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Incarnate Spirits: The Embodied Roots of Worship

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ABSTRACT:

Spirituality is “how the Spirit of Jesus enables Christians to grow into fullness with God in this life and in particular historical circumstances.”

The role of the community is definitive in shaping the spirituality of an individual and the interior dynamism of spirit is contextualized by incarnate experience. This article employs the thought of Bernard Lonergan, SJ bolstered with the work of two Lonergan scholars, Ian Bell and Timothy Brunk, to explore the notion of a “worshipful” pattern of experience.

Incarnate Spirits

The Embodied Roots of Worship

by Henry O. Widdicombe

“The human person is an integral, psychophysical unity of body, mind, and spirit.”¹

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- 1 The proximate source of this quote is my own hand-written notes for a course on Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement, taught by Thomas Jeannot, PhD at Gonzaga University, which I audited in the spring of 2021. My notes indicate its origin as Edmund Husserl. Elsewhere, I have attributed it to Emmanuel Mounier, a French philosopher of a school of thought known as “personalism”—thus it would be fitting for him to have said it. However, I have not been able to trace the quote to either Husserl or Mounier and therefore must conclude it is a unique formulation of my own professor, Thomas Jeannot, and thus attribute it to him. This has been confirmed in personal conversation.

INTRODUCTION

Spirituality is “how the Spirit of Jesus enables Christians to grow into fullness with God in this life and in particular historical circumstances.”² Furthermore, there is no growing alone; rather, the role of the community is definitive in shaping the spirituality of an individual. Therefore, the interior dynamism of spirit is always already contextualized by one’s incarnate experience—an experience which is itself socio-culturally and historically conditioned. One is not merely a product of one’s time and place; nevertheless, those factors do condition and contextualize the possibilities of interior spiritual growth. For the human person, the interior and the exterior form a complex unity. To aid in arguing for and explaining the consequences of that idea, this piece employs the thought and work of Bernard Lonergan. His thought is bolstered and expanded by the work of two Lonergan scholars, Ian Bell and Timothy Brunk, who clarify and explain the notion of a worshipful pattern of experience. In that vein, this piece must therefore explain what is meant by “pattern of experience” in Father Lonergan’s thought and then offer, with Bell and Brunk, a development of the latency in Lonergan for a specifically “spiritual” pattern of experience. From there, we can articulate the role of the community in spirituality.

PATTERNS OF EXPERIENCE IN LONERGAN

An element of Lonergan’s cognitional theory, fully described in *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, is the notion of “patterns of experience.” They are the varied ways in which we experience the world around us. Lonergan states,

we are all familiar with acts of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling. Still, such acts never occur in isolation both from one another and from all other events. On the contrary, they have a bodily basis; they are functionally related to bodily movements; and they occur in some dynamic context that somehow unifies a manifold of sensed contents and of acts of sensing. ... [T]he

2 Course notes, September 6, 2022 – definition offered in class presentation, Michael Rubbelke.

sensations and the bodily movements are subject to an organizing control. Besides the systematic links between senses and sense organs, there is, immanent in experience, a factor variously named conation, interest, attention, purpose. We speak of consciousness as a stream, but the stream involves not only the temporal succession of different contents but also direction, striving, effort. ... [T]here are, then different dynamic patterns of experience, nor is it difficult for us to say just what we mean by such a pattern. As conceived, it is the formulation of an insight; But all insight arises from sensitive or imaginative presentations, and in the present case the relevant presentations are simply the various elements in the experience that is organized by the pattern.³

Thus, “patterns of experience” are a “dynamic context that somehow unifies a manifold of sensed contents and of acts of sensing.”⁴ They are shaped, in part, by where we direct and on which objects we focus our attention; additionally, they are contextualized by the exigencies of our circumstances.

Lonergan offers a few specific patterns in *Insight*: biological, aesthetic, intellectual, and dramatic.⁵ The “biological” pattern—which Lonergan elsewhere calls animal extroversion—has to do with the sensate and vital aspects of our personhood. This pattern is operative when we are unconscious or incapacitated or overwhelmed by physical sensations. Essentially, we are in this pattern when we are acting like a mere animal. The “aesthetic” pattern is when one moves “above and beyond the biological account books of purposeful pleasure and pain” and into the realm of experience had for its own sake.⁶ The aesthetic pattern is when “conscious living is itself a joy”—Lonergan lists “the untiring play of children, ... the strenuous games of youth, ... the exhilaration of sunlit

3 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* 3, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 204–5.

