Fred P. Edie
Duke Divinity School
fedie@div.duke.edu
REA Annual Meeting, November 7-9, 2014

The Peace which Passes Understanding

Abstract

Christian Religious Educators seeking to inculcate peaceful virtues in Christians and to shape peaceful communities may find assistance through revisionist philosophical and theological anthropologies. These emerging portraits of human being give primacy to the insights and habits of the human body as a source for knowing while diminishing the role of self-conscious reasoning toward free decision-making. If knowledge is (once again) a bodily phenomenon then the Christian liturgy (once again) becomes relevant for Christian formation. This essay uses the occasion of All Saints worship to explore how and why Christ's Peace may find bodily expression in the bodies of worshippers and in the gathered worshipping assembly.

Introduction

Christians profess that Jesus Christ manifests peace. Declaring him "Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:16) in the manner of Isaiah's suffering servant, they look to Christ as arbiter of multiple expressions of peace. Christ's gifts of peace include variously: a feeling of inward peace on the part of believers; a constellation of virtues including compassion, gentleness, kindness, etc. (Galatians 3: 23) that together characterize believers as peaceable beings; a set of practices or means of grace shared between neighbors including forgiveness, reconciliation, and the positive extension of Christ's peace; and even a politics, a set of social relations in which all of creation may flourish under Christ's just peace.[1] I propose to explore the phenomenon of Christ's peace as a gift and expression of Christian worship. I suggest that not only may worshippers receive Christ's gifts of peace in worship, as members of Christ's body they may embody and therefore incarnate dimensions of it. By "embody" I intend to signal my interest in human ways of knowing and acting that push beyond those traditionally described as "rationalist," "cognitivist," and "decisionist" in pursuit of an epistemological and anthropological account that attends to capacities extending beyond those to which human beings self-consciously attend. These include the powerful roles played by habituation, imagination, aesthetics, and the desires of the heart in our motivations and actions. I contend that Christian worship, because it operates within and upon these embodied realms of human

[1] For theologies of ecclesial peace, see Hauerwas, S. (1991). *The Peaceable Kingdom.* South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press; Yoder, J. (1994). *The Politics of Jesus.* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

that often surpass understanding, offers an essential zone for formation and transformation in Christ's peace.

I am not naïve, however. It is at once sociologically and theologically undeniable that Christians often fail to receive or practice the peace that Christ offers by way of the liturgy. Because it cannot escape the mixture of motivations resident in its human actors, liturgy historically has excluded or marginalized persons or reified unjust asymmetries of power.[2] Put differently, liturgy can do violence to worshippers.[3] Nevertheless, because God calls Christians to worship and promises to be present as they gather, the possibility exists to acknowledge and confess sin and to receive and practice peace as a worshipping assembly.

I construct this account by way of, first, a short yet remarkable liturgical case study followed by analysis of the motivations and actions of the worshippers and the liturgy depicted therein, then conclude by offering a few implications for the practice of Christian religious education.

Liturgical Case Study

In the late 1980's a certain pointy-headed associate pastor successfully lobbied to offer a first ever All Saints Worship in an otherwise pietistic, ardently non-liturgical, southern United Methodist congregation. Between invited relations of the honored dead and carry-overs from the Wednesday night fellowship supper crowd the sanctuary welcomed nearly 300 worshippers that night. The service opened with glorious singing of "For All the Saints" led by the processing choir. Scripture readings pertaining to the occasion included equally powerful eschatological imagery from the book of Revelation, the "cloud of witnesses" in Hebrews 12, and the recitation of the Apostle's Creed which of course pointedly affirms Christian belief in the "communion of the saints." The junior associate's boss delivered a sermon at once pastoral and catechetical. Steering clear of notions of saintly veneration likely to inflame Protestant iconoclasts, he focused instead upon Christian exemplars and the cloud of witnesses mystically gathered with the worshipping assembly. He also anticipated the rite of Holy Communion by gesturing to the table while evoking the biblical image of "heavenly banquet" (Luke 14:15-24; Isaiah 25:6). Following the sermon the names of the honored dead were read aloud solemnly and at a deliberate pace—each spoken name accompanied by the toll of a deep bell and lighting a votive candle. At this point, sighs, moans, and other gestures of grief began to break out in different pockets of the assembly. Public grieving spread as more names were called. Some worshippers including some children responded to the grieving with expressions implying fear and anxiety. Others, however, moved closer to the grievers even reaching over pews to touch or pat their backs or grasp their hands. This pattern of interaction intensified as worshippers came to the chancel to receive Holy Communion. Indeed, it seemed to be catching. In the aisles, in the pews, and even around the

---

[2] See for example, Cavanaugh, W. (1998). *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell or Proctor-Smith, M. (2000). *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition.* Memphis, TN: Order of St. Luke Publications.

