Experience, Encounter, and Ritual in the Aesthetic Theory of John Dewey

Abstract:
Among both pedagogical theorists and pragmatist philosophers, John Dewey might seem an unlikely source of insight on religious ritual. Yet, as I suggest in this paper, Dewey’s examination of art and the commonplace, as well as his limited but insightful work on the communal dimension of religious practice, mark important and often overlooked contributions. In conversation with three of Dewey’s contemporary interlocutors, I argue that Dewey’s understanding of the formational, integrative quality of experience, and the relationship between experience and the aesthetic, offers fruitful philosophical groundwork for theological reflection on the role of ritual in the spiritual formation of communities, particularly those characterized by cultural difference.

Introduction
Among both pedagogical theorists and pragmatist philosophers, John Dewey might seem an unlikely source of insight on religious ritual. Yet, as I suggest in this essay, Dewey’s examination of art and the commonplace, as well as his limited but insightful work on the communal dimension of religious practice, mark important and often overlooked contributions. These are not only important for the study of ritual and aesthetics, but they also help to expand our understanding of Dewey’s educational theory. When read in conjunction with his philosophy of experience, Dewey’s aesthetic theory provides a valuable philosophical resource for approaching the interpretation of religious ritual in ways that help us to overcome a priori dichotomies and simplistic understandings of its function while also helping us to articulate more clearly questions about the pedagogical dimension of ritual practice. In my engagement of Dewey’s understanding of ritual, I also draw on three of his contemporary interlocutors: Christopher Tirres, Gregory Pappas, and Adam Seligman.

Dewey’s Criteria of Experience
Dewey’s understanding of experience is elaborated most comprehensively in the educational theory for which he is most widely known. Dewey conceives of experience as the basis of democratic education. Education and Experience (1938) offers a concise explication of his understanding of experience. Published more than two decades after his landmark Democracy and Education (1916), Education and Experience can be read as Dewey’s “final word” on his theory of experience and educational philosophy. The educative significance and
value of an experience, Dewey argues, can be assessed through two mutually interdependent criteria: continuity and interaction between learner and the subject of learning.

Continuity. The principle of continuity marks the ground to which Dewey’s vision of experience is anchored. His notion of continuity points to a vision of experience that is holistic, organic, and integrative. On a basic level, Dewey eschews the notion that experience occurs in a social or temporal vacuum. Continuity means that experiences must be conceived of not as isolated points on a unilateral and unidirectional timeline of events, but rather as moments in an evolutionary tide: “Every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after.” The meaning of an experience transgresses time in a way that blurs too starkly drawn lines between past, present, and future. Within the individual, then, the continuous nature of experience contributes to one’s formation in “attitudes of desire and purpose” – a formation that can be either positive or negative.

Interaction. According to Dewey, traditional modes and philosophies of education viewed the educational task as context-neutral. According to traditional approaches, the classroom was understood as the student’s world and the context of her learning. Dewey regarded traditional education as failing to attribute pedagogical or epistemological value to the present conditions of students’ lives, instead viewing its task as preparation of pupils for a distant vision of future success. For Dewey, one of the fatal flaws of this system was its tendency to operate with a thin understanding of experience that failed to acknowledge the constant exchange between an individual and the environment. Against this legacy, Dewey argues that just as experience cannot be conceived phenomenologically as a dot on a timeline, neither can it be viewed socially/contextually simply as something that happens to and unfolds within an individual person. Rather, experience is intrinsically social as well as environmentally mediated, and the implications of an experience are manifested beyond the individual doing the experiencing. Thus, Dewey contends, “Every genuine experience has an active side which changes in some degree the objective conditions under which experiences are had.” Experience is not only influenced by external conditions but also shapes them; experience and context exist in a dynamic and mutually influential relationship. As we will see in the final section of this essay, this sense of the porosity of experience stages an implicit critique of any philosophical, educational, or religious tradition “that has been used to validate any quest for purity” – a critical point for understanding the significance of ritual in light of Dewey.

