

Chapter 1

Why study Christian worship?

- 1 Initial definitions
 - 2 Reasons against the study of Christian worship
 - 7 Reasons for such study
 - 8 The intention and method of this textbook
 - 12 Suggestions
 - 12 An outline for writing a worship service report
 - 13 For further study
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Initial definitions

We are alive at a time when an educated person ought to know a considerable amount about the world's **religions** and how they function for individuals and in society. This textbook is an introduction to the study of a central feature of the **Christian** religion: its patterns of **worship**. The emphasis in this textbook is on the primary Sunday morning worship of Christian communities in the United States. Sunday worship intends to assemble members of the Christian **church** so that they praise God, offer prayers, and strengthen their identity as an inspired community of faith and action.

It may be that for you a course in Christian worship is required by some outside agency, such as your academic major or future employer. Some students have freely chosen to take this course. Yet many historic, cultural, and personal arguments might pull students away from attention to the 100,000 Sundays on which Christians have assembled for **services of word and sacrament**. Why study the weekly **liturgy** of the church?

religion

a communal worldview about ultimate reality, enacted in rituals and expressed through ethics

Christianity

a worldwide religion based on faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ

worship

religious exercises honoring the divine and uniting the community

church

an assembly of Christians, either worldwide Christianity or an international, national, or local organization of Christians; a building used for worship; a service of worship

services

meetings for Christian worship

word

a synonym for the Bible, the authorized scriptures of the Christian religion; reading the Bible aloud and commenting on its meaning

Reasons against the study of Christian worship

A list of reasons against such a study can begin by listening to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson lived in the Boston area in the nineteenth century and is famous in American intellectual history for advocating the worldview called transcendentalism. According to transcendentalism, each individual can receive divine truths by listening to God, who is found within the self and throughout nature. Emerson had trained at Harvard Divinity School to become a minister in one of the most **liberal** groups of Christians in nineteenth-century America. But after a few years he resigned the ministry, having decided that even a church with rational **doctrines**, minimal **symbols**, and few **rituals** stood in the way of receiving divine truth. Emerson judged that although the Christian **Bible** is in some places beautifully written, its morals were flawed and its symbols outdated, and he judged that the church's religious doctrines obscured rather than revealed divine truths.

Emerson expressed his difficulties with Christian public worship in his address to the Harvard Divinity School in 1838. In this speech delivered in the chapel of his alma mater, Emerson developed the position that the moral goal of human life is to live out “the sentiment of virtue.” This sentiment, which is “the essence of all religion,” is most fully and profoundly found not in books, not even in the Bible, not in churches, but rather in the self, which is good and

sweet and houses the “indwelling Supreme Spirit.” Jesus is no more divine than is every human person: in his nineteenth-century prose, Emerson said, “Man is the wonderworker.” At the beginning and conclusion of the speech, Emerson invoked nature: in order to connect with divine truth, a walk in the woods is better than an hour in church. The implication of his address is that every person with

It seemed strange that the people should come to church. It seemed as if their houses were very unentertaining, that they should prefer this thoughtless clamor. . . . We have contrasted the Church with the Soul. In the soul, then, let the redemption be sought. In one soul, in your soul, there are resources for the world.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1838'

integrity will replace participation in religion with introspection of the self.

We now listen to Emily Dickinson, one of the greatest poets of nineteenth-century America. Dickinson was raised in Amherst, Massachusetts, in a strict Protestant community that expected her as a young adult to make public confession of her faith in Jesus as the center of her life. Her community also assumed that on the basis of this conviction, she would then publicly join the local church as an adult member. However, Dickinson had no such personal religious conviction, and she chose not to fake it. After age thirty she stopped attending Sunday worship services, and she remained outside the religious

sacrament / ordinance / mystery

the preeminent ceremonies of Christian worship, such as the communal consuming of bread and wine, through which believers receive blessings from God

obligations of her community. Much of her poetry adopts the pose of the lone individual, somewhat contented in its isolation and facing death without the consolation of religion. Especially in poem #324, she questions the value of Sunday worship, its symbols and rituals.