4 Lonergan, *Insight*, 205.

5 Lonergan, *Insight*, 205–12.

6 Lonergan, *Insight*, 207.

morning air, ... [and] the swing of a melody” as examples.⁷ Beyond either of these is the “intellectual” pattern—when one is driven by the detached and disinterested desire to know. One does not let distractions get in the way of questioning, and one follows the questions where they lead, regardless of what they might uncover or how those discoveries might make one feel. This pattern is the human as “rational animal.” There is also the “dramatic” pattern, where we spend much of our time. This pattern consists of the narrative we construct for ourselves about our own lives, the interior monologue that accompanies our conscious living and the broad, sweeping story we tell about our past and project into our future. This list is not exhaustive, nor meant to be. Implicit in *Insight*, and explicit in *Method in Theology*, is a notion of a “practical” pattern, associated with Lonergan’s articulation of common sense knowing, the practical knowledge that one accrues as a member of a given community in a particular time and place. In *Method in Theology*, Lonergan gestures at a “worshipful” pattern.⁸ It is to that pattern that we now turn.

THE “WORSHIPFUL” PATTERN OF EXPERIENCE

The worshipful pattern of experience is, chiefly, developed by Ian Bell⁹ and, secondarily, by Timothy Brunk.¹⁰ Bell notes that, “The importance of clarifying the worshipful pattern of experience lies in the fact that authentic human existence begins with attending to all of the data, but this information varies according to the particular situation in which a person is located.”¹¹ This insight into the purpose of patterns, generally, is helpful in clarifying the work of this piece. Bell states, “Human existence is far from uniform, and the data contained in the immense range of human experience varies within that spectrum. Therefore, the operations of the human subject differ according to the unique characteristics of a particular moment.”¹²

Patterns of experience help us to understand the ways that we attend

7 Lonergan, *Insight*, 207.

8 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 286.

9 Ian B. Bell, “An Elaboration of the Worshipful Pattern of Experience in the Work of Bernard Lonergan,” *Worship* 81, no. 6 (Nov 2007): [page number(s)].

10 Timothy M. Brunk, “Worshipful Pattern,” *Worship* 85, no. 6 (Nov 2011): [page number(s)].

11 Bell, “An Elaboration of the Worshipful Pattern,” 522.

12 Bell, “An Elaboration of the Worshipful Pattern,” 522. Emphasis my own.

to the world around us and become more authentic people. It should be obvious to the modern person that we cannot dwell long in any individual pattern—distractions and duties call us elsewhere. A child in pain calling out from another room pulls the parent from a dazed stupor on the couch. The graduate student is distracted from reading by a knock on the door or a phone call. Our attention is constantly divided. Having formulae, however, for the varied fashions by which our attention is directed is helpful—it allows us, in self-reflection, to come to a better understanding of what we were doing, why we did it, and why we felt the way we did.¹³ As Bell points out, “clarity regarding the pattern of experience is an aid to the authentically operating human person.”¹⁴ Elsewhere, he writes that “if individuals are not clear about the pattern in which they are located and the particularities and goals of that pattern, authenticity becomes difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.”¹⁵

The worshipful pattern, then, is when one’s experience is ordered toward prayer and praise of God. As Bell articulates it, the pattern has the following four elements:

First, it is a religious experience in which human persons and communities become conscious of being in love with God in an unrestricted fashion. Secondly, it is an expression of religious meaning insofar as Christian persons articulate what the state means and its implications for human living. Thirdly, it is an experience of prayer, and in prayer Christ is mediated on both an objective and subjective level. Fourthly, in the Christian context the worshipful pattern of experience may be either communal or personal, but personal worship always occurs within the context of the communal expression of religious meaning.¹⁶

13 This is not explicit in Lonergan, but there is a way in which the patterns of experience, as named, are only clear in self-reflective activities like the Examen.

