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Re-membering the Body of Christ

Dis-membering the Pornographic Body: A Ritualistic Approach to Religious Education for Empathy Through the Body of Christ in Contrast to the Pornographic Body

Abstract This paper seeks to answer how religious educators could contribute to educating empathy. Approaching the Body of Christ and the Pornographic Body from the perspective of ritual studies, I first argue, following Susan Griffin and others, that while pornography is a ritual which tends to reduce its' viewers' empathetic attitudes toward other bodies, the Eucharist is a starkly contrastive ritual in the sense that participating in it would increase empathy toward one another, thereby reducing violence of whatever forms, let alone sexual one. Building on this contrastive framework between the pornographic body and the body of Christ, I will finally explore how participating in the Eucharist could cultivate empathetic attitudes among its participants.

Introduction

This paper argues that, from the perspective of ritual, while watching pornography tends to reduce its viewers' empathy toward other bodies (especially those of women), participating in the Eucharist runs counter to that effect, i.e., increasing empathy toward other bodies. Overall, the paper is divided into three parts: The first part aims to show how pornography as a ritual brings about the empathy-reducing effects on its viewers, whereas the second part contends that the Eucharist is a ritual that images God, whose Incarnation in Jesus Christ means God's empathizing with humanity, naturally calling for God's people to be more empathetic with others. In the last part, the paper ends with suggesting how participating in the Eucharist could be geared toward its original intent of empathizing with the suffering members of humanity.

Pornography as Empathy-Reducing Ritual

Pornography as Dehumanizing Ritual

Much social-scientific research tends to find out that pornography dehumanizes and degrades the body, primarily that of woman. According to the studies conducted in the 70s and 80s, D. Zillman reports that men who were continually exposed to pornography were more inclined to agree with statements such as "A man should find them, fool them, fuck them, and forget them," "A woman does not mean no unless she slaps you," and "If they are old enough to bleed, they are old enough to butcher."¹ In more recent studies of

¹ D. Zillman, "Effects of Prolonged Consumption of Pornography," in *Pornography: Research Advances and Policy Considerations.*, ed. D. Zillman and J. Bryant (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1989), 155.

contemporary pornography called *gonzo*, more degrading acts of women's bodies, are becoming increasingly more common.²

Worse yet, what such degrading acts have in common is that there is an element of body-punishing, and the female performers in these films are more often than not being called "cunts, whores, sluts, cumdumpsters, beavers, and so on."³ The reason such strategy is adopted is that once woman's humanness is not recognized, their bodies are no longer recognized as human bodies, which now hold little values as human bodies worthy of dignity and respect, resulting in a sort of the *disappearance* of their bodies.⁴

Although this is not to conclusively corroborate the direct correlation between pornography and violence, one thing that has to be taken account into for every such research is that pornography is a set of moving, or still, images, and it is well-recognized among scholars that images are powerful enough to affect the viewers' lives.⁵ In this regard, one could still argue quite persuasively that pornography has a degrading element about women's bodies.

Torture and Pornography

Now that I have identified the degrading and dehumanizing elements toward women's bodies in contemporary pornographic images, what kind of influence would pornography have on its viewers, and under which mechanism? William T. Cavanaugh's insights into the body as the *ritual* site is quite helpful in this regard, "for in torture the body of the victim is the *ritual* site where the state's power is manifested in its most awesome form."⁶ Just as Cavanaugh calls the body the *ritual* site where the state's power is manifested in its most awesome form through its imagination⁷, Susan Griffin also understands the pornographic body in the context of ritual: "For above all, pornography is ritual. It is an enacted drama that is laden with meaning, which imparts a vision of the world. The altar for the ritual is a woman's body. And the ritual which is carried out on this altar is the desecration of flesh. Here, what is sacred within the body is degraded."⁸ At this point, an interesting parallel is formed between Cavanaugh and Griffin. Namely,

². Dines gives a detailed description of how degrading the contemporary pornography has become. I have intentionally omitted some of the most graphic acts that are commonly enacted in pornography due to its extremely graphic nature. For more descriptions, see Dines' book *Pornland*.