2 Dewey, EE, 35.
3 Dewey, EE, 39.
4 Dewey, EE, 49. Here, the influence of Dewey’s critique of traditional education is evident in Paulo Freire’s critique of the “banking concept” of education, which domesticates students by educating them into passive acceptance of “the world as it is.” See Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30th Anniversary Edition (Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), especially Chapter 2.
5 Dewey, EE, 43.
6 Dewey, EE, 39-40.
7 Dewey, EE, 39.
Aesthetics, Experience, and the Everyday

The turn to aesthetic theory marks a thematic departure for Dewey. *Art as Experience* (1934), in which he develops his theory of aesthetics, is unique among Dewey’s works as his only sustained engagement with notions of art or aesthetics. Yet the work marks a continuation and extension of, not a departure from, the integrative understanding of experience developed in his educational theory. In continuity with his critique of traditional understandings of experience, Dewey again rejects a dualistic manner of conceiving the aesthetic that buries the nuance of experience under false simplicity. With respect to art, he eschews common distinctions between matter and form and between the artist as active creator and audience as passive recipient. In both cases, he argues, these facile distinctions fail to capture the reality of art as a socially situated site of dynamic, ongoing negotiation of meaning. Above all, Dewey laments the separation of art from experience. Works of art, particularly those that have achieved the cultural status of a “classic,” become not more embedded in the human experiences from which they emerged but rather more isolated from them. In turn, for most people, viewing art becomes like an “experience from a foreign country.” For Dewey, this wall of separation between art and the everyday is tragically ironic. Art, after all, does not descend from heaven or materialize out of a realm apart but rather emerges from the lived experience of the artist situated in a community and society; it is received and interpreted by people who are also situated socially and historically. Divorcing works of art from the context of the everyday, both the past out of which they emerged and the present within which they continue to be interpreted, “a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance.” When artistic classics are rendered “timeless,” they are also robbed of meaning.

For Dewey, a more adequate understanding of the aesthetic is concerned not merely with the glorification of the artistic “final product” but with the entire process of art-making and reception as emerging from deep within of the ordinary experiences of human life. He advocates a pragmatist approach to the aesthetic undergirded by the metaphysics of experience he develops elsewhere. The goal of such an approach “is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.” In other words, Dewey seeks to “[recover] the continuity of aesthetic experience with the normal processes of living.” He argues, “The roots of aesthetic experience lie… in commonplace experience, in the consummatory experiences that are ubiquitous in the course of human life.” Thus, the aesthetic quality of something can only be discovered by going back to this “experience of the common.” In this way, for Dewey, something has aesthetic standing to the extent that it becomes an experience for the human being. Read in a theological key, Dewey’s understanding

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12 Dewey, AE, 12.
14 Dewey, AE, 10.
15 Dewey, AE, 11.
16 Dewey, AE, 11.
of the intrinsic continuity between art and the everyday suggests a related and analogous continuity between sacred and profane, or, as U.S. Latino/a theologians have emphasized, the theologically revelatory nature of *lo cotidiano*. It also bespeaks the need for theological emphasis on communal processes and practices and not merely on their “end result.”

**Tirres, Dewey, and the Integrative Capacity of Ritual**

Dewey’s understanding of the formational, integrative quality of experience, and the relationship between this notion of experience and the aesthetic, offer potentially fruitful philosophical groundwork for theological reflection on the role of ritual in the religious and spiritual formation of communities. U.S. Latino theologian Christopher Tirres engages this trajectory of Dewey’s thought by drawing on Dewey to establish a dialogue between Latin American liberation theology and U.S. Latino/a aesthetic theology. Tirres convincingly argues that a Deweyan understanding of experience allows us to view ritual as possessing an integrative capacity that conceptually and practically reunites the aesthetic/cultural and ethical/political dimensions of religious faith, disclosing more fully what both Latin American and U.S. Latino/a liberation theologians have attempted to convey in their emphasis on “integral liberation.” This is primarily true, Tirres suggests, of popular ritual, which can be understood in Deweyan terms as a kind of formational (and thus educationally significant), shared aesthetic experience that emerges from the everyday lived experience – *lo cotidiano* – of the people.

