

# DANCING IN THE SPIRIT: EXPLORING PENTECOSTALISM AT THE INTERARTICULATIONS OF AFFECT AND RITUAL

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## ABSTRACT

Bringing together personal testimony and narrative with theories of affect and ritual, this article explores the interdisciplinary connections between affect and ritual, seeing the two as complementary. Affect explores how things feel, how bodies are acted upon and become actors. Ritual studies allows that movement, that choreography, to be observed and mapped out in embodied life. Theory comes from the Greek, *theoria*, meaning “to look at.” Thus, I begin by looking at my own experiences growing up in a dynamic, spirit-filled church community and how those moments of worship have shaped and stayed with me. One of the recurring themes in this chapter is dance, which serves as an apt metaphor and method of engaging spirituality (praxis).

## KEYWORDS

embodiment, ritual, Pentecostalism, dance, affect, spirit



Affect theory merges with LaMothe's call to begin studying religion with bodies, using our embodied practices, habits, and sensitivities to understand religious worlds.

— Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power*

Ritual is not a senseless activity but is rather one of many ways in which human beings construe and construct their world.

—Ted Jennings, "On Ritual Knowledge"

When I was twelve years old, my dad, a Pentecostal pastor, decided to add a Friday night worship service to the roster of weekly church meetings—the previous Sunday's neatly arrayed chairs pushed to the edges of the sanctuary in leaning, mountainous stacks. Another local preacher mocked: "Are you going to turn the church into a dance club?" "Why not?" my dad fired back. The openness of the room gestured at the possibilities of worship: space to dance. An invitation for bodies to congregate, shoulder to shoulder, in varying postures—arms raised or kneeling palms up. Sound flooded the interstices of the room, buzzing with the garbled sounds of singing, shouting, and praying. Streamers, flags, and banners flew as upbeat praise songs turned into slower anthems. There were blankets scattered about, as volume and movement ebbed and flowed with the music.

After a time, usually an hour or so, a holy hush would descend, which was a collective indication that the time of worship had come to an end. On those Friday nights, we gathered with no set agenda, no order of service—only an invitation to worship God however and by whatever means you were inclined. What held us in those occasions saturated with feeling has continued to hold onto me, a God-haunting that is as affective as it is effective to anchor, push, and pull bodies through the worship space and time.<sup>1</sup>

This essay reflects on affectively dense worship experiences and the consequent rituals that accompanied them. To do so, I suggest a conversation between theories of affect and ritual studies as a multifaceted framework for exploring Pen-

tecostal worship experience. The adjacency of affect and ritual demonstrate how these theories coalesce: how theory can bend and stretch beyond any Cartesian anxiety that bifurcated bodies into body/mind. Through their interarticulation, we can theorize via affect and ritual in the interstices of what remains elusive, just out of reach of cognition and language, complementing and augmenting other ongoing approaches to Pentecostalism. Affect draws attention to the extra-linguistic cues, feelings, and forces that shape and orient bodies in space, while ritual observes, explores, and charts the choreographic languages of the body. Dancing is the perfect example of this feeling-movement, as it serves as a theory and sways as a practice, taking seriously the sounds and sights of the space without foreclosing the possibilities for serious inquiry. Affect theorists have quoted extensively from ritualists,<sup>2</sup> but the connection between the two fields as an interdisciplinary method, especially regarding sound and space, has not yet received adequate attention.

Pentecostal permutations are unwieldy, potentially undermining the conventions and traditions of the spiritual practices of Pentecostal worship itself. While this approach is not fully sufficient to attend to the boisterous potential of Pentecostal worship, it does center the body as the locus of spiritual practice and interpretation. No one method can capture Pentecostal worship; nevertheless, an interdisciplinary approach is helpful to explore these languages of the body in their choreographic and extra- and para-linguistic manifestations.

