

**A Response to
"Dancing in God: The Relevance of Ritual for Conceiving the Divine Today."**

Steven R. Guthrie

I am grateful to Professor Thompson for his essay, and grateful as well for the opportunity to offer a response. The essay testifies to Professor Thompson's impressive command of a wide range of literature – in philosophy, theology and religious studies. Another salutary feature of "Dancing in God" is its emphasis on two valuable, but often-neglected sources for theological reflection: ritual and the arts.

Indeed, as Thompson's subtitle indicates, ritual is of great relevance for conceiving the divine. For much of Christian history, in fact, the *practices* of faith – prayer, baptism, eucharist, worship and so on – have been recognized as both the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of theological reflection. Theological reflection arises out of and is oriented toward the worship of the community. One example of this is Basil the Great's treatise *On the Holy Spirit*. In that work Basil explicitly identifies "the origin of our question" (*On the Holy Spirit*, 1.2.) – the starting point, that is, for the theological reflection he is presently pursuing. "Lately while I pray with the people," he says, "we sometimes finish the doxology to God the Father with the form 'Glory to the Father with the Son, together with the Holy Spirit,' and at other times we use 'Glory to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit.'" (*On the Holy Spirit*, 1.3.) For this reason some accused Basil's congregation of using contradictory terms in speaking of God. In defense of his congregation's practice, Basil undertakes to offer "clear teaching concerning the force underlying" the people's words. (*On the Holy Spirit*, 1.3.) In Basil's case, then, theology is the attempt to speak of God in a way that is adequate to the reality of Christian prayer and worship; it is the attempt to find words and concepts that do justice to the encounter with Jesus Christ that takes place in baptism, in the reading of scripture and at the eucharist. Likewise, Christian theological reflection has traditionally found its *telos*, not in detached metaphysical speculation, but in service of the church and its worship. The theologian speaks into the community of the church in order that its celebrations may more deeply delight in the mysteries of God and that its worship may more faithfully reflect the reality of God.

This kind of theology, however, can only be done by attending carefully to the actual practices of the religious community. Thompson's essay is a helpful call to give such careful attention. It also makes some movements in this direction, in mentioning the Hindu *Dance of Divine Love*, for instance, the First Nation's Sun Dance festival, and the healing dance of the Bushmen of the Kalahari. The breadth of

Thompson's survey demonstrates the great potential for this sort of reflection on ritual practice. This same breadth represents one of the problematic aspects of the essay, however. Rituals are radically particular, defining the identity of a specific tradition and community. Understanding those rituals means situating them within the grammar of their own community, rather than attempting to abstract universal principles from them. The danger of such sweeping references to widely differing rituals is that the particular rituals themselves will become the ethnographic equivalent of biblical proof texts: bits of living religious tradition lopped off from their setting, and referenced in a cursory fashion, in support of some general (and independently derived) thesis.

Thompson aspires to speak of a God "who embraces the creation in all its variegated particularity." (1) Similarly, he hopes to articulate a theology that does not involve "a flight up and away from the world" but rather acknowledges God's presence in all the "bodily interrelationships and interdependencies are the very elements of God's salvific activity." (1) These are valid goals and concerns, but it is just at the level of attention to particularity and embodiment that the essay's engagement with ritual falls short. It is not at all certain that the Hindu *Dance of Divine Love*, the healing dance of Kalahari Bushmen and the dance of the First Nation's Sun Dance festival are species within a universal genus called "religious dance rituals." Even if they are, it seems likely that the meaning of those dances is bound up with all the "variegated particularity" of dance and the community in which it is situated. If embodiment matters, if we are to avoid flights up and away from the world, then we must engage with communities, religious traditions and rituals on their own terms and with respect to their own particularity; not as individual instances of a generalized idea of religion.

The same demand for attention to particularity applies not only to engagement with ritual, but to our engagement with the arts. The musicologist Daniel Chua complains that too often music has been the "ventriloquist's dummy" of metaphysicians (*Resonant Witness*, 137 ff.). Chua observes that philosophers and theologians across Western history have listened to music, and – not so surprisingly – heard in it a confirmation of their own metaphysical systems. In such instances, however, the philosopher has precisely failed to *hear music*. Instead music is employed as a thin, decorative veil, draped over a previously determined philosophical program. Rather than attending to the distinctive character of music itself, and learning from its actual shape and movement, the scholar imposes an interpretive framework on music, one that supports a project derived separately from the experience of music. This same caution applies to all theological and philosophical conversation with the arts. If the theologian is

to really engage dialogue with the arts, then there must be genuine dialogue – an exchange in which each practice and discipline is allowed to speak.