The writings of Emerson and Dickinson present ideas that, although controversial at the time, became increasingly mainstream over the following 150 years. Urban life and the Industrial Revolution led to nostalgia for untouched nature. A pleasant walk in the woods, quite different from the backbreaking labor of the farmer, was idealized. Increasingly, Americans viewed the human being as basically good and wholesome, rather than as essentially sinful. The religious doctrine brought to America by the Pilgrims, that humans are born in sin and “totally depraved,” was being abandoned. The idea that God is a stern judge was giving way to belief in God as a loving parent. According to such thinking, since people are good and God is nice, there seemed to be less need for organized Christianity.

That the American founding fathers supported the new idea of governmental separation from religion has deeply influenced American life. Thomas Jefferson believed that Jesus was an eminent teacher, but he maintained that what one thought about Jesus was personal opinion. If religion is a set of ideas about one’s private connection with God, it is perhaps best kept in one’s head. This understanding of religion has led many Americans to assert that they can believe something about God without affiliating with a group that maintains and cultivates this belief.

Adding to these attitudes was the actual living situation of decades of pioneers. Many white settlers occupied geographical areas that did not yet have any resident Christian churches, and so these nonnative immigrants to the prairie and West Coast could not attend meetings for worship even if they had wanted to. Homesteaders were required by law to live in houses that were on their 160-acre allotment, rather than in a town, as had been the European pattern in farming communities. When a church was established in the area, it may not have been the church of the family’s heritage, and so persons may have found it difficult or distasteful to participate in its symbols and rituals.

Bible / the Scriptures
a compilation of some seventy books that constitutes the sacred writings of Christianity

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—
I keep it, staying at Home—
With a Bobolink for a Chorister—
And an Orchard, for a Dome—

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice—
I just wear my Wings—
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton—sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman—
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last—
I'm going, all along.

—*Emily Dickinson, 1864*²

liturgy
the format of text and action used by a Christian community in its worship

liberal
an attitude marked by an open-minded approach to change

doctrine
stated authoritative belief of an association

symbol
a concrete word, image, or object that represents an abstract truth or value; see chapter 2

ritual
a repeated symbolic
communal activity;
see chapter 3

branch
one of the three
major divisions within
Christianity: Eastern
Orthodoxy, Roman
Catholicism, and
Protestantism; see
chapters 6–8

denomination
a subdivision of a branch
of the Christian church,
with a distinctive pattern
of belief and practice; see
chapters 7–8

conservative
an attitude marked by
a preference for the
traditions of the past

spirituality
an attitude of concern
for the moral life and an
appreciation of beauty
that may or may not be
connected to organized
religion

When churches arrived, there was not one, but several, perhaps many. In previous centuries and locales throughout most of human history, everyone residing in a certain area participated in the same religious symbols and rituals, with more or less personal interest or dedication. Yet for the last two centuries, many places in the United States offer a diversity of Christian **branches** and **denominations**. This array of possibilities encourages a critical view of religious practice, since when choice is offered, persons must use their judgment about their preferences. Such a critical attitude has led many people to reject religious practice entirely.

Many forces within the modern world sought to disregard historic symbols and ancient rituals as being hopelessly retrogressive, and traditional religious practice was blamed for holding back the progress of civilization. Americans wanted to be freed from all the shackles of the past, and for some people that included religion. A scientific worldview that equates truth with fact has led many people to reject religious proposals and traditional scriptures as no more than escapist fantasy. A tour through a major art museum makes clear that the Christian symbols in the medieval art of the European sixth through fifteenth centuries are nearly completely absent from the art of the last two centuries. American society cultivated an increasing focus on the individual. Technology allows a single person to accomplish tasks that used to require cooperation within the group. Great value is placed on individual freedom and preference among options. When a society places considerable emphasis on the individual, any obligation that tradition or the community lays on the individual receives a smaller slice of the pie.

