

Conference and Edited Volume
**“The Law of the Liturgies and the Liturgies of the Law:
Finding Common Ground between Law and Religion
in Ritual Speech and Performative Action”**

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Call for Papers

State of Research

Recent studies of the relationship between law and religion have begun to focus on the role of ritual speech and performative action in both spheres. For instance, scholars have started paying increased attention to the function of ritual action in legal contexts¹ and the function of law in religious rituals and worship.² They have recognised the significance of performative language in both law and religion.³ Building on this, they have made observations about the intrinsic link between law and religion.⁴ This connection is particularly evident in *liturgies*, rituals which convey their meaning through invariant actions based on stable normative frameworks, such as liturgical laws. These liturgical rules enable liturgies, or “canonical rituals” as anthropologist Roy Rappaport has called them,⁵ to proceed in a customary manner, conveying their unchanging message through established symbolic actions. Liturgies achieve their intended effects by

¹ E.g. Colin Dayan, *The Law Is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013; Alexis Alvarez-Nakagawa, “Rituals of (Dis)possession: Appropriation and Performativity in the Early Modern Law of Nations,” *London Review of International Law* 10 (2022), 33–69; Judith Hahn (ed), Special Issue “Sacred Order: The Function of Ritual in the Emergence of Norms,” *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 13 (2024), 149–281.

² E.g. Oliver T I Wright, “Prosper’s Law: Putting the *lex* back into *orandi* and *credendi*,” *Oxford Journal for Law and Religion* 13 (2024), 151–171; Oliver T I Wright, *The Performativity of Christian Discourse: A Theological Theory of Language as Act* (forthcoming); Stephan Winter, “Liturgical Order, Cultura Dei and the Normative Function of Ritual Power: Considerations on the Effective Forces of the Cultura Dei in the Coronation of King Charles III,” *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 13 (2024), 243–260.

³ E.g. Harold J. Berman, *Law and Language: Effective Symbols of Community*, edited by John Witte, Jr., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013; Oliver T I Wright, “Sestinas, Farce, and Rules of Religious Life: The Performative Theology of Giorgio Agamben,” *Literature and Theology*, 8 May 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/fraf007>.

⁴ E.g. Judith Hahn, *The Sacraments of the Law and the Law of the Sacraments*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023; Judith Hahn, “Sacraments of the Law: Discovering Common Ground of Law and Religion,” *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 13 (2024), 203–218.

⁵ Roy A Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion*, Richmond, CA, North Atlantic Books, 1979; idem, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

ensuring that the performative elements of the ritual are properly orchestrated—that is, as Rappaport puts it, in semantics closely resembling philosopher John Austin’s description of illocutionary speech acts,⁶ that they “are performed by authorised people with respect to eligible persons or entities under proper circumstances in accordance with proper procedures.”⁷ It is through their regulatory frameworks, or “liturgical laws”, as we might call it, that rituals develop the performative power to transform reality in various social spheres, including legal, religious and political contexts.⁸

Three Aims

The Conference, “The Law of the Liturgies and the Liturgies of the Law”, and the edited volume on the conference theme, aim to improve our understanding of the intrinsic connection between law and religion by focusing on their shared reliance on ritual speech and performative action. To achieve this, contributions may focus on three broad areas from different disciplines, without being restricted to them. The three areas are as follows. By studying the **(1) Law of the Liturgies**, we aim to shed more light on the function of laws, rules and norms in establishing performative action, with a focus on the normative foundations of orchestrated rituals, including ritual laws, liturgical rules and procedural law. As our aim is not merely to study particular liturgical rules, but to gain a broader understanding of the function of laws, rules and norms in successful performative action, we welcome contributions that help us discover the commonalities between different liturgical laws in various contexts and social domains. We also welcome comparative studies, such as analyses of the similarities between religious rituals and legal procedures, such as court proceedings. We encourage the multidisciplinary study of regulatory frameworks for liturgical action, as well as the application of mixed methods. This involves drawing on analytical tools and theories, such as ritual theory, speech act theory and symbol theory, to explore how liturgical rules function within legal or religious contexts.

While religious studies and theology have devoted some attention to the rituals of various religions, less attention has been paid to the **(2) Liturgies of the Law**: those ritual speech acts and performative actions used in legal or political contexts to produce legal and other normative effects that bind the community. However, recent scholarship has noted that ritual action plays an important role in law by establishing a legal community and its legitimacy, asserting legal authority and enforcing law even in contexts where legal sanction mechanisms are relatively weak. Legal scholar Valentin Jeutner has recently illustrated this with regard to the legal liturgy of the oral proceedings before the International Court of Justice.⁹ Our aim is to further explore these ideas and provide more insight into the role of ritual speech and performative actions in law and other normative systems by collecting and comparing legal liturgies from various legal traditions, including common law, civil law, secular law and religious legal traditions. We welcome contributions that interpret *law as liturgy* and develop theological perspectives on law that consider it not only as a system of rules and regulations, but also as a religious practice and

⁶ See John L Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962, 14.

⁷ Roy A Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion*, Richmond, CA, North Atlantic Books, 1979, 190.

⁸ The notion of liturgies which exist and function beyond the confines of the religious sphere and into cultural life is something for which James K A Smith has argued in his Cultural Liturgies Trilogy, *Desiring the Kingdom*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2009; *Imagining the Kingdom*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2014; and *Awaiting the King*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2017.

⁹ See Valentin Jeutner, “The Function of Legal Ritual in the Peace Palace,” *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 13 (2024), 219–242.

a means of enacting religious beliefs. We especially invite contributions to this field from scholars with expertise in religious law—across the spectrum—that can help overcome a narrow Western view of law and religion as distinct social domains.

We hope that our findings on the law of liturgies and liturgies of law will enable us to develop new theories and methodologies for understanding the relationship between law and religion. We therefore aim to shed new light on the contested concepts of “law” and “religion” to learn more about them by studying their common ground. By examining their shared reliance on ritual speech and performative action, we hope to improve our understanding of law and religion by identifying their similarities and differences. Drawing on established theories such as ritual theory, speech act theory and symbol theory, and using their respective analytical tools, we intend to develop new **(3) Theories of Law and Religion** and to provide new methodologies for analysing their relationship. Alongside case studies examining the normative framework of liturgies and the diversity of legal rituals, we therefore encourage theoretical and conceptual studies that contribute to our understanding of the nature of law and religion when examined through theories such as ritual theory, speech act theory and symbol theory. To further the ongoing discussion, we welcome interdisciplinary approaches and the application of mixed methods.

Join Us

We invite scholars interested in law and religion, including from fields of law, theology, religious studies, philosophy, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology and ethnology, to contribute to our conference and anthology in one or more of the three focus areas mentioned above. If you would like to take part in this project, please send **abstracts** of your proposed papers (approximately **300 words** long) to Judith Hahn (judith.hahn@uni-bonn.de) by **28 February 2026**. Decisions will be made by 31 March 2026. Selected speakers and authors will be invited to present their papers at the conference, which will take place at **Magdalen College, University of Oxford, from 14 to 16 September 2026**, and to submit their papers as full articles (8,000–10,000 words, including references) for an edited volume by **30 September 2027**. The conference is funded, so expenses for travel and lodging will be covered.