In the tradition of scholars such as Roberto Goizueta and Virgilio Elizondo, Tirres grounds his project qualitatively in the Good Friday liturgies of San Fernando Cathedral, particularly the *via crucis*, the living Way of the Cross performed annually throughout the streets of San Antonio. For Tirres, the Good Friday practices hold a certain “aesthetic charge.” They are “bodily, visceral, and tactile encounters” – with the Jesus Christ in his suffering, agony, and death; with Mary in her grief; as well as with other people. “At the same time,” argues Tirres, these liturgies also prove aesthetic insofar as they engage participants at the level of the imagination. Through ritual practice, participants forge new epistemic connections between that which may seem, at first glance, to be disconnected.... [R]itual participants engage multiple identities simultaneously, they imaginatively merge past and present, and they creatively straddle universal and enculturated meanings of the *via crucis*. In short, participants engage ritual experience in a subjunctive, ludic, and liminal way. They use their imaginations to bring together what may, at first, appear to be discreet and independent aspects of experience.

Dewey’s notion of experience resonates in Tirres’ description of the aesthetic dimension of the San Fernando Good Friday rituals. Tirres identifies in the work of Dewey a way of speaking about experience that allows him to read ritual as a site of integral liberation. “Rather than begin with an a priori understanding of what ritual is,” a Deweyan, pragmatic approach to the study of ritual “invites us to look at ritual practice primarily in terms of the profound effects

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it has on participants.”

For Tirres, the spiritual and moral power of the Good Friday liturgies is related to the power of these rituals to become sites of integration and boundary transgressions. He states, “ritual performance at San Fernando helps to subvert commonly held dichotomies:”

it renders ambiguous boundaries between past and present, living and dead, private and public, sacred and profane, personal story and communal narrative, participant and observer. The Good Friday liturgies not only transport participants into the past, to the site of Jesus’ death on the cross; they also bring the past into the present, inviting participants to read their own daily stories of suffering and grief through the passion of Jesus Christ. When distinctions between past and present, “us” and “them” are ritually collapsed, Tirres suggests, people are moved at the moral level through the feelings of deep solidarity and empathy that are evoked. Thus,

At its best, popular ritual practice proves significant not only because it stands as a unique experience unto itself (with its irreducible feelings of anguish, solidarity, or healing, for example) but also because it serves as a means, as a conduit, to new moral sensibilities.

The Good Friday rituals are sites of both affirmation of Latino/a Catholic identity and practice (aesthetics) and social challenge to racial injustice and all forms of crucifixion in society today (ethics). Dewey’s integrative understanding of experience is thus clearly manifested in Tirres’ vision of the aesthetic and ethical as dynamic and continually evolving qualities of experience, not wholly distinct realms of experience.

Dewey’s Interlocutors on Ritual and Ambiguity: Seligman and Pappas

Contemporary scholars of ritual and religious practice have also retrieved Dewey’s work for the way in which it accounts for ambiguity within human experience and the porous nature of boundaries and identities within communities. Their retrievals suggest the ongoing relevance of Dewey’s theory of experience to a present moment characterized by pluralism and contested national, cultural, and social boundaries.

Adam Seligman and Robert Weller propose three models for understanding how communities characterized by plurality and ambiguity negotiate boundaries: notation, ritual, and shared experience. Naming and defining difference – what Seligman calls notation – is critical for upholding the integrity of distinct cultural communities within a space. But merely defining difference doesn’t help us to live with it. Seligman argues that the latter, practice-oriented categories – ritual and shared experience – function as both notational (or boundary-defining), and ambiguous (or boundary-transgressing). Following Dewey, Seligman argues that ritual, when understood as a kind of shared experience, allows us to take practical action, “teaching us to live with differences and all their associated ambiguities” in context characterized by

20 Tirres, The Aesthetics and Ethics of Faith, 41.
22 Tirres, The Aesthetics and Ethics of Faith, 36.
23 Tirres, The Aesthetics and Ethics of Faith, 89.
25 Seligman and Weller, Rethinking Pluralism, 8.
plurality and difference. Elsewhere, Seligman and co-authors state, “Rather than trying to eliminate boundaries or to make them into unbreachable walls—the two approaches that so typified the twentieth century—ritual continually renegotiates boundaries, living with their instability and labile nature.” Ritual allows us to construct and operate out of a sense of what Seligman et al. call “life in the subjunctive,” through the creation of a shared social “as if” world that imaginatively tolerates the ambiguities inherent in life together.

