

Andrew Wymer
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary
andrew.wymer@garrett.edu

THE LITURGICAL INTERSECTION OF HARM AND HEALING: THE PROBLEMS
OF NECESSARY AND UNNECESSARY LITURGICAL VIOLENCE AND THEIR
UNMAKING THROUGH LITURGICAL HEALING

Factoring pervasive violence into already existing conversations about the structural and interpersonal ways in which liturgy has had a destructive impact on liturgical participants, religious communities, and the surrounding world can lead to a more careful and precise treatment of liturgical violence. Rather than working toward the impossible ideal of the absence of violence within liturgy, violence must be carefully critiqued and watchfully monitored. This essay will suggest that violence, while having the potential to be unnecessary, senseless, and unjust, is also absolutely necessary and essential to the liturgical event.

This essay will propose that there are two primary types of violence that are potentially present in liturgical events: necessary and unnecessary, and it will explore the theological intersections of these forces. Moving from the problem of liturgical violence to theological inquiry, this essay will primarily employ a literature-based and constructive method. Sources from philosophy, theology and anthropology will provide a foundation for defining and exploring liturgical violence.

A History of Violence

During the late twentieth century, shifts in culture and the arts led to the “worship wars.”¹ The term is quite fascinating in relationship to liturgical violence. Certainly no blood was shed in these recent North American, ecclesial conflicts, yet the popular use of “worship wars” to speak of these events reveals an astute awareness of the bloodless violence that was done. These “wars” frequently led to interpersonal and communal violence, and in an intense way, worship has been and continues to be a frequently contested site of bloodless violence.

Another aspect of liturgical violence, which has come under scrutiny, is the potential for liturgy to be complicit in and even a source of harmfully violent structures and destructive paradigms. Feminist critiques of patriarchal language, male hierarchies, and male-dominated theology have resisted the liturgical potential to assist in the oppression of women. The past and the present provide examples of how liturgy has served both as an affirmation of male domination and as a source of patriarchal power and authority.

Marjorie Procter-Smith illustrates this powerfully. She begins her influential book, *In Her Own Rite*, by quoting Adrienne Rich’s well-known poem, “The Images.”² The poem grapples with the ways in which the arts can “translate violence”³ into something aesthetically pleasing. Procter-Smith then asks the question, “Does the liturgy “translate

¹ While the term may be a recent creation, the phenomena, which it is used to describe, most certainly is not. Joseph Herl treats the musical worship conflicts of early Lutheranism in: Herl, Joseph. *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism Choir, Congregation, and Three Centuries of Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

² Procter-Smith, Marjorie. *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990, 1.

³ Rich, Adrienne. *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems, 1978-1981*. New York: Norton, 1981, 1.

violence” into beautiful forms disguising its danger for women?”⁴ Procter-Smith’s answer to this question is affirmative. Liturgy can be a beautiful and compelling means of maintaining oppressive relationships and structures.

Liturgical rituals also have the potential to create boundaries which dehumanize those who are at the margins. Nancy Eiesland shares how the eucharist can be “a ritual of exclusion and degradation”⁵ for disabled persons. A community’s concept of normativity is deeply embedded in their liturgical rituals, thus the rituals can isolate those who are not “normal.” In the case of Eiesland, the eucharist has the potential to become the embodiment of an ideology of the able-bodied, so those who were disabled or differently abled were potentially dangerous and confounding. The perspectives of those who have experienced harmful liturgical violence must lead to examining to what degree violence pervades liturgy.⁶

The Problem of Pervasive Violence

In the work of Jacques Derrida violence has an ontological character. Of particular interest is his treatment of violence within his analysis of hospitality in *Of Hospitality*. In this work he addresses what he calls “the law of absolute hospitality.”⁷ True hospitality welcomes the stranger into the presence of one’s family and community with complete openness and generosity. Such hospitality is provided without questions and without reserve. Anything and everything must be open and available to the stranger.

⁴ Procter-Smith. *In Her Own Rite*, 2.

⁵ Eiesland, Nancy. *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994., 113.

⁶ These analyses are drawn from a paper, “When Liturgy Causes Suffering: The Problem of Liturgical Violence and the Possibility of Liturgical Redemption,” presented at the Duke Graduate Conference in Theology on October 4th, 2014.

⁷ Derrida, Jacques, and Anne Dufourmantelle. *Of Hospitality*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000, 25.

However, Derrida recognizes that such hospitality does not and should not exist in this world. Hospitality occurs in brokenness and finitude, and it has corresponding limitations. Derrida writes, "...but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus excluding, and doing violence."⁸ What most individuals and churches would reckon to be hospitality is actually a form of violence. This violence is varied, but it begins with the requirement that the foreigner speak into the language of the host. For Derrida, hospitality and power are linked. As soon as the foreigner intrudes on the host's power, they become threatening, and this influences the host's decision to offer hospitality. Any decision to withhold hospitality also becomes a means of excluding and doing violence.