Thompson's essay suggests the tremendous potential in attending closely to the shape and dynamics of dance. This is a valuable and welcome insight. Dance is (along with music) an activity found across history and human cultures. It is also (like music) an activity that infants begin to engage in spontaneously, about the same time they begin to speak. For all these reasons and others, dance promises to offer important insight into who we are as human beings, how we relate to one another and the world, how we pray, celebrate and worship. But for just this reason, dance also demands our careful attention, and Thompson's essay would be enriched by this sort of attention. We don't, in fact, learn much about dance in the essay. There are some broad observations: dance requires a dancer, a dance, and the dancing. (3) But these are hardly distinctions made uniquely available to us by dance. (Thompson's reference to Richard of St. Victor and his discussion of love indicates this.) Thompson also suggests five essential elements of dance, (2-3) but these five elements feel rather *ad hoc*. They may be true of much dance; but they hardly seem to outline dance's essential character. (Some, such as "movement," "involvement of the body" and "responsiveness" are characteristic of human life generally, and so fail to offer a sufficient condition for dance. Others, such as "passion," or again, "responsiveness" are not true of all dance, and so fail to provide a necessary condition.)

So we do not learn much in the essay *about* dance. Nor, unfortunately, do we learn much *from* dance. As often as the essay mentions dance, the actual practice of dance ends up doing surprisingly little theological or conceptual work. "Dance" functions as more of a rhetorical flourish, rather than actually illuminating the various ideas outlined in the paper. It certainly makes the essay more colorful, but it isn't immediately clear, for instance, how it enriches the conversation to identify pantheism's "*dancing heart*", panentheism's "*dancing mind*", or pantransentheism's "*dancing soul*." What does the term "dance" and the essay's engagement with dance add to each of these designations? The distinguishing term in the typology, in fact, is not "dance", nor is it some conceptual tool made available to us from considering dance, but rather the terms: "heart," "mind," and "soul." And these three terms point to another problem. At the outset of his essay Thompson rightly emphasizes the profoundly embodied character of dance. But his discussion of "*dancing heart*," "*dancing mind*" and "*dancing soul*" suggests that within the essay, dance functions only at a metaphorical level, rather than as a physical, embodied activity. Hearts, minds and souls may "dance" – but they don't *dance*.

None of this is meant as a broad critique of the type of project undertaken here. I think Thompson is right to suggest that the theologian or scholar of religion has much to learn from dance. Moreover, I think that dance may be helpful, as he suggests in the bulk of his essay, in conceiving the God-world relation. In fact, I wonder if one fruitful point for further exploration may be found in a classic Christian statement of the God-world relation: the *homoousios*.

The authors of the symbols of Nicea and Chalcedon insisted that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully human, and that in Jesus, this divine-human relation occurs "without confusion, change, division or separation." Jesus' full humanity does not in any way compromise or diminish his deity. Nor does his full deity in any way limit, trample, impede or overrun the fullness of his humanity. Jesus is fully united (*homoousios*) with God, but this does not make less room for his humanity. Rather, he is, in the Apostle Paul's words the *eschatos adam* – the complete, the true, human. As the true human, Jesus is not the exception, but the paradigm of God's intentions for humanity. God and humanity are meant to come together in just this way – with neither God nor humanity being absorbed into the other, but rather being united in an intimate union that preserves the integrity of each. The *homoousios* models the God-world relation.

And it seems that dance might possess a peculiar eloquence in exploring this relation – in considering what happens when a dancer "takes to herself" a particular way of movement, for instance, or when two dancers move in relation to one another's bodies. The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus *learned* through his "days in the flesh" (Heb. 5:7) – suggesting that the life of God is profoundly shaped by taking on embodiment. And again, the *homoousios* suggests that this embodiment, this coordinated movement of Jesus' humanity and deity, traces out the shape of the God-world relation. Similarly, Paul speaks of Christ "living in him" (cf. Gal. 2:20), and of struggling "with all his power which works so powerfully in me." (Col. 1:29) Again, such language not only is expressive of the divine-human relation, but is evocative of dance. Here two partners move together in a coordinated interplay that does not obstruct, restrict or inhibit either participant. Neither partner is absorbed into the other (in which case there could be no more dance!), nor does either partner simply control or compel the other (which again, would preclude a true dance). The dance depends upon both partners sharing in the same movement, while remaining distinct from one another. Without separation, without confusion.

Of course, the preceding paragraphs also fail to attend to the particularities of dance with sufficient care and depth. So, while the *homoousios* seems to me a promising area for engaging with the wisdom of dance, such an interdisciplinary ballet will require that each partner (theology and dance) remain distinct while attending carefully to the movements of the other. If the theologian simply calls the tune and expects the dancer to respond – there is no dance.