[3] Here I wish to distinguish between violence as a result of human sin and what some would call the necessary violence endemic to the Eucharistic rite itself. I do not take up the latter subject here.

communion rail, worshippers spontaneously hugged, patted, whispered to, and laid hands on mourners. Parents offered gestures of love, then guided their children to do the same. As the service concluded, many worshippers continued to offer and receive gestures and words of compassion and peace.

The service stirs my own heart all these years later for at least two reasons. First, it evoked a range of powerful if sometimes contrasting emotions thereby sealing it in my memory forever. Second, it seemed at the time and even more so now an occasion where Christ's Body *embodied* the gift of peace for and with members of that Body. Peace was more than an idea; it was incarnate.

Analysis

I confess that "analysis" seems presumptuous in light of what I believe to have been the redeeming action of a loving and mysterious God. If believers received or practiced peace on that occasion it was a gift of grace and a foretaste of God's Realm. It cannot be reduced to any of the variety of psycho-social, scientific, or cultural explanations I may wish to employ. Yet the true mystery is that God would choose to lovingly create, redeem, and sustain beings and fashion them capable of responding to God's initiatives of grace. Hence the "how" of human response is not sacrosanct. Indeed, better understanding of how we may be empowered by God toward peaceful ends has never seemed more urgent.

New Portraits of Human Being and Human Knowing

Scientists, philosophers, and theologians curious about the nature of human being have discovered many points of convergence over the past two decades. Something like consensus exists for a description of humans as embodied animals who share a genetic legacy and many behavioral traits with other animals. Among these is a bias toward homeostasis and therefore toward life. Driven by hunger or fatigue, for example, the bodily organism is recruited and enacted to satisfy those needs thereby returning it to homeostasis. Importantly, neither the other animals nor humans require consciousness much less a process of rational decision-making on order to seek bodily equilibrium. Our bodies, in effect, do our thinking for us. This is not a novel insight. The philosopher mystic Pascal described what he called a "conatus" in human beings, the desire not only to be, but to be well.[4]

By linking desire with what we moderns call flourishing Pascal takes his place among a great many scholars ancient and contemporary convinced of the primary role of emotion in human social intercourse and therefore in efforts toward moral life. (Pascal is also reported to have quipped, "The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing" though I have not located sourcing.) Building upon Pascal, Augustine, and others,

---

[4] The view of *conatus* discussed here is developed in Groome, T. H. (1999). *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry.* Eugene, WA: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 28-29.

contemporary philosopher James K. A. Smith asserts even more forcefully that we human beings are "lovers" more than thinkers.[5]

Current neuroscience continues to uncover biological evidence to support this portrait. For example, it has established that emotion is a phenomenon of the embodied organism, not merely a will-o-the-wisp deriving from we know not where, or a vestigial relic from our pre-rational days. Instead we now know that emotion is constructed out of organismic processes including brain stem and other brain region activation, hormone secretion, blood flow, skin conductance, and respiration rates, plus the resulting "felt" (but not necessarily by consciousness) bodily postures.[6] In addition, brain science has shown that emotion may arise within and enact human beings into dispositions to responsive action without consulting the consciously reflective capacities of the brain.[7] (Reasons of the heart motivate our protective care for lost children in the Target aisles.) Further still, emotion is shown to be an interactive phenomenon. My emotional state results from being moved by some other. This other may include external stimuli--a child's gesture of love, the news of a friend's death--or internal ones--memories of persons, places, or events. Since emotion is interactive, prompted by some other, some scholars even take the additional step to claim that it is inter-relationally constituted. In other words, social intercourse may be described as an affective dance. In a conversation, for example, I am moving you as you are moving me causing emotion to arise out of our shared interaction. Embodied emotion, therefore, is increasingly understood to underlie human behaviors as diverse and important as parent/infant bonding and social contagion.[8]

In addition, attacks upon Cartesian dualistic ontology and Kantian "pure reason" grow in number and precision not least because of scientific recognition that human capacities traditionally linked to reasoned cognition (logic, dispassion, subject-object distinction, free will, etc.) all are inescapably woven through the brain's emotion systems. Even the Cartesian illusion that our minds are free from bodily constraint is an ironic instance of evolution's continued interest in a body minding brain.