Some scholars of religion reduce and relegate Pentecostalism to a historical aberration or doctrinal heresy.<sup>3</sup> Others, especially within theological studies, dismiss it as hyper-sensationalism or superstition (Pentecostalism is indeed sensationalist, though not in the pejorative way that is meant by the term). Others, such as anthropologists, use fieldwork and interviews to flesh out key insights and characteristics (e.g., Miller & Yamamori 2007, 1; Coleman and Hackett 2015). Still others try to inject it with philosophy in efforts to legitimize or situate it within larger historical movements (mysticism, holiness, revivalism) (e.g., Cox 2007, 1; Smith 2010; Castelo 2017; Alexander 2011). In what follows, I propose an approach that engages Pentecostalism in all its gestural, visceral, and corporeal potential, its paradoxical nuances, its messy ecstatic outbursts, ruptures, performances, contradictions. Approaching the subject in this manner allows for a more nuanced understanding of the felt dimensions of religious experience and the irreducibility between thought and action. I refer to this as feeling-doing, or doing-thinking, that organizes, informs, and teaches bodies.

## On Dancing and Dignity

My dad's favorite sermon riffed on the story of King David: how he shamelessly danced out of his robe when the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol and physical abode of God's presence, entered Jerusalem; how he leapt and twirled, becoming 'undignified'; how his wife, Michal, daughter of Saul, despised his nakedness as she looked down from her high window onto his indignity. Michal's contempt was punished with barrenness. My dad's run-in with the local preacher underscores how embodied worship, specifically dance, has been historically criticized as primitive, dismissed as feminine, and racialized. It seems there is something odd and unsettling when certain men show emotion, especially when those feelings lead to expressions that do not comply with (hetero)norms.

My dad would dance as David danced, embracing the playful indignity of embodied worship experience. His eyes brimmed with tears each time he preached the dancing king: "Like David, our dancing church will bear much fruit." On many occasions I recall watching my dad limp as he danced and sung, sometimes while crying—a reminder of how deeply he felt his truth. He indulged in rather than rejected the invitation to intimacy and vulnerability, even at the price of losing his dignity. Dancing was such a staple in our church that we formed a dance team, The Spirit of David. I was one of two boys in a group of fifteen. In a short time, we began traveling and dancing, as we performed our choreographed numbers to popular Christian hip-hop and worship songs. Occasionally, others would tease me with homophobic slurs. Dancing has a way of resisting, of queering the norm, of refusing to be reduced.

How does it feel to become undignified? What is dignity but a performance of power and privilege from an honored position of being deemed worthy. Worthy of what exactly? Often, my dad would go up to the keyboard and sing one his favorite songs: "Slow dancin', swayin' to the music. Slow dancin', just me and my *God*" (Rivers, 1998) Of course, "God" here is substituted for "girl." People would twirl and step as if God was the leading partner in an intimate slow dance. The inversely proportional nature of shame and dignity is worth further consideration. As Schaefer (2022) flags:

Dignity and pride have not been directly studied in affect theory and one might make the argument that they do not quite qualify as feelings, per se... But I think what we are seeing emerge in works by Bonilla-Silva, Ahmed, and others are the contours of a theory of how economies of dignity synchronize to race. The shame (and shaming) of one group builds the dignity of another. These are amplified by dynamics of class, race, and region. The feelings that circulate within this economy consolidate those same political dynamics. (258)

As Schaefer (2015) points out elsewhere, Emmanuel Levinas famously said “humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated: all the rest—all the exotic—is dance” (qtd. in Schaefer, 262). It is dance, nevertheless, that we return to consider the interarticulation of affect and ritual.

Kimmerer LaMothe (2004) invites us to study religion with/in the body “as a kind of dance—as rhythmic bodily movement enacting a logic of bodily becoming *and* a cultural spiral of discovery and response” (2, emphasis in the original) Donovan Schaefer (2015) adds: “Affect theory situates religion in the ordinary... following the materialist shift, tries to think of religion as dance, as a surging of multileveled, deeply stratified bodies into the work that is not reducible to language... the music and the meaning are absolutely indissociable” (218). Dancing occasions movement that brings about an ordering; a cosmology is created. Returning to my anecdote at the beginning of this essay, I concur with LaMothe that dance serves as an important metaphor, a vital example of what religion means and what it does, and a form of embodied and bodily knowledge. Whereas many theorists and scholars of religion have historically discounted dance as inadequate or insufficient to express religion, LaMothe (2004) uses dance to unlock the affective and ritualistic components of religion that, linguistically and cognitively, conceptually and kinesthetically, constitute an ensemble of embodied processes (2-3). One dances religion into meaning: “The dancer dances her worship in the temple, creates the temple within her body, and dances the temple in her performance” (Narayanan 2003, 508, qtd. in Schaefer 2015, 192).