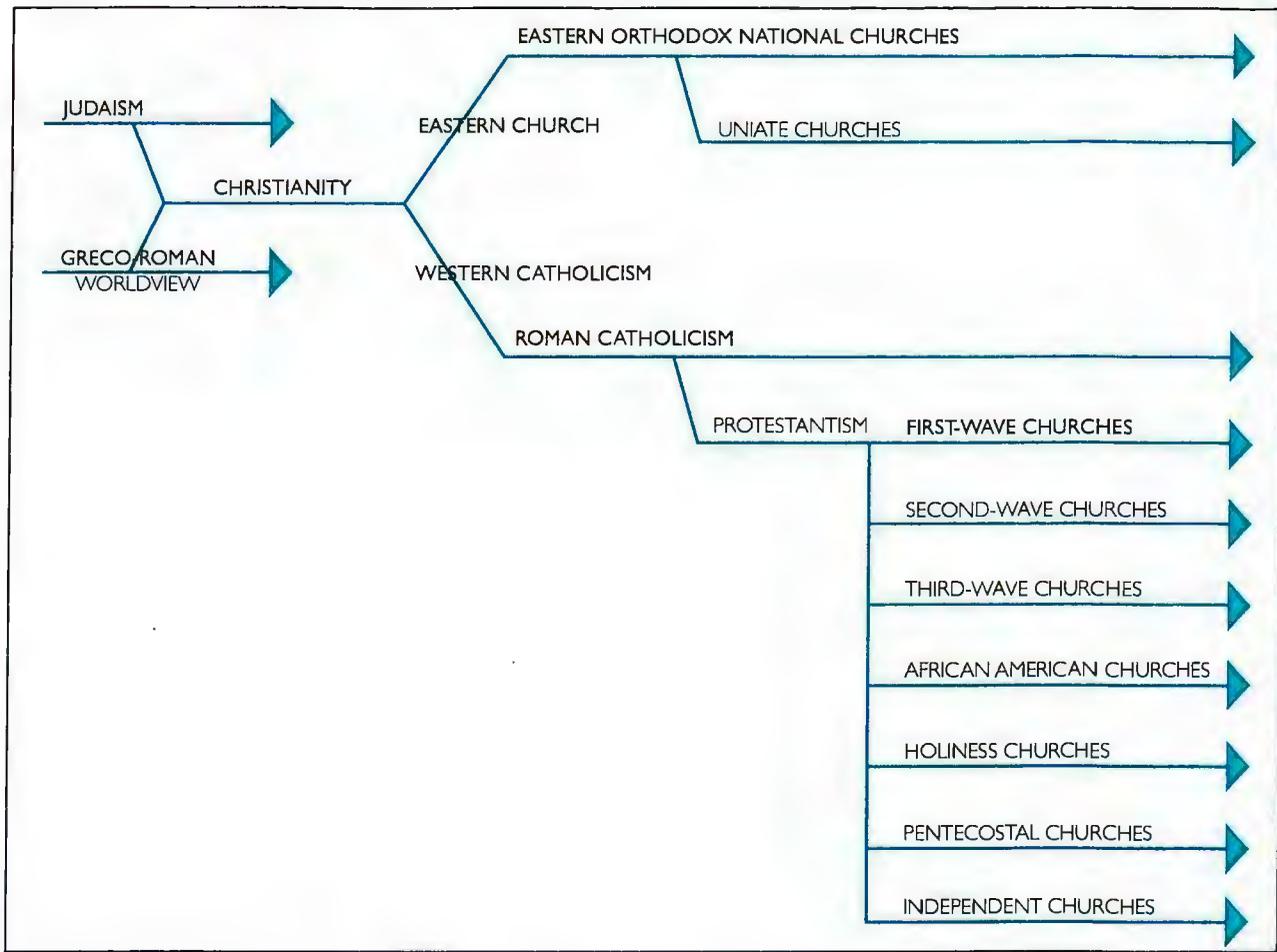
The rise of radically **conservative** religious groups has led to an increase in the number of commentators who describe religion as an entirely negative force in human society. The media publicize scandals in religious communities more often than reasonable and faithful belief and practice. Much in society speaks positively about a life guided by a generalized sense of **spirituality**, rather than by commitment to any organized religion. An increase in marriages in which the two persons come from different religious communities leads to the formation of many families in which the adults do not concur about any Sunday morning obligation. The children of such families may be

raised without the habit of attending any one church, or any religious service at all, and may judge that attendance at worship services affords them nothing beyond what they have already received through some other activity.

Over the centuries many Christians attended church services

... wondering, too
When churches fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show ...

