

“Shall We Dance?” A response to Curtis Thompson

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Who’s on the Dance Card?

Curtis Thompson has offered a provocative perspective on the Divine through the analogy of dance. Beginning with the premise that God is a dynamic reality that draws us into a synergistic relationship, Thompson develops three models of religious response to the Divine, all based upon the analogue of dance: Pantheism, Panthesim, and Pantrasentheism. This last term is one coined by Thompson. Though his climactic term is a new one, there is much familiar about his theological categories. The shadow of Schleiermacher looms large in his work, rooting pantheistic response to the divine in a prevailing *feeling* of the Divine (page 5) [should we read *gefühl* here?], and humanity’s (and all creation’s) universal dependence [utter dependence] upon God. Further, echoes of Rahner’s “liturgy of the world” can be heard in his claims for the ultimacy of ritual in human-human and human-Divine relationships. On the contemporary side, his use of the category of sacramentality as phenomena explored through multidisciplinary study follows Bernard Cooke’s approach in *The Distancing of God*. And while invoking the names of Hegel, Whitehead and Hartshorne on behalf of process theology, his description of reality taking place within the life of God, in the process of becoming (re)united with God, exudes the ancient spirit of Maximus the Confessor’s cosmology as elucidated in his *Mystagogia*.

Drawing on a wide variety of theological sources, Thompson weaves together an argument for an understanding of God and a correlative Divine-human interaction that

seeks to be universally applicable. The parallelism between the immanent dynamism of the triune God and the dynamic synergy between God and creation are established in the metaphor of dance. But this is not rooted in theology alone, as Thompson is also conversant with contemporary science and the cosmologies under consideration within that academy, as seen in his most recent book (Cuff and Thompson, *God and Nature*). In twenty-first century science, the Newtonian universe of patterns and predictability has been replaced with the randomness and exceptions of current cosmologies. From both the subatomic on one end, to the cosmic on the other end, the world of science is moving towards models of the universe in which nothing is ever static; everything is either expanding or contracting, and nothing is unaffected by that with which it comes into contact. From this perspective one can see how the theologian Thompson would be drawn to the image of dance, and then find sympathetic theological voices to lend their support to this model.

Judging the Performance

Although in general agreement with much of Thompson's theological argument, I would like to examine the analogy of dance, its strengths and limitations, and how another metaphor might strengthen his argument. It is not hard to find strengths in the use of dance as a way of understanding the economic and immanent trinity. God is in a dynamic relationship with Godself, with the perichoretic intersection between the persons of the Trinity being a dynamic relationship, not a static overlap, as some trinitarian models might suggest. Thompson's Augustinian-esque model of the first, second and third persons of the Trinity as the Dancer (subject), the Dance (object), and the Dancing (verb) might be considered to be a bit understated, as it implies that the dynamism is

exclusively imminent (page 3). However, as Thompson continues, he expands the analogy to how the Divine Dancer draws all creation into the cosmic dance that is God. The warp and woof of the universe, its inhaling and exhaling, expanding and contracting, is evidence of the dynamism of God that continues to feed into the dynamism of the universe. And ultimately we are drawn into not the creating and sustaining of the universe alone, but the “Christic Dance” of redemption, transforming reality more and more into the loving Dance that is God (here compare the “Christic Dance” of page 2 with the discussion of “Panrasentheism” on page 10). Dance is an apt and evocative imagine, drawing us out from our wallflower responsive to the Divine to an activated tango of grace, mercy and love which holds redemptive potential.

Yet, as I have suggested elsewhere (Johnson and Savidge, *Performing the Sacred*), the performing arts not only function as an appropriate analogy for God and the Divine-human interaction, but also actually manifest the nature of God in very concrete ways. And while dance is one of the performing arts, dance is a limited performing art form, lacking two of the three qualities of God manifest in theatre: Presence, Community and Encounter. Dance certainly invites us to consider the incarnational, presence-filled universe and God’s dynamic offer to join in the dance. But we can, according to Thompson’s proposal, dance solely with God. Dance could be done in community, but it is not essential, save the community that is God and the universe. Dance *per se* does not explicitly require community. And for a model that purports to establish relevance for ritual in the Divine-human encounter, community is essential. Ritual is not a solo performance.

Further, though there is a sense of encounter in dance, God offers more than just presence, but *presence to*. An encounter with God is relational, personal, a sharing of stories. When one encounters God, one encounters a God of history, as people with a history. This makes the quality of narrative essential for the Divine-human encounter, and dance has no inherent narrative qualities enabling it to define that encounter. Although there are numerous schools of thought about the nature and meaning of ritual, one of the most common interpretations of rites would be the “myth and ritual school.” The mythic element is the narrative (or meta-narrative) element for this school of thought. Even the quality of improvisation (which dance evokes well) in theatre has a requisite narrative nature to it lacking in dance. And it is the immanent quality of God in creation, and God’s interaction in creation over time and in space, that is the story—the narrative—that becomes the content of our ritual.

I do not believe that encouraging the expansion of the analogy from dance to the performing arts to include theatre would distort Thompson’s argument. I believe it would instead strengthen his argument, making it more fully orbbed in relating to contemporary sacramental and ritual models without diminishing the affinity of dance to current scientific cosmologies. Neither do I believe that focusing upon the narrative quality of religion, and the requisite definition of religious narrative, narrows Thompson’s desired universal appeal given his own use of Trinitarian and Christic models. The gift of Thompson’s work is the insight that the image of dance offers in bridging scientific and theological models of the universe. Where Thompson’s model is less successful is in the use of dance as a model which bridges from theological models of God to contemporary models of ritual and sacrament.

In other words, though I have chosen to accept Thompson's invitation to dance, I would hope that at times he would follow my lead. I also hope Thompson's work and the responses to it will inspire a few onto the dance floor, or the stage, as the case may be.