Theologically speaking, there is a Trinitarian flow and relation to LaMothe’s (2004) cosmology—and the word Trinity, *perichoresis* in Greek, means rotation—read: dance—between the three persons of the Godhead. Dance animates, rotates, and keeps moving, spinning webs of interconnectedness to the point of indistinguishableness, of indistinction, to the point where the lines between dancer, dance, and temple blur. Dance, as movement, is feeling in motion, feeling

on display. It is learned and performed, even mastered. It is the subject of analysis from varying fields across the arts and humanities because it not only has meaning but is action. Something happens when one dances. It connotes more than words can convey. While theories of affect prompt one to consider forms of religion as dance, ritual also provides insights for imaging the connection between religion and dance and religion as dance.

Friday night worship was about getting the mood right: lights switched off, save for the red glow of exit signs at the back of the room. Even without a live band, we were pulled into a shared rhythm—blasting Hillsong worship tunes over the sound system, then pausing to offer a prayer, prophecy, or vision. Often, my dad would sit on the stage and cry and pray in tongues until the room began to stir. He was cued even as he cued the room. In that way, he functioned as a thermostat, affecting and regularly regulating the collective temperature of the room. Rarely, someone else would share a scripture at the beginning to frame the night. The music, accompanied by the effervescent sounds of ecstatic praise, was the primary driving force of the night. The room itself vibrated, buzzed, reverberated with voluminous sounds of music and movement.

It was there in the dark but warm space filled with voluminous worship music that I first danced with God. (Maybe it is more appropriate to say that I danced “in the spirit?”) The experience evinced a progression: I began by clapping suspiciously. Then I swayed subtly. Until finally—once I realized that nobody was watching or judging—I jumped and spun about wildly. The affective mood of the room would shift as the fast-tempo praise songs transitioned to slower anthems and ballads. All the energy spent jumping around became more focused and concentrated in the body. The fast-tempo songs allow one to move through the outer courts with thanksgiving and praise; the slower songs brought about a collective reverence in the room that stilled and calmed bodies into slower movements and eventually more tranquil forms of worship.

My dad would speak of this slower time as an opportunity to ‘soak’ in the presence of God. People would transition from standing to kneeling, and eventually to laying on their stomachs or backs. On more than one occasion I—and several others—would lie on the floor until we eventually fell asleep. (To this day, I still consider it the best sleep I have ever had.) I remember the sensation of a warm

blanket enveloping me, as the sounds of people praying, crying, and speaking in tongues slowly faded. More than emotional outbursts and goosebumps, I felt, above all else, safe. I felt, in essence, at home. And I learned that this was what it meant to feel God's presence, to know God. The ritual knowledge of the event was learned as it was experienced. That presence, that is, the feeling of emotions ebbing and flowing in the room, is what we were all pursuing.

I would wake up either when the lights were turned on, usually after 10 PM, or earlier if someone started 'laughing in the Holy Ghost,' which was frequently followed by an unpredictable amount of time where a few trickling laughs multiplied in persons and volume until most in the room would be laughing uncontrollably. These periods of laughter were contagious and often followed periods of intense worship that included sobbing and what I have come to understand as lament. I realized, even as a child, that the degree of crying and emotion often was occasioned by laughter in equal measure. When worship was over, we would head to the local greasy spoon restaurant for another one or two hours of fellowship, which was a testament to both our southern culture and Pentecostal tradition. There were many occasions when we did not leave our beloved restaurant until well after midnight. People would come in from night clubs and a night out drinking at a bar. My mom would joke that we were all drunk, too, but off the 'new wine.'

