problematic aspects will make the book less useful in teaching. If the churches' seminaries knew what's what in this postmodern climate, they would all start teaching students to be creative ritualizers, using this book for starters.

Endnotes

[1]Smith takes the two concerns which anthropologists Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff named "doctrinal efficacy" and "operational efficacy" (p. 28) and renames them "theological effectiveness" and "experienced effectiveness." "Experienced" is an improvement over "operational" outside of a social-scientific context; but I wish she had stuck with "doctrinal" rather than using "theological" to refer to the official theological take on ritual meaning. As Smith herself makes clear, it is a Christian theological imperative to pay close attention to the experience of the individual in need.

[2]Smith says (p. vii) there are more stories to be found on her website, WalkingtheWay.org, but there are not many there yet, as of this writing.

[3]The best place to start acquainting oneself with this literature is *Rituals in Families and Family Therapy*, edited by Evan Imber-Black, et al.

[4]See pp. 100, 117-18. Smith is right to say that a transitional rite is dishonest if it does not take account of the real human emotional/spiritual work of transition. However, her contention that a ritual needs to come near the end of the transitional work seems to ignore the very nature of ritual process, where there can be rituals at various points along the way. A created ritual could mark an earlier stage in the transition, as long as it was honest about the work that yet needed to be done. It could, in fact, commission the focal person to do that work.

[5]This is Smith's main ritual example, described and discussed in several places throughout the book. Much of this discussion is fine, but there are lacunae: she doesn't think in terms of a need for some type of (provisional) ritual incorporation at the end of this separation rite (although she is right that attempting a common meal would have been a dreadful mistake); she doesn't

acknowledge that the power dynamics between the divorcing partners are crucial in determining whether a single ritual can fairly and safely involve both (usually not!); she doesn't give serious consideration to how the (ex-)husband experienced the ritual. (She probably has no way to find out, but she should still have raised the issue.)

References

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