³. Gail Dines, *Porland: How Porn has hijacked our Sexuality* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2013), 64.

⁴. Ibid.

⁵. James K.A. Smith's description of the 'religion of the local shopping mall' in his *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), provides a good example of how images lead people to imitate what are presented: "Unlike the flattened depictions of saints one might find in stained-glass windows, here is an array of three-dimensional icons adorned in garb that-as with all iconography-inspires us to be imitators of these examples. These statues and icons embody for us concrete images of "the good life." Here is a religious proclamation that does not traffic in abstracted ideals or rules or doctrines, but rather offers to the imagination pictures and statues and moving images. While other religions are promising salvation through the thin, dry media of books and messages, this new global religion is offering embodied pictures of the redeemed that invite us to imagine ourselves in their shoes-to imagine ourselves otherwise, and thus to willingly submit to the disciplines that produce the saints evoked in the icons." This is also my argument that will be made later in this paper.

⁶. William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 30.

⁷. Ibid.

⁸. Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*. (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publisher, 1981).

Cavanaugh's torture and Griffin's pornography, both as rituals, operate under a similar mechanism to each other: "torturers (the pornographer) humiliate the victim (woman and her body), exploit his(her) human weakness through the mechanism of pain, until he(she) does take on the role of filth, confessing his(her) lowliness."⁹ Cavanaugh stresses the fact that the tortured eventually give in to the new reality pictured by the imagination of the state, conceding that they are lowly and filthy, while in reality they are not. Likewise, the female pornographic performers, by being called whores, cunts, and all kinds of degrading nicknames, might as well concede to another reality where they are treated just as lowly and filthy as the tortured in Cavanaugh.

In all these, the ritualistic nature of torture and pornography enlists its victims to another reality by having them *perform* that reality. This is why Griffin calls pornography an enacted *drama*, for in such drama through performance an embodiment of certain values takes place, and Dines argues from her interviews with people that men watching porn tend to imitate how women and their bodies are treated in pornography upon their girlfriends or partners, eventually resulting in men's "find(ing) it increasingly difficult to separate the two [the body of their girlfriend and the porn woman's body]."¹⁰ This way the viewers of pornography also *perform* the imagination of the pornographer, thereby participating in the ritual of pornography, if you will. Again, this does not necessarily mean that men watching porn act violently toward their girlfriends when they have sex; still, it is likely that "pornographic images create a world that is at best inhospitable to women, and at worst dangerous to their physical and emotional well-being."¹¹

Dissolving of Empathy

Now that I have looked into the nature of pornography as body-degrading ritual for its performers and viewers alike, I am ready to argue that pornography's violent treatment of the body results in less empathetic attitudes toward human bodies by making those bodies *disappear*. In the case of Cavanaugh, the victims' bodies no longer belong to the victims themselves, but they are the possessions of the state, so "the state seized bodies and made them emit signs, play roles in a drama, speak the regime's words in order to make ritually present the omnipotence of the state."¹² In this way, the bodies of the tortured had disappeared by having turned into mere state property. There is no human autonomy and dignity with these bodies; therefore, these are not human bodies, at least in the eyes of the state. For Griffin, such confiscating of bodies as objects also happen in pornography, for "she is *a thing*"; therefore, her body is doubtless a thing also,¹³ with which Dines, as has been shown above, cannot agree more.¹⁴

Hence, when the body *disappears*, violence against it seems to be made easier. However, in terms of education and formation, how do we teach against this? It is at this

⁹. parenthesis added to represent Griffin's understanding of pornography as ritual.

¹⁰. Dines, *Pornland*. 91. Although I only quoted how this primarily affects men, since the vast majority of pornographic films still portray men's overpowering women, Dines also notes that women are increasingly becoming the active viewers of pornography.

¹¹. *Ibid.*, 85.

¹². Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist.*, 70.