## On Ritual Knowledge

I recall this anecdote to say that Friday night worship in the sanctuary constituted a way of knowing for me—knowing God was knowing *how* to experience or encounter God. Knowing God was feeling God and vice versa. Pentecostal knowing comes from personal experience. Perhaps that is why times of intense worship were described as 'intimacy with God.' There was a way of achieving this intimacy. I watched and learned from others. I listened to the songs and to the words of those praying and singing around me, how their voices inflected what they were saying as they talked to God and waited for God to respond. I found in music the ecstatic power of feeling all the way alive. Sundays were like Fridays in a milder manner. But I lived for those Friday nights, when, in a dark sanctuary, I would lose and find myself once again in God. This period of life was short-lived. After a church split and denominational dispute, we moved away. I did not dance much in my subsequent teenage years. The wonder and joy

I experienced on those Friday nights was a thing confined to the past, memories unthought of, until I visited The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries' bi-yearly meeting in 2017. That was the only time I felt those familiar feelings again. At first, I tried to resist, but eventually I gave in, even indulged.

While growing up Pentecostal instilled a sense of wonder, it also brought about a sense of skepticism. Consider the phrase, "Don't make it a doctrine." Perhaps puzzling jargon to the outside observer, but for those of us *in* the community, these five words carried a caution. If Pentecostalism is considered, as Harvey Cox (1995) has argued, a protest against man-made creeds and the coldness of traditional worship, then these words serve as a careful hermeneutic for interpreting worship beyond the event. Meaning, as my mother would warn, the worship experience itself could become *like* a doctrine, and doctrines are made to be followed. When confronted with the need for doctrine in the church, she would rebut: "Someone with an experience is never at the mercy of someone with an opinion." Here, of course, opinion is synonymous with doctrine or authoritative teaching. The comment exposes her roots in the Oneness movement, a non-Trinitarian sect within Pentecostalism.

Given the repetitions that occur in Pentecostal worship, I was raised to be fearful that the novelty of the Spirit, i.e., the capriciousness and capaciousness that proliferate in these Spirited-filled spaces, could be squelched if it became too regimented or rehearsed. Or worse, the lack of feeling could be a bigger problem like unconfessed sin or a spiritual sign that something was awry. When things would begin to feel 'stale' or 'dry' in the collective aura, the preacher or worship leader would cry out to God for a fresh word or outpouring and renewal. The emotional temperature of the worship experience served as a gauge for and guide through the open-ended service. At any moment, the Spirit could take over, shifting the mood in the room even as it edited the order of worship in real time. Doctrines, as such, are not as flexible and therefore not as useful for the shifting, unpredictable dynamics of Pentecostal worship.

Because of the interplay between emotion, spoken word, text, and personal reflection, Pentecostalism does not force anyone to choose between learning through embodied forms of knowledge and more philosophical processes of knowing. One does not simply study Pentecostalism; one is enveloped in its cosmology.

That it is not systematic does not delegitimize it as a theology or preclude it from theological reflection, even though it does separate it from Western categorical distinctions of theology as shaped from Enlightenment understandings of the term. Whereas Western notions of doctrine have largely led to organization or systemization, Pentecostalism is a critique and reversal of the methods of Western theological thought and is usually wary of hyper-intellectualized projects. Doctrine and theology are still important parts of the tradition, but there is a deeper reliance on performance; a rhythm, a *perichoresis*, a dance, constitutes a methodology for embracing Pentecostal spirituality. As my mother still contests: “I can’t explain it, but I know deep down inside what is true.” In this way, Pentecostalism is different in kind from theological approaches found in many other theological traditions. This project attends to this difference in ways that trace the contours of Pentecostal theologizing without reducing it or comparing it to other purportedly more ‘formal’ traditions.