Not only is violence a reality of human existence, violence also pervades social structures and hierarchies. James Cone's work on violence takes this pervasive nature into account. He writes, "Injustice in any form is violence, and violence is found everywhere there are people."⁹ For Cone, violence is the "violation of personhood"¹⁰ in which one's heritage and culture are considered worthless or even abhorrent.

For those who have been forcibly inserted into a harmfully violent social system or had a harmfully violent social structure imposed upon them, violence is absolutely essential to existence. Only through violence is self-defense or revolution possible. Cone asserts that people whose social agency has been violently removed have a choice. They are compelled to either choose to assent to the oppressor's violence or to choose their

⁸ Derrida and Dufourmantelle. *Of Hospitality*, 55.
⁹ Cone, James H. 1995. "In Search of a Definition of Violence." *Church and Society* 85, no. 3:5-7. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 15, 2014), 5.
¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

own violence. The oppressor's violence will consume the oppressed, but the violence of the oppressed has the potential to provide self-defense and revolution.

Revolutionary violence has the potential to result in the creation of a new society in which the oppressed are liberated. Since the oppressed are forced to choose between their own violence or the oppressor's violence, the problem of violence cannot be interpreted as violence versus nonviolence. The dilemma is one of determining the necessary degree and forms of violence required for self-defense and revolution,¹¹ and Cone asserts that the answer to this problem must be provided by the oppressed.

Within the work of Derrida and Cone is a great deal of ambiguity regarding violence. Violence does not necessarily result in death though it is destructive. Violence also potentially leads to life or to both life and death. For both, violence to varied degrees is absolutely essential to the protection of the vulnerable. Within radical hospitality, the oppressed would be compelled to welcome the oppressor, which would leave the oppressed at risk and ultimately unwelcome. For the oppressed, violence is absolutely essential to life.

Within this framework of pervasive violence, nonviolence is an illusion, and it is a particularly dangerous one for the oppressed. Any possibility for survival and freedom lies in self-defense and revolution. Anything else will result in the oppressed becoming complicit in the violence of the oppressor, and in Derrida's thinking, the infliction and reception of violence pervade human experience.

¹¹ This is the basic argument of Moltmann upon whose work Cone is building in: Cone, James H. 1977. "Black theology on revolution, violence, and reconciliation." *Christian declaration on human rights*, 64-76. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 15, 2014).

Within the work of Derrida and Cone exists opportunity to expand the scope of violence in relationship to liturgy. If indeed violence is pervasive and has the potential to be necessary or unnecessary, violent liturgy may not be an unworthy anomaly from pure, “nonviolent” liturgy. Liturgical scholars must instead account for the ways in which liturgy does violence both necessarily and unnecessarily. Moving beyond the question of violent or nonviolent, liturgical theology must critique how and to whom liturgies do violence. “Within the framework of pervasive violence, the pressing issue for liturgical theology and practice is not the removal of violence but the practice of violent liturgy in such a way that participants are healed and liberated.”¹²

From this survey, a working definition of liturgical violence can begin to take shape. Liturgical violence is embodied in actions or symbols that leaves behind spiritual, emotional, or physical suffering, trauma, or destruction to institutions, ideologies, communities, and individuals. In this definition liturgical violence may have both positive and negative ethical values, thus a key concern in regard to liturgical violence is to determine the ethical value of the violence being done.

Necessary and Unnecessary Liturgical Violence

For the sake of this essay, liturgical violence will be valued in two distinct categories: necessary and unnecessary. To speak of necessary liturgical violence has two elements. The first facet of necessary violence is that it is unavoidable as a part of the human condition. As the act of a community, liturgy will always encounter the conflict of wills and other sources of violence, and the inherent ontological violence of the human condition inevitably shapes the liturgical experience.

¹² These analyses are drawn from: “When Liturgy Causes Suffering: The Problem of Liturgical Violence and the Possibility of Liturgical Redemption,” presented at the Duke Graduate Conference in Theology on October 4th, 2014.

The second aspect of liturgical violence is that violence is an essential part of liturgy that embodies values which come into conflict with the status quo. If liturgy is to liberate the oppressed, the ideologies and practices of the oppressor must be rejected. Practices and perspectives of the status quo will potentially be isolated and destroyed.¹³ An example of necessary liturgical violence is contained within healing, which will be explored later.

Catherine Bell's work on political ritual in *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* provides insights into how liturgy can do unnecessary violence to participants.¹⁴ Through her work, political power and physical violence can be connected to political rituals. Through rituals, those people with political and ritual power present a compelling view of social solidarity and display the compatibility of this solidarity with the society's cosmological understanding of the world. Rituals are used to convince a society or group of people that the interests of the powerful reflect the greater social interests and are cosmologically appropriate even though they quite possibly are not.

As a source of power, rituals are perhaps the most effective means of creating and maintaining power. Unlike violence, ritual reinforces a structure in which rebellion can seem unnatural and even undesirable. The immense potential of political ritual is in the

¹³ A treatment of necessary violence must carefully examine the ethical implications. The necessary violence, which this essay seeks to address, does not cover the physical injury of persons. However, it would be overly simplistic to state that physical violence is never truly necessary. Such an example could be a sit-in on private property. While the common term for such an action is "nonviolence", such an action is physically violent in that it involves the bodily intrusion of another's space in order to compel the destruction of an undesirable practice or belief. In relationship to liturgy, it must be noted that the use of bodies can be violent even without bloodshed. Might a liturgy emerging from social concern employ bodies in a way that does violence to an unjust institution or ideal? This is reminiscent of a Eucharistic chapel service at Union Theological Seminary in response to the second Iraq War. Various students were strewn across the floor of the chapel with bloodstains, lying as if dead. At one point, during the processional, a bloody body was drug down the aisle by the leg. As participants received Communion, they had to walk across the bodies.

¹⁴ Bell, Catherine. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

subtle and holistic creation of hierarchies and power differentials of which the participants are likely not aware. Masquerading behind illusions of social cohesion, cosmological appropriateness and exterior authority, these rituals shape those who participate in a profound but often unseen manner.

In her essay “Reorganizing Violence: The Intersection Between Liturgy and Domestic Violence,” Marjorie Procter-Smith examines this subtle and violent power of liturgy. She suggests that the use of male-dominated texts, forms, and gestures have the capacity to, “disguise and mystify domestic violence and its roots, making the abuse seem not only acceptable, but even divinely sanctioned.” The impact of this violence has been very harmful for women. She writes, “. . .because liturgy (again, like language) shapes us gradually and in tiny increments, words and gestures which are used regularly and repeatedly, although appearing small, have a powerful effect.”¹⁵ Unnecessary liturgical violence can be subtle but profoundly harmful.

The Violence of Liturgical Healing

Liturgical healing is an example of necessary liturgical violence, and it can have many meanings.¹⁶ From the perspective of ritual theory, it can be said that liturgy has the potential to help individuals reach wholeness with their cosmological understanding and cultural and social environment.¹⁷ In a theological perspective, liturgical healing is the transformation that occurs when participants encounter God in liturgy. Humans are highly complex, and the scope of human need reflects this. A holistic understanding of

¹⁵ Procter-Smith, Marjorie. 1987. "Reorganizing victimization : the intersection between liturgy and domestic violence." *Perkins Journal* 40, no. 4: 17-27. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLA Serials*, EBSCO host (accessed May 25th, 2014), 18.

¹⁶ Much of what has been labeled “healing” that occurs in liturgical settings is actually oppressive and potentially harmful; however, this essay will employ the term with a fuller definition.

¹⁷ This definition evokes the work of Catherine Bell.

liturgical healing must address both the body and soul, and healing is the progression toward wholeness.

Liturgical healing requires a concern for the pain, brokenness, and trauma of an individual or community, and it is an expression of hope for a more complete future. For a liturgical ritual to be truly healing, before it is celebrated it must be preceded with the question, “What needs to be healed?” This is the foundation for a healing ritual, and the end result of a healing liturgy should be a ritual that reflects the needs of those who require healing.

Liturgical healing of both the body and the soul is inherently violent. Physical healing brought about in or through a liturgical experience could result in the death of harmful biological organisms, and healing always involves the negation of or resistance to the forces of death as embodied in brokenness and harm. Within spiritual, emotional, and psychological healing, violence is also a factor. Something is being destroyed. Liturgical healing is violence for the good of those in need of healing.

If liturgical healing implies an empowering concern for the good of those in need, what is implied in liturgies containing unnecessary and harmful liturgical violence? Unjust liturgical violence minimizes concern for the potential of an individual. An individual’s or community’s worth stands in direct relationship to the needs or whims of a person or an institution. It is hard to imagine an unnecessarily violent liturgy beginning with the question, “For what do you need healing?” Unnecessarily violent liturgies do not empower the individual or the community; rather, they subject a person or a group of people to the violent liturgical actions and priorities of another. From an educational

standpoint, unnecessary violent liturgies have a pedagogical role of teaching communities and individuals lessons of oppression, exploitation, and dehumanization.¹⁸

Liturgical healing, an expression of necessary liturgical violence, and liturgical harm, an expression of unnecessary liturgical violence, stand in stark contrast to each other. Each have the potential to undermine the other. If liturgical healing were to be inserted into an unnecessarily violent liturgical environment, it could theoretically have the potential to subvert and even completely erode the postures and values present in that liturgical environment. The opposite is true as well.