¹³. Griffin, *Pornography and Silence*, 33.

¹⁴. See footnote 17

juncture that Catholic mystic Edith Stein sheds an interesting light on the relationship between the body and empathy. Namely, empathy is possible only through the body. For the purpose of this paper, this might convey that when the body *disappears*, meaning that people perceive human bodies no longer as such, then empathy toward those with the disappeared bodies also tend to decrease. Inversely, when the body appears, empathy is produced. To begin with, Stein defines empathy in the following: "Empathy, which we examined and sought to describe, is the experience of foreign consciousness."¹⁵ In order to experience foreign consciousness, Stein emphasizes the existence of I as subject. "The experience which an "I" as such has of another "I" as such looks like this.

Such experience of foreign consciousness, however, cannot happen except in the following two dimensions: *communal* and *bodily*. First, empathy is communal in that "the subject of empathizing experience... is not the subject of empathizing, but another."¹⁶ Second, empathy is *bodily* in that both "I" and "other person" need mediating "bodies" in order for empathy to be possible. For example, "He who does not see that another is cold by his 'goose flesh' or his blue nose, having first to consider that this discomfort he feels is indeed a 'chilliness,' must be suffering from."¹⁷ In this light, the Eucharist, as communal-bodily ritual, is an excellent candidate for cultivating empathy, and that is where I am headed in the next section.

Eucharist as God-imaging, Empathy-Cultivating Ritual

Having examined what pornography as ritual does to its performers as well as its viewers, namely, reducing empathy for other human beings by treating their bodies no longer as such, I am proposing that the Eucharist is a starkly contrastive ritual in the sense that participating in it would increase empathy toward one another, thereby reducing violence of whatever forms, let alone sexual one. First, I will argue that the Eucharist is a God-imaging ritual, in the sense that God's salvific works in Christ, beginning with the Incarnation, are re-enacted as an invitation to all the participants; second, participation in the Eucharist will increase empathy among its participants.

Eucharist as God-imaging Ritual

At its root, the Eucharist is thoroughly Trinitarian. While it is Jesus Christ whose flesh and blood is shared among the participants, the sender (God the Father) and the sanctifier (the Holy Spirit) are equally at work. While Jesus' earthly life, including his crucifixion and resurrection, has revealed God's self-giving to us, the intention of Jesus' institution of the Eucharist is perhaps best expressed in his own words, "Do this in remembrance of me."¹⁸ In other words, not only is the Eucharist thoroughly Trinitarian, but also it is an act of remembering all the salvific works of the Triune God. Here the original word of "remembrance," argues Joel Green, is directly calling for some sort of action in response to what is being remembered.

¹⁵. Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989), 11.

¹⁶. *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁷. *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁸. New Revised Standard Bible.

The notion of remembrance is pivotal to the celebration of the Passover and cannot be limited to the idea of cognitive recall of a prior occurrence. In the biblical tradition, cognitive (or affective) recall is often triggered by verbal communication for that purpose, and this provides the impetus for some response or action. In a related sense, "remembrance" is often employed with the sense of "the effect of the recollection of the past for present or future benefit."¹⁹

Put differently, in order for the Eucharistic participants to be faithful to "remembering" Jesus' self-giving, they cannot help responding to Jesus with their whole persons, for Jesus' self-giving was the giving of Jesus' whole person. This may also shed light on the nature of the Eucharist as imaging who God is, for the Scripture bears witness to Jesus' being "the image of the invisible God."²⁰ If the Eucharist is intended to be a ritual for which Jesus instituted as the "remembrance" of his whole person and work, and if Jesus is, as the Scripture testifies, the image of the invisible God, then it would not be too much to say that the Eucharist is a God-imaging ritual. In other words, Christ came on earth as the image of the invisible God, and the Eucharist is Christ-instituted ritual that would fully convey who Christ is and what Christ still does to and for the world in the context of the triune divine life, to which all the Eucharistic participants are perennially invited.

Now, while this invitation is *spiritual* in nature, its mode of invitation does not neglect the *physical*; rather, it cannot be done apart from the physical, for Jesus urged all his followers to eat and drink his flesh and blood, i.e., bread and wine. Here I will argue that the body of Christ appears as a spectacle in the Eucharist, resulting in the divine empathy for humanity.

Eucharist as Empathy-Cultivating Ritual

In undertaking his erudite yet practical exposition of the sacramental theology and spirituality, Alexander Schmemmann begins with the simple axiom which he borrowed from Ludwig Feuerbach, "Man is what he eats,"²¹ for "man must eat in order to live; he must take the world into his body and transform it into himself, into flesh and blood. He is indeed that which he eats, and the whole world is presented as one all-embracing banquet table for man."²² Here, in terms of what is happening to the person who eats, eating symbolizes two things: disappearance of the eaten, and union between the eater and the eaten. In this respect, eating in the Eucharist might well have been understood among pagans as cannibalistic (and therefore violent) when it was first instituted among the early Christians. However, just because bread and wine symbolized as Jesus' flesh and blood are consumed by the Eucharistic participants, this does not mean that Jesus' body would *disappear* in the

¹⁹. Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 762.

²⁰. New Revised Standard Bible.

²¹. *Ibid.*, 1. Many theologians and religion scholars also begin from this particular axiom in their explorations of the relationship between food, the Eucharist, and life. For further inquiry besides Schmemmann's book, see Norman Wirzba's book *Food and Faith*, which was previously quoted. Also, see Angel F. Mendez-Montoya, *The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist*, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Co., 2012), and Ann W. Astell, *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages.*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

²². *Ibid.*

sense I have argued above. Rather, Jesus' body appears in the bodies of the Eucharistic participants. Regarding this, Ann W. Astell makes an interesting observation on the differences between cannibalism and Jesus' offering of his body.

While cannibalism eats for the negation of the other, Jesus' offering his flesh and blood would not result in the negation of any party. This is because the eating and drinking of Jesus' flesh and blood is not one-way, but two-ways: "the human communicant eats God, and God eats him or her to achieve a mutual in-one-anotherness, which is the precondition for *emphatic understanding*," for "whereas cannibalism aims at the loss of the Other (either through the Other's absolute destruction or through his absorption into the eater), Communion aims at the loss of the "I" in either the "you" or the "we."²³

When the life of Christ enters those of the Eucharistic participants as their own, it is the body of Christ that the participants are now showing to the world as a kind of spectacle, both individually and corporately. With regard to this, Cavanaugh spoke of martyrdom as an example of this spectacle, for martyrs follow the way of Christ, thus revealing to the world the body of Christ.²⁴ Likewise, he argues that the Eucharist does the same as martyrdom by means of mentioning a threefold distinction of Christ's body, i.e., how the body of Christ has *appeared* in the world: 1) the historical body, meaning the physical body of Jesus of Nazareth; 2) the sacramental body, or Christ as present in the Eucharistic elements; 3) the ecclesial body, that is, the church.²⁵ What these three distinctions of the body of Christ commonly assume is the sheer physicality of such body, and when the body as physicality appears, readers cannot help being reminded of the earlier points of Edith Stein, who argues that "empathy is *bodily* in that both "I" and "other person" need mediating "bodies" in order for empathy to be possible."²⁶ At this point, astute readers should notice that this has everything to do with God's intention in the Incarnation of Christ.

When God-self sends Christ in to the world, Scripture testifies God's intention of doing so would be "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."²⁷ In other words, when Jesus put on the human body, part of the divine intention consists in God's putting God-self in the shoes of human life, for having a body is absolutely necessary for God to empathize with humanity, in all her pain, joy, agony, and etc. The Eucharist is a ritual through which people are turning themselves in to be part of the body of Christ, with full of empathy for the world, let alone for the members of his body. On the one hand, this is why Apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians with regarding to having empathy amongst the members of the body, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if

²³. Ibid, 11.