14 Bell, “An Elaboration of the Worshipful Pattern,” 527.

15 Bell, “An Elaboration of the Worshipful Pattern,” 536.

16 Bell, “An Elaboration of the Worshipful Pattern,” 535–36.

The first element is the basic contours of spiritual experience—the human person and community as aware of their relation to God. The second is the predicate state necessary for systematic theology in a given religious tradition. The third is an articulation of the Trinitarian and Christological aspects of prayer—one worships the Father, in the Son, through the Holy Spirit and one praises Christ through his power. The fourth provides categories for liturgical theology and emphasizes the contextual element of the interior drive to worship.

The notion of “religious conversion” is fundamental for Lonergan’s theological method.¹⁷ When one experiences religious conversion, one’s being becomes being in love. Lonergan defines it thus,

“Being in love with God, as experienced, is being in love in an unrestricted fashion. All love is self-surrender, but being in love with God is being in love without limits or qualifications or conditions or reservations. Just as unrestricted questioning is our capacity for self-transcendence, so being in love in an unrestricted fashion is the proper fulfillment of that capacity.”¹⁸

This is a fundamental, totalizing reality, and Bell points out that “the state of being in love with God in an unrestricted fashion affects every moment of life, and, when human persons recognize this, they recognize every moment as an experience of worship.”¹⁹ This state of being is the root and ground of spirituality. Thus, when we are aware of our being in love with God, we are explicitly advertent to the worshipful pattern.

As indicated above, however, the pattern of experience is not always clear, so we may not be aware of it in the moment. This failure to be fully aware is especially true of the state of being in love with God. As Lonergan points out, “Being in love is not just a state of mind and heart. It is interpersonal, ongoing; it has its ups and downs, its ecstasies and quarrels and reconciliations, its withdrawals and returns; it reaches security and

17 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 267–93.

18 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 105.

19 Bell, “An Elaboration of the Worshipful Pattern,” 539–40.

serenity only at the end of a long apprenticeship.”²⁰ Thus, some self-reflective activity, like prayer, can be helpful in recognizing the presence of God in one’s life and that way in which one is, fundamentally, oriented in and toward God through love.

Bell’s third element of the worshipful pattern is, quite simply, the Christian experience of prayer, wherein Christ is both object of devotion and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the subject of the praying—this is akin to the traditional formulation of liturgy as being directed to the Father, in the Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit. As Brunk points out, “The Holy Spirit is . . . the driver of religious experience.”²¹ When we allow ourselves to be moved by God to contemplation and prayer, we are in the worshipful pattern of experience—our operation is co-operation with God’s operation.

Ultimately, the worshipful pattern is characterized by an openness to God’s working in and through us.²² For Lonergan, openness has three dimensions: fact, achievement, gift. As a fact, openness is “the pure desire to know”—that which directs us toward the world and the things within it. As an achievement, it has two aspects. Fundamentally, the aspect regards the subject—it begins interiorly. Consequently, the act regards the object—it terminates exteriorly. Finally, as a gift, openness is “an effect of divine grace”—our openness is not a result of some work in us, but given to us by God’s grace.²³

Like many of the features of Lonergan’s anthropological thought, openness in the subject has the potential of development and growth. Here, he is specifically referring to the enlargement of one’s horizon, considered in both an immanent and transcendent sense. He says,

20 Brunk, “Worshipful Pattern,” 498–99. Quoting Lonergan, “The Response of the Jesuit as Priest and Apostle in the Modern World” in *A Second Collection, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* 13, ed. Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016) 147.

21 Brunk, “Worshipful Pattern,” 491.

22 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “Openness and Religious Experience,” in *Collection, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* 4, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 185–87. This is unsurprising, considering that his doctoral dissertation was on the topic of operative grace in Saint Thomas’ work and that he was a well-formed member of the Society of Jesus.