Ritual theorist Ronald Grimes (2014) suggests that religions are “little nourished by disembodied reflection, and it is a mistake to assume that dancing one’s religion precludes thinking about it” (1). Grimes is alluding to what is offered in LaMothe (2004), namely that dancing—as the choreography of the body—is indissociable, inextricable from thought. Perhaps dancing, itself, can be thought as a form of feeling–doing or doing–thinking? The line between thought and action is eschewed in the dance. Attending to Grimes’ assertion, what might it mean for one to find ‘nourishment’ in religious reflection? An example is necessary. In the Hebrew Bible narrative, God feeds the children of Israel in the desert with manna from heaven. Manna, here, more than miraculous daily bread, is a question: “*Ma’u Hu?*” (מַה הוּא), meaning, “What is it?” The nourishment is found in asking the question as much as eating or consuming the miracle bread. Partaking of the bread is the act, asking the question is the reflection. It is why in Deuteronomy the writer informs that “one does not live by bread alone; but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (8:3 NRSV). Meals and food are a vital and ubiquitous part of social and religious life and feature as a way of connecting the daily needs of people with hunger for more, for meaning, for spiritual food.

If religions find little nourishment in disembodied reflection, then Pentecostalism represents a case in point for embodied reflection—bodily-knowing-seeking-understanding—informed by the needs and desires of the body, and subsequently moves to contemplation and reflection. Theology, thus, is an embodied exercise, a fleshy practice: the Word becoming flesh. “Dancing in the Spirit,” the title of this article, builds upon what Maia Kotrosits (2015) calls ‘sense-making,’ a hyphen-

ated phrase that evidences how “thinking and feeling are hopelessly interwoven experiences” (3). We may think of the hyphen as a way bringing together things that are neither fully commensurate nor opposites; the hyphen seeks to bring together seemingly disparate things.

Perhaps *Dancing in the Spirit* can be imagined and studied as an example of holding the tension of experiential knowing and theoretical, intellectualized, logocentric projects without wholesale accepting or rejecting each other. I propose extending Kotrosits’ (2015) notion of sense-making into a performative register; dancing suggests ecstatic possibilities of Pentecostalism and the interpretations of it are anchored in and performed by the body: “To say we ‘make sense’ of something, for instance, is to accord an intuitive, bodily, and non- or beyond- conscious force to knowing. Knowledge arrives as an ‘impression’” (4). Knowledge arrives as an impression, which is to say, in a felt (sensate) or registered manner.<sup>4</sup> Sense-making that does not take into account performance, that does not factor in the corporeal movements, gestures, posturing that occur, is incomplete. Thus, sense-making is triptych of feeling-thinking-doing in which it is unclear where one ends and the other begins.

For Ted Jennings (1982) “Ritual is not a senseless activity but is rather one of many ways in which human beings construe and construct their world” (112). He gives three ‘moments’ in the noetic (noetic, as in the amalgamation of intellect and perception) functions of ritual: ritual as a way of gaining knowledge, ritual as the transmission of knowledge, and ritual performance as a display of the ritual and its participants to an observer who is invited to see, approve, understand, or recognize the ritual action (113). “*Dancing in the Spirit*” embraces these moments and suggests engaging in religious experience under the assumption that it is spirit, or the Spirit, that animates it. It opens the door to an interdisciplinary conversation between theories of affect and ritual studies to explore Pentecostal worship experience as an occasion of bodies being pushed and pulled by affective rituals. Like those Friday nights when we churched, this method turns down the lights and invites us to feel the music and be willing to move where the dancing takes us.

## Endnotes

1. This article is in furtherance of my research, which was published in my book (Watts 2023).
2. For more on this connection, see Schaefer (2015), LaMothe (2004), Grimes (2014), and Ahmed (2015).
3. This denomination focuses on the doctrinal aspects of Pentecostalism, which it seems to be an adventure in missing the point: “In this series of articles, we have tried the Pentecostal movement in its basic roots and tenets. We have considered its history and origin; its emphasis on the special gifts of the Holy Spirit; and now its view of the Christian life. And in every case, having been weighed in the Bible’s balances, it has been found wanting. It fails the test of what constitutes orthodox Christianity... [O]ur conclusion has to be that this movement is not a great blessing for the church, but a dangerous heresy” (Engelsma 2018, n. p.).
4. For Sara Ahmed (2015), ‘impressions’ highlight the contact of material forces—bodies, objects, etc.—that literally ‘press’ upon bodies: “To form an impression might involve acts of perception and cognition as well as emotion. But forming an impression also depends on how objects impress upon us... An impression can be an effect on the subject’s feelings; it can be a belief; it can be an imitation or an image; it can be a mark on the surface” (6).

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