²⁴. Cavanaugh also spoke of the differences between martyrdom and torture as revealing whose story it retells, either that of Christ or of the state. For more explanation, see Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 58-68.

²⁵. Ibid., 212.

²⁶. See the previous explanation on Edith Stein in page 13.

²⁷. New Revised Standard Version.

one member is honored, all rejoice together."²⁸ On the other, empathizing with Christ as part of his body means for Christians empathizing with whatever Christ has sympathy for, i.e., this world. Incidentally, this becomes a very effective antidote to the effects of pornography as having little empathy toward other bodies.

Participating in the Eucharist as Empathy-Cultivating Formation

In this last section, I will suggest two possible directions in order for the Eucharist to play the role of empathy-cultivating formation. First, through the Eucharistic participation we need to focus upon training our *desires* for empathy. Second, the Eucharistic participation should pay closer attention to what Jesus' Incarnation means for its participants.

First off, approaching the Eucharist as empathy-cultivating formation may not mean that the Eucharist is some kind of wonder drug; Rather, a proper perspective on the Eucharistic possibility of educating for empathy would be, as Cavanaugh shrewdly points out, *disciplined practices*. St. Cyprian speaks of Christian *disciplina* as "inscribing the body so as to resist the encroachment of worldly powers against the church,"²⁹ which, according to James K. A. Smith, cannot be imagined apart from the training of desires, for humans are shaped according to what they love, and the ritualistic training of desire is one of the important means of religious education.³⁰ For the ritualistic formation as religious education has much to do with forming our desires so as to channel them to a certain direction. Smith describes how ritualistic formation happens in terms of training human desire.

Liturgies-whether "sacred" or "secular"-shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world. In short, liturgies make us certain kinds of people, and what defines us is what we *love*. They do this because we are the sorts of animals whose orientation to the world is shaped from the body up more than from the head down. Liturgies aim our love to different ends precisely by training our hearts through our *bodies*. They prime us to approach the world in a certain way, to value certain things, to aim for certain goals, to pursue certain dreams, to work together on certain projects.³¹

Not only is this true of the Eucharist, but also of pornography. In fact, as has been made explicit, the desires formed through viewing and performing pornography are very self-centered, taking little of other bodies, and paying attention to gratifying the desires of the self, thus atomistic and un-empathetic. On the contrary, the desires formed through the

²⁸. New Revised Standard Version.

²⁹. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 237.

³⁰. Mary Elizabeth Moore's *Teaching as a Sacramental Act* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrims Press, 2004) addresses the relationship between worship and religious education. This book would be quite helpful for whoever is interested in the matrix of worship and education.

³¹. James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 25.

Eucharistic participation are, among other things, empathetic, which needs to be highlighted more. While this paper would not go into specific pedagogical know-how, the implications for the Eucharistic pedagogy of desire are open to further reflection.

Second, the Eucharistic participation should be attentive to Jesus' Incarnation. This tendency of neglecting Jesus' Incarnation is, according to Catherine LaCugna, is inherent in the church's historical treatment of the humanness of Jesus. LaCugna analyzes the church's putting less and less emphasis on the humanity of Jesus in order to heighten up his divinity, saying, "As the mediatory place of Christ in his human nature became too doctrinally problematic to retain, and as the distinction between God and Christ became merely academic, veneration of the saints increased dramatically, since they in their humanity could provide the necessary bridge between us and God."³² Unless the bodily, human nature of Christ is posited in healthy tension with his divine nature consistently in the Eucharist, the participants are not likely to learn to meditate on what it means for God to enter into the physical world with physical body, one of whose implications would be God's empathy for this world, let alone their own empathy as followers of God-became-human. Besides empathy, the doctrine of Incarnation performed in the Eucharist is open to cultivating so many other Christian virtues, and I believe that more theologians and religious educators should delve into what it means for God to become human in the context of the twenty-first century. As a novice researcher, I will also join those who study the dynamic between doctrine and liturgy for education.

³². Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 127.

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