23 Lonergan, “Openness and Religious Experience,” 186.

“... the successive enlargements of the actual horizon fall into two classes. There are the enlargements implicit in the very structure of human consciousness, the enlargements that are naturally possible to man. But there is also an ultimate enlargement, beyond the resources of every finite consciousness, where there enters into clear view God as unknown, when the subject knows God face to face, knows as he is known. This ultimate enlargement alone approximates to the possibility of openness defined by the pure desire; as well, it is an openness as a gift, as an effective grace and, indeed, of grace not as merely *sanans* but as *elevans*, as *lumen gloriae*.”²⁴

Considered in this light, “openness as fact is the inner self, the self as ground of all higher aspiration, ... as achievement is the self in its self-appropriation and self-realization, and ... as gift is the self entering into personal relationship with God.”²⁵ Finally, “Because these three are linked in the historical unfolding of the human spirit, they reveal how religious experience holds a fundamental place primarily in man’s making of man...”²⁶ Thus, the “worshipful” experience is the openness of the human spirit to being moved by God and our response to that movement of the Holy Spirit in us. It is, to quote a verse Lonergan was fond of, “the love of God poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5) or, as Saint Thomas articulated it, operative and co-operative grace.

SPIRITUALITY AS COMMUNALLY CONDITIONED

For the Christian, the worshipful pattern is always already contextualized by the community of which we are members. Bell posits that, “on a personal level, the worshipful pattern of experience continues to derive meaning from the community’s expression of meaning in the liturgical life of the church.”²⁷ This communal contextualization is true on both the level of local and universal ecclesial communion, for, while what a Christian in sub-Saharan Africa or in East Asia might be different from each other, “Christian communities are bound together by a common

24 Lonergan, “Openness and Religious Experience,” 187.

25 Lonergan, “Openness and Religious Experience,” 187.

26 Lonergan, “Openness and Religious Experience,” 187.

27 Bell, “An Elaboration of the Worshipful Pattern,” 532.

faith in the triune God, and this faith comes to expression preeminently in the liturgical life of the community.”²⁸

The socio-cultural communities of which we are a part shape our spirituality and our engagement with our religious tradition. This shaping is on account of the “polymorphism of human consciousness” that is a function of the overlap of the varied patterns of experience.²⁹ Furthermore, the situatedness of a person in a community or a community in a broader social context is going to shape the contours of worship so as to give a particular bent to what, ultimately, is universally common worship—the act of praising God. What a given community does is distinguished from another not by the transcendent orientation toward God, which they share, but by the concrete contexts of their given time, place, and socio-cultural contexts.

The patterns of experience are not operative exclusive of one another, nor are they permanent states. They can both, simply, be operative at different points of an individual’s experience, and, complexly, be partially or more fully operative at the same time as one another, thereby complicating one’s experience of a given event. Our worship cannot but be a reflection of concrete circumstances and local communities. The average worshipper is not exclusively concerned with adoring God’s own self. They are also, through no real fault of their own, concerned with the goings on of their quotidian life. Bell notes that, “Human living, however, is multifaceted. Human beings are not only reasonable, they are also affective. As Robert Doran indicates, a psychic undercurrent of emotions is present at all times, and whether it helps or hinders authenticity varies according to the situation at hand.”³⁰ We are complicated creatures even to ourselves.

INCARNATE SPIRITS

There is no clean division in our experience of the world. Likewise, there is no crisp line between what is and what is not the worshipful pattern. For penultimate remarks, it seems best to quote a typical instance of the more lyrical Lonergan, who says,

28 Bell, “An Elaboration of the Worshipful Pattern,” 532.

29 Lonergan, *Insight*, 410–11.

30 Bell, “An Elaboration of the Worshipful Pattern,” 539.

consciousness is like a polyphony, or like a concerto that blends many themes in endless ways. So too religious experience within consciousness may be a leading voice or a middle one or a low one; it may be dominant and ever recurrent; it may be intermittently audible; it may be weak and low and barely noticeable. Again, religious experience may fit in perfect harmony with the rest of consciousness; it may be a recurrent dissonance that in time increases or fades away; it may vanish altogether, or, at the opposite extreme, it may clash violently with the rest of experience to threaten disruption and breakdown.³¹

Additionally, Lonergan's three conversions (intellectual, moral, and religious) are precarious achievements—vulnerable to becoming less operative or, even, being completely overturned. Here that precarity is applied to the notion of patterns of experience, which are, in another fashion, also a precarious thing. They do not always harmonize with one another, and they are not always operative for the duration nor in the intensity that we might wish.

In concluding their articles, both Bell and Brunk note that the worshipful pattern of experience ought to extend into the workaday world.³² They emphasize an aspect of liturgical theