

Shall We Dance?

Response to Curtis L. Thompson's "Dancing in God: The Relevance of Ritual for Conceiving the Divine Today"

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Curtis Thompson wants to dance, and he wants us all to "dance in God." I affirm his impulse to invite us to dance. I appreciate his desire to play theologically with what dancing in God could look and feel like. Thompson rightly points to a prominent stream of Christianity that has been "too restricted in its affirmation of religious experience and God's revelatory activity." (1) And he invites us into a broader space in which "profound expressions" that take place outside the bounds of church can be given religious status.

Thompson also asserts that this invitation to dancing in God, to a deeper and wider space for religious experience, is nothing if not embodied. He searches for "dancing gestures" in various theological streams to help focus this dance lesson. It is here, in Thompson's desire to embody our theological rhythms of interrelationship with God, that I would like to linger. I have three areas of inquiry about Thompson's approach.

First, Thompson mentions the relevance of ritual in his title and has mention of a few non-Christian dancing rituals (as well as some additional nods to other cultural dancing rituals in footnotes). The Bushmen of Kalahari, the First Nations' Sun Dance, and the Indian dance of Krishna are offered up as examples in Thompson's frameworks of God/world relationships that somehow integrate natural human desires/tendencies to dance with an ultimate frame of meaning. As

Thompson suggests, rituals show us “what is most important in life” and are therefore religious and cosmological. (2)

What I wonder here is how those of us who are not prone to dancing these ultimate relationships into expression can find authentic expression by gazing at another who does. My question carries with it awareness of the heavy cultural baggage of Western ways of knowing, doing, observing, and dissecting religious life from non-Western cultures—ways that have not traditionally served to embody the observer. Instead this gaze at “the other” who dances more freely than us has often brought with it critical assumptions about the palatability of certain religious expressions. I sense in Thompson a desire to gaze on these practices differently. He, after all, wants to provide a “medicinal dose of dance” to the dis-eased body in prominent streams of Christian practice. (1)

Does his use of these examples here accomplish this healing task? The Nietzschean language of naturalizing the body that Thompson leans on in the essay leads me to wonder if these other cultural expressions are suggested as “more natural.” If so, can the body similarly take up more space ritually in Christianity, simply because it seems to for the Bushmen and in Ancient Indian poetry? I want to hear more from Thompson here about how his invitation gives the reader more than just some interesting anthropological examples.

A located space for inquiry from the lives and context of the “dis-eased” ones could break loose some interesting possibilities. I would welcome a chance to hear more about how Thompson could take his important questions and suggestive frameworks into an exploration of the sacramental nature of the dances we are

always already engaged in, like birth, mothering/fathering, sex, eating, etc. How would Thompson's five elements of dance overlay on these practices to accentuate their sacramental and ritualistic possibilities? I also wonder how Thompson's invitation could be fleshed out in conversation with the Holiness and Pentecostal traditions of American Christianity.

Second, the "dancing gestures" conjured up from Kierkegaard (the leap), Spinoza (striving), Hegel (movement), and Nietzsche (instinct) are provocative and aptly inform what Thompson calls the "dancing mind." I feel, however, the pinch of Western intellectual biases here keeping the "dancing mind" from moving out of cognitively-based modes of experience. In my work on embodiment I find more helpful the category of feeling in the work of Alfred North Whitehead and *Gefühl* in Friedrich Schleiermacher's thought.¹ I think also of Wendy Farley's erotic theologies and how wounding, tragedy, and alterity let theology speak from the truth of embodied lives.² The collection of essays edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, Controversies in Body Theology, also conjure up ways of encountering lived bodies where they "speak" of complicated, mystical, troubling ways of encountering the Divine.³

Third, I appreciate and affirm the transformative trajectory of the doctrine of God that Thompson names "Pantransentheism." I would suggest that Process

¹ See chapter my chapter on feeling in Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ (WJKP, 2010).

² See Farley's The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Together Heaven and Earth (WJKP, 2005), as well as her book released this month, Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation (WJKP, September 2011).

³ Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, eds. Controversies in Body Theology (SCM Press, 2008).

theology fits snugly into this paradigm, as do many contextual theologies that I am assuming Thompson would include in his category of “liberation theology.” In the end, dance can only heal what ails us if it is transformative. Can theology embody the fact that transformation is not simply a new idea—but an actual change in form? Form, in human life, involves our skin, our cells, our muscle fibers, our bones, our synapses and taste buds. Transformation must usher in more than new habits of mind—but a different fluidity to how our bodies flow with the rhythms of both how we were made and who we are called to be together. I can feel the beat of something that is alive to that transformative possibility in this essay.