Engaging Liturgical Harm and Healing

To speak of healing is to implicitly speak of harm. If harm were to be destroyed, healing would vanish as a powerful force immediately upon the achievement of wholeness, for without harm, healing would be unnecessary. In the same sense, without healing, harm as a destructive force would consume all things to the point when it would be extinguished. Harm and healing must be held in dynamic tension with one another.

Liturgical healing requires us to acknowledge harm inflicted on persons, communities, and the world by the powers and principalities of this world both within liturgy and outside the church. Liturgical healing is not simply the grand gesture of a nonviolent church toward a harmfully violent world. The liturgical potential for liberative violence stands in direct relationship to and in tension with the liturgical potential to do harmful violence in numerous ways.

To speak of necessary liturgical violence in relationship to healing is at least partially to speak about the dynamic process whereby a community can be renewed. As the people of God work toward the liberation of the oppressed, necessary violence will

¹⁸ This analysis of healing is drawn from: Wymer. "When Liturgy Causes Suffering," 2014.

ensue. Necessary violence will occur in a community amidst the tensions of normal communal life. Healing liturgies provide ways of reconciling and transforming. Liturgical healing is a constructive force whereby a church can survive being destroyed by necessary and unnecessary violence.

Liturgical healing exists in stark contrast with the destructive force evidenced in unnecessary liturgical violence. The theory and practice of liturgical healing has the potential to radically subvert unnecessary liturgical and secular violence. The subjugated stance of unnecessary violent liturgy cannot exist simultaneously with the liberated stance of the necessary violence of liturgical healing. The healing empowerment experienced in liturgy has the potential undermine experiences of subjugation in the world. Healing implicitly and explicitly acknowledges a fuller and healthier potential. Liturgical healing is intrinsically a statement of value. From an educational perspective, it can be said that liturgies of healing have the pedagogical effect of teaching an individual or community their true value and helping them achieve wholeness.

Toward Safe(r) Liturgy

Awareness of the tension between healing and harm within liturgy provides a fuller understanding of both the situation and the priority of healing rituals that bring individuals and communities toward spiritual, physical, and social wholeness. Healing is not a luxury merely to be celebrated at moments of perceived need. It is an absolutely essential force to the life and renewal of the Christian church. As such it should be an always-present theme and dynamic in liturgical theory and practice.

To recognize violence as a necessary force in the world is an act of humility, for Christians are just as finite and earthbound as the rest of the world.¹⁹ To begin to think about the ways in which our liturgies do violence is essential to uncovering the ways in which they do violence to persons, communities, and God unnecessarily. Truly open conversations about the violence embedded in liturgy have the potential to lead to the empowerment of those who have experienced unnecessary violence in the church and the world.

If indeed violence is pervasive, then the problem of violence within Christian communities must press at the focus, degree, and manner of violence. To what forces, values, and structures is the church doing violence? How does this violence impact both the oppressed and the oppressor? The illusion of nonviolence is not an option. The oppressed cry out for justice. To be “nonviolent” would be to forsake them in their great need and to be complicit in the violence done to them.²⁰

Conclusion

All Christian worship can cause necessary and unnecessary violence, and all Christian worship has the potential to harm or to heal. Out of this awareness must arise an intentional emphasis upon healing as a liturgical theme and dynamic, this realization may help the Church to move beyond the illusion of nonviolence to grappling with and naming the precise ways in which our liturgy destroys in both necessary and unnecessary ways.

¹⁹ These suggestions are closely drawn from: Wymer, “When Liturgy Causes Suffering.” 2014.

²⁰ Perhaps the relatively simultaneous emergence during the latter half of the twentieth century both of awareness of the ways in which women and others have been violently impacted by liturgy and of interest in healing liturgies is no coincidence at all. Might liberation and healing be wound up together?

WORKS CITED

- Bell, Catherine M. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Cone, James H. 1977. "Black theology on revolution, violence, and reconciliation." *Christian declaration on human rights*, 64-76. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 15, 2014).
- Cone, James H. 1995. "In Search of a Definition of Violence." *Church and Society* 85, no. 3:5-7. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 15, 2014).
- Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Anne Dufourmantelle. *Of Hospitality*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- Eiesland, Nancy. *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.
- Herl, Joseph. *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism Choir, Congregation, and Three Centuries of Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Procter-Smith, Marjorie. *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990.
- Procter-Smith, Marjorie. 1987. "Reorganizing victimization : the intersection between liturgy and domestic violence." *Perkins Journal* 40, no. 4: 17-27. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLA Serials*, EBSCO host (accessed May 25th, 2014).
- Rich, Adrienne. *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems, 1978-1981*. New York: Norton, 1981.