—Philip Larkin³



because there was nothing else socially acceptable for them to do on Sunday morning. Church attendance provided a culturally significant occasion for people to connect with others. Although there are still some places in North America where local pressure encourages Christian participation, most locales have greatly diminished or completely removed an American pattern of reserving Sunday morning for church attendance. Sports activities in some public high schools require Sunday morning participation. Stores are open on Sunday morning, and those who staff them then cannot attend worship if they want to.

Technology has played its part. Thanks to the practice of broadcasting services over the air, any individual who cares about hearing a preacher can simply tune in to the sermon while relaxing at home or doing the laundry. People can watch a Roman Catholic service on television. Some Christians now sponsor interactive Web sites with instructions to set “something to

drink” and “something to eat, like a cracker . . .” next to the computer screen so as to participate in the ritual privately at home. If religion is largely information, then we can access it without having to assemble with others on Sunday, and much in our society suggests that information is the road we must take to reach what is good.

Some people have been raised within Christian practice, but had a disturbing or stupefying experience with organized religion. They may have been abused by a religious leader, disgusted by a local scandal, or humiliated in a worship setting. They might assume that what is distasteful about one group of Christians will prove distasteful about all Christians, and so, despite their rearing, they have ceased any practice of the faith.

To the degree that organized religion is discredited, the practice in Christian churches of weekly meetings for the worship of God and communal religious inspiration will suffer. If students adopt an attitude of spirituality rather than the practice of a religion, or if they are uninterested in Christianity, or if they are drawn toward other fascinating course options, students may judge that a course



Some churches have been converted into restaurants and other entertainment venues.

dedicated to the study of contemporary Christian symbol and ritual is not a high priority. If students reflect negatively about their own experiences of worship, their attitude for a semester's study may be negative.

Reasons for such study

Educated American citizens do well to know something about what Christians do when they assemble on Sunday. Citizens of other countries remark on how central to American life religion is. Yet because of the concern that public schooling might privilege one religion over another, many American students attend sixteen or more years of school and never encounter much information about the religious patterns that influenced world history and are reported in the daily news. The primary source of most people's personal religious experience, whether it is minimal or life-transforming, is the public ritual activities of their religion. The United States embraces a bewildering variety of Christian groups, and students either are themselves Christian or encounter daily believers for whom public worship is a central feature in life. Some of these worshipers can make articulate speeches about why and how they worship, but many cannot. Here are some of the many possible questions that a course in Christian worship may help to answer:

Imagine yourself walking down Main Street, USA, and on the boulevard are five different Christian churches. Each one advertises its services on Sunday morning. You wonder, **Why** are there so many different types of Christians? It seems that two of them have the same group name: **Why** are there two, if they are the same? You are reading the newspaper: **What** goes on at worship that influences a section of Americans to vote a certain way at elections? You read in national news magazines about megachurch worship: **What** is it, and why does it matter? In a movie theater, you see a film in which Christian ritual is featured: **Has** the depiction been accurate?

You have been raised in a religious tradition other than Christianity: **What** do Christian people do on Sunday morning? You regularly or occasionally

The service ended with the handshake of peace. You had to stand up and shake hands or even hug the people around you. This was a horrifying moment for me, because it meant I had to make eye contact and skin contact with all these strangers. . . . I never tried to go to church at Vassar again.

—Nica Lalli⁴

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. . . . When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." . . . A week later his disciples were again in the house. . . . Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

—*John 20:1, 19, 26*

"Do you go to church?" he asked her, teasing, guessing she wouldn't. But she said that she did sometimes, though she didn't know why, it was just "somewhere to go if it was raining."

—Margaret Forster⁵

attend one church: How is its Sunday morning experience similar to and different from the worship of other churches? One of your parents left one religious group to join with that of your other parent: What symbols and rituals were left behind? With a friend or colleague, you visit a church that is new to you: What should you wear? How should you act? You have been away from worship for some years, and upon returning, you encounter changes in the ritual: Why have these changes occurred? How might you reflect on these changes? You have been bored to death whenever you went to church: What in the world do others see in this exercise?

You are a faithful worshiper in your church: Where did these symbols and rituals come from? You are committed to your religious tradition and intend to become a leader in your church: What should you be proud of in your tradition? What needs criticism? You are aware of the controversies within your Christian group, some of which are evident on Sunday morning: Who has the authority to make what kind of changes to public worship? How is worship connected with the group's core values?

As a young American, you are expected to make your own way, growing away from your childhood into an adult life of your own choice: Will Sunday morning worship be part of your future life commitments?

This list suggests that your questions at the outset of this course may be wholly intellectual: Why do Christians meet to do whatever it is that they do? On the

other hand, your interest may be primarily personal: What is the meaning of my Sunday morning experience? A semester study of Christian worship hopes to assist you as you probe these and other questions about the role of religion in human life.

How can I buy the communion wine? Who am I to buy the communion wine? Someone has to buy the communion wine. Having wine instead of grape juice was my idea, and of course I offered to buy it. Shouldn't I be wearing robes and, especially, a mask? Shouldn't I *make* the communion wine? Are there holy grapes, is there holy ground, is anything here holy?

—Annie Dillard⁶

The intention and method of this textbook

This textbook focuses on why Christians attend weekly communal worship, what happens during such worship, and how worshipers speak of the value of



Why are all these people here?

such worship. It means to serve as the primary text in undergraduate courses in Christian worship, a secondary text in a course on the Christian tradition, or an introductory resource in a **seminary** worship course. Most books about worship are written from within a denomination, for its own members; however, this textbook is **ecumenical**, crafted without preference for any one type of Christian worship. This textbook highlights the symbols and rituals in mainstream Christianity, rather than those of the many faith communities that are in some substantive way idiosyncratic. For example, the practice of **Quaker** silent meeting reflects a belief system so distinctive that some Quakers do not consider themselves Christian. Such exceptional practice contrasts with the general worship consensus of Christians, the topic of this textbook.

It is important here to clarify the terms *symbol* and *ritual*. This survey of Christian worship has adopted these categories from the academic study of phenomenology, that is, the examination of the phenomenon of religion. For phenomenologists, the categories *symbol* and *ritual* are wholly objective descriptors of the central features of religious practice. If people speak in a negative way about “just a symbol,” or claim that their communal behaviors are other than “mere ritual,” they are not using the terms as would a phenomenologist. Some Christian theologians have refused to use these terms to describe their own practice, explaining that “symbol” is not a profound enough word or “ritual” too secular a category for their sacred worship. However, this textbook

seminary

an academic institution for training leaders in Christian churches

ecumenical

applicable to all Christians worldwide

Quakers, the Society of Friends

a religious community that recognizes God in the self and assembles for silent meditation

will continue to use these academic labels. Members of different Christian denominations may check to what degree their church uses or refuses these objective categories.

As an introductory text, this book does not intend to be a thorough examination of any of its specific topics. The prose of this book recognizes that students may not be knowledgeable about Christianity, ancient geography, or world history, and so definitions are provided in the sidebars. Of the many meanings these words have, the definitions given apply particularly to the use of these words in the study of Christian worship. Quotes that illustrate a point or offer an alternative view are in the inset boxes. Illustrations and cartoons can prompt class discussion. Each chapter's "Suggestions" include discussion topics, essay assignments, and activities to enrich the semester's study for either the collegiate or the seminary student. Appropriate biblical passages, short stories, and films are suggested that can enhance the discussion of each chapter. Endnotes and chapter bibliographies suggest further study.

Students are encouraged to attend worship services at a variety of Christian communities. Many people find that being a visitor at an unfamiliar ceremony is more or less unsettling. Yet visiting churches on Sunday can be a valuable learning experience. Worship is not words on a page, but rather a group of participants who are honoring a set of symbols and enacting specific rituals. Most people cannot experience music by merely looking at the musical score; they must attend a musical performance. Worship is something like a Bach cantata: to begin to know it, you must experience it, and to know it well, you need to experience it repeatedly. Students who cannot visit different churches should view such worship over the Internet, while remembering that watching a screen does not replicate attending a service.

When visiting a service, it is well to show respect for the event by dressing as you would for an important appointment. In some churches, members will be dressed in "Sunday best" as a sign that they are meeting with God, and attire that is too casual may be offensive. Students may choose to go with a member of that church or with a classmate. At some churches, you will be met by a greeter from whom you may ask assistance. You might tell the greeter that you are present because of a classroom assignment. Usually it is acceptable to stand or sit throughout the ritual in respectful silence. Do not feel that you must participate. In some churches visitors will be asked to introduce themselves to the entire assembly. These churches understand that attending worship is more like going to a dinner party than like attending a movie: everyone wants to know who is present. Depending on the church, the Sunday service may last anywhere from a clipped forty minutes to a meandering three hours.