Metaphors in and of the Body

Influenced by this portrait, pragmatist philosopher Mark Johnson offers an account of the bodily origins and importance of metaphor. Long regarded as mere linguistic decoration adorning "real" knowledge (read "reason") Johnson suggests that the antecedents of metaphor reside in the body's perceptual experience of its environment. Given the configuration of the body (typically an erect carriage featuring two pairs of extremities

---

[5] Smith, J. K. (2009). *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 46-70.

[6] See for example, Damasio, A. (1995). *Descarte's Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain.* New York, NY: Penguin Books

[7] See for example LeDoux, J. (1998). *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life.* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

[8] See Stern, D. (1985). *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Pyschoanalysis and Developmental Psychology.* New York, NY: Basic Books. For a more theologically tuned reading see Harak, S. (2001). *Virtuous Passions: The Formation of Christian Charactr.* Cascade, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers.

attached to a torso, a head extending from the top of the torso bearing forward facing eyes and nose, etc.) sensory-motor experience is shaped by these realities. For example, an infant will experience itself being lifted out of the crib into mother's or father's arms hundreds if not thousands of times. This repeated experience gives rise to what Johnson calls "image schemas" including, in this case, the "container" schema (in and out) and the "source-path-goal" schema (to and from).[9] These activation patterns becomes imprinted in the form of neural maps, and subsequent experience ("in the stroller," "out of the house") is structured by and strengthens these schemas. Johnson emphasizes that image schema are "preverbal and mostly non-conscious…."[10]

Johnson proceeds to show how the body's image schema ground figurative language including metaphor. "Falling *in* love" or baptismal "immersion *in* Christ" are not ex nihilo linguistic inventions of the human mind, they are instead imaginative extensions of the body's prior experience interpreted through its image schemas. Similarly, at All Saints, to receive the exhortation to "run the race set before us " and to intercede for blessings upon those "who have finished their course in faith" in order that they (and we) may join the "great cloud of witnesses" is to extend the container schema and the source/path/goal schema metaphorically. The deceased are at first perceived (and those who mourn them may perceive themselves) as "out;" out of presence, out of relationship or, even outside of belief. The "company" and "cloud" images evoke and invite the contrary sense of "in," however. This "in" sense is strengthened through performance of Holy Communion which explicitly is named as a context for communion with the saints. Similarly, death and mourning may be perceived as barriers to fulfillment of the source-path-goal schema. Again, however, images of completed "journey" or "race" invite bodily reinterpretation of bodily experience. The service performs a series of counter claims accompanied by counter emotions and counter gestures (more about this below). In effect it declares that the deceased are not gone they are present in the assembly—only now as members of the company of saints. Nor have they failed to reach their goal; they have finished the race and joined the cloud of witnesses. For Johnson, because the origins of metaphors are bodily, it is in the bodies of those who experience them that they are "comprehended." In this case mourners may find themselves strangely moved by metaphor-induced feelings of reassurance, peace and hope in the midst of their lament.

Imitation and Formation of the Body

What about the gestures of compassion and peace the service prompted? Practical theologian Warren Brown is among those investigating the significance of mimesis for forming Christian character. Its biblical mandate not withstanding (I Corinthians 11:1), imitation has been devalued in a culture of self-authorizing individualism. More often than not imitation is qualified by the words "mere" or "cheap." Yet as many have noted, infants employ imitation to recruit the affections of their caregivers. According to Brown et al., "[t]he recognition of self-other equivalences is seen as the primary means by which we relate to and understand other humans—a precondition for development, not the

---

[9] Johnson, M. (2007). *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 142-144.
[10] *Ibid*., 144.

outcome of it."[11] Nor do humans abandon their penchant for imitation in adulthood. Neuroimaging studies demonstrate that certain motor neurons are activated when persons perform a task or assume a bodily posture. These same neurons also are activated when persons observe others perform tasks and assume postures.[12]

This "as if" phenomenon assists our understanding of what took place in the All Saints worship. When worshippers detected others in the assembly grieving, they registered similar body states consistent with pain and loss. Indeed a number of worshippers wept in solidarity with (imitation of?) their grieving brothers and sisters. Encounters with the suffering of others also induce empathy, however, and at least some worshippers reached out with gestures of compassion and love to those they knew to be suffering. What could account for these gestures? One possibility is that they too had experienced the loss of loved ones and felt the accompanying grief. Perhaps they also recalled how gestures of love and compassion from others had helped them endure their suffering. In addition, they may have been motivated by their Christian convictions, including in part by newly reactivated by the metaphors of eschatological hope. Put differently, we might assume that at least some in the sanctuary were exemplary and mature Christians and responded accordingly.