Gregory Pappas, also drawing on Dewey, elaborates an understanding of U.S. Latino/a borderland identity. Pappas’ concern is with the “the ontological status of being [metaphysically] ‘in between.’” He suggests that a Deweyan concept of experience discloses a “borderland” character, insofar as it has a capacity to deal conceptually with the impure, ambiguous, and in-between. He positions Dewey’s nondualistic metaphysics of experience in contrast to an “atomistic metaphysics” that views entities (such as cultures) as discrete and monolithic wholes. Within such a system, existence and belonging can only be conceived of in singular terms – one must be either this or that. In a dualistic metaphysical framework, “ontologically speaking, the existence of the kind of single but dual identity claimed by border people seems to make no sense…. It is a philosophical tradition that regards ambiguity, vagueness, and continuities as not part of reality.” Such an understanding, which by design guards against the possibility of impurity, may succeed in “saving border people from illegitimacy,” Pappas argues, but only by “[denying] features that are essential to their border-culture experience.” In Dewey’s ontological landscape, by contrast, “what is primary is the ongoing interactions of cultures with all of their raggedness and impurities.” With this acknowledgement of and appreciation for continuities and indeterminate boundaries, being “in between” is, ontologically speaking, “a real place to be.” A Deweyan cultural framework of experience acknowledges not only continuity, but also the possibility of emergence. Thus, what makes borderland spaces distinctive, argues

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26 Seligman et. al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11. Sociologist of religion R. Stephen Warner echoes and explains Seligma’s point, emphasizing the “crucial role of embodied ritual as a key to the capacity religion has to bridge boundaries, both between communities and individuals” (pp. 217-218). Warner argues that in contexts of difference, there is a need to move conceptually beyond paradigms of assimilation, which disregards difference, and multiculturalism, which essentializes it, to something akin to mestizaje, which seeks meaning in the reality of the “impure,” embodied, and experiential dimensions of communal experience over more theoretical or categorical approaches (p. 234). See Warner, “Religion, Boundaries, and Bridges,” *Sociology of Religion* 58:3 (1997).


28 Pappas, “Dewey and Latina Lesbians on the Quest for Purity,” 267


30 Pappas, “Dewey and Latina Lesbians on the Quest for Purity,” 268.

31 Pappas, “Dewey and Latina Lesbians on the Quest for Purity,” 268. Here, Pappas’ analysis demonstrates that Dewey’s cultural understanding foreshadows that of postmodern theorists of culture such as Kathryn Tanner (see *Theories of Culture; A New Agenda for Theology* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997]) and Homi Bhabha (see *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. [Routledge, 2004]).


33 Pappas, “Dewey and Latina Lesbians on the Quest for Purity,” 269-270.
Pappas, is the gradual and dynamic emergence over time of something new and exciting in the ambiguous in-between space between cultures – something based on the significance of the interactions between people.\textsuperscript{34}

**Conclusion**

In this essay, I have related Dewey’s praxic understanding of experience within his theory of education to his limited but significant aesthetic theory. Utilizing three contemporary Dewey interlocutors, I then drew implications for understanding pedagogical dimensions of ritual within a Deweyan framework. When read in conjunction with his philosophy of experience, Dewey’s aesthetic theory provides a valuable philosophical entrée into the examination of the critical role of embodied ritual in “borderland” contexts characterized by plurality, ambiguity, and porosity. At the same time, Dewey’s integrative, continuous, interactive understanding of human experience allows us to approach the study of culture and cultural practices in ways that overcome unhelpful understandings of both as discrete and neatly bounded wholes.

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\textsuperscript{34} Pappas, “Dewey and Latina Lesbians on the Quest for Purity,” 269-270.
Bibliography