Churches of even a single denomination are not like McDonald's, at which customers everywhere order from an identical menu. Churches are

comprised of people who have unique backgrounds, who see things differently from their neighbors, whose history and personalities influence their beliefs and activities. The church you visit might be self-consciously liberal or especially conservative. Thus, visiting one church of a denomination will not necessarily inform you about the worship in all the churches of that denomination. Each Sunday in each church is in some way a unique event. Perhaps on the Sunday you visit, the usual leader or musician is out of town, or the Girl Scouts have an unusual role to play. Leaders of worship may make mistakes, and some may conduct worship poorly. A worship leader may be trying out a new idea that turns out to be ineffective. Even at McDonald's, customers may judge that one manager or employee ought to be replaced.

The goal of this textbook is to equip a contemporary person with knowledge and understanding about the many variations of Sunday worship available in the United States. Chapters 2–3 consider what symbol and ritual are and how they function. The textbook proceeds by investigating how and why the different types of Christian worship developed as they did. Since we inform the present by looking to the past, chapters 4–8 check back through Christian history by asking what symbols and rituals have been around for 100,000 Sundays, that is, since about the year 150. Which ones for 75,000 Sundays, since about 600? What about for 50,000, 25,000 and 10,000 Sundays, about the years 1000, 1550, and 1800? Chapter 9 examines the practice of baptism, and chapter 10 considers worship during the week. Chapter 11 compares and contrasts Christian worship with some of the practices of other religions in North America. The textbook concludes by exploring the claims made for how one's daily life from Monday through Saturday is influenced by participation in Sunday worship.

You are walking down Main Street, USA, on a Sunday morning in the twenty-first century. Many churches invite your participation. This semester's study hopes to help you decide whether to attend one and what that attendance means, so that whether you worship regularly in your home church or find yourself making a one-time visit, you do so with knowledge, understanding, and perhaps even appreciation.

Religious experience is absolute. It is indisputable. You can only say that you have never had such an experience, and your opponent will say: "Sorry, I have." And there your discussion will come to an end. No matter what the world thinks about religious experience, the one who has it possesses the great treasure of a thing that has provided him with a source of life, meaning and beauty and that has given a new splendor to the world and to mankind.

—C. G. Jung⁷

Suggestions

1. Review the chapter's vocabulary: Bible, branch, Christianity, church, conservative, denomination, doctrine, ecumenical, liberal, liturgy, mystery, ordinance, Quakers, religion, ritual, sacrament, Scriptures, seminary, services, spirituality, symbol, word, and worship.
2. Compare this textbook's definition of the word *Christianity* with other definitions and present arguments for and against each.
3. Summarize and analyze several significant twentieth-century persons, ideas, or events that encourage or discourage participation in Christian worship.
4. Discuss how a contemporary political issue has been influenced in one direction or another by what happens at Sunday worship.
5. Write a personal essay analyzing why you are where you are on Sunday morning.
6. In the Bible, the prophet Amos speaks harshly against the symbols and rituals of worship. Discuss Amos 5:8-24 in light of this chapter.
7. Discuss Anne Lamott's "Why I Make Sam Go to Church,"⁸ a chapter in *Traveling Mercies*, in which the author describes the value of church attendance.
8. Discuss the 1989 film *Romero*, the story of the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero. How does worship function for the people? Do you know enough about Christian worship to understand the movie?
9. Attend any Sunday Christian worship service, and write a report of it. Below is an outline for such a report.

An outline for writing a worship service report:

- A. Cite the full name of the church and its national or international affiliation, if any. Cite the date, the time, and the type of service attended.
- B. Describe the building, its design, its art, its appointments, and any printed matter that is handed to you.
- C. Describe the people who are assembled, the size of the group, and its conduct.
- D. Describe the leaders, their functions, and their attire.
- E. Describe the event itself, its symbol and rituals.
- F. Discuss any aspect of the worship service that you found contradictory to the stated intentions of the community, or discuss anything that you found negative about the experience, and give your reasons why.
- G. Conclude with a discussion of what you found positive for the community or for yourself, and give your reasons why.

For further study

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