Not everyone in the assembly shared this set of life experiences, convictions, and virtues, however, yet by the conclusion of the service nearly all became involved. How to account for the rest? Brown, channeling Schleiermacher, offers a possible explanation: *"…action within groups strengthens the intensity of the benevolent motivations and sentiments of each individual in the group."* [13] In other words, through mimesis a contagion of goodness swept through the assembly. By way of non-conscious bodily imitation, many persons were being formed into the practices and affections of Christian life.

Ritualizing Bodies

What about the liturgy itself? How did its structure and trajectory influence its human participants? Here I offer only a few exploratory remarks. All Saints dares to tell an important truth about human beings—we all suffer; we all die. At the same time it audaciously juxtaposes human pathos to resurrection hope. Hence it invites the re-narration and re-interpretation of human experience. It does more than *tell* the story for internal consumption, however. With crucial support from poetic language and ritual symbols it *performs* that story. The spoken names, tolling bell and lighted candles purposefully locate assembled bodies in close proximity to death, a space most would prefer to avoid. In response, the church also ritualizes (bodily) its eschatological hopes. It sings "For All the Saints" in a major key not to deny the reality of death but to contradict its finality. Scriptures burst with life-giving metaphors and sermon proclaims the good news of Jesus as risen. The rite of Holy Communion invites persons to journey physically from their place of mourning to a table promising life, then taste and see this

---

[11] Garrels, S., Reimer, K., & Brown, W. (2013). Redeeming Imitation: Virtue Formation by Memetic Compassion in Communities. In G. Stassen, R. Petersen, & T. Norton, *Formation for Life: Just Peacemaking and 21rst Century Discipleship.* Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 46.
[12] *ibid.,* 45-46.
[13] *ibid*, 47. Authors' italics.

living reality enacted. Through its thanksgiving prayer the meal is characterized as a feast in communion with the saints and amidst a great cloud of witnesses. Jesus Christ is praised as paschal lamb and resurrected, *living* host of this meal, the One through whom Christian community is constituted across space and time . Bodily gestures of affection and peace shared with other pilgrims en route to and from the table strengthen and confirm this hopeful reality. And it was *real*, not pretend. Ontologically speaking, Christ's Body was made manifest. It was constituted and caught in the act of participating in God's redemption of the world

Implications for Christian Religious Education

Evidence continues to mount suggesting how and why liturgical action forms persons and communities. Religious educators, long known for their faithful creativity, can assist congregations with liturgical design that seeks to enact the truths about God and the truths about human beings (and, indeed, all of creation), including especially their sufferings, longings, and hopes. In addition, awakened to significance of aesthetics for shaping faithful life, religious educators will invite persons to develop these capacities within themselves; to learn to create and appreciate figurative language; to sound the polyvalent depths of ritual symbols, to make or appreciate music, drama, and visual art; and to imagine personal and communal stories in light of the stories of God. In this case the educator is after more than deepened artistic appreciation. She is also seeking to create the conditions where persons may attend to the usually tacit, ordinarily non-conscious, and always bodily operations of meaning-making. As with all of God's gifts, peace runs through the body.

Bibliography

Cavanaugh, W. (1998). *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Damasio, A. (1995). *Descarte's Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain.* New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Garrels, ,. S., Reimer, K., & Brown, W. (2013). Redeeming Imitation: Virtue Formation by Memetic Compassion in Communities. In G. Stassen, R. Petersen, & T. Norton, *Formation for Life: Just Peacemaking and 21rst Century Discipleship.* Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications.

Groome, T. H. (1999). *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry.* Eugene, WA: Wipf & Stock Publishers.

Harak, S. (2001). *Virtuous Passions: The Formation of Christian Charactr.* Cascade, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers.

Hauerwas, S. (1991). *The Peaceable Kingdom.* South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Johnson, M. (2007). *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

LeDoux, J. (1998). *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life.* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Proctor-Smith, M. (2000). *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition.* Memphis, TN: Order of St. Luke Publications.

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

Stern, D. (1985). *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Pyschoanalysis and Developmental Psychology.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Yoder, J. (1994). *The Politics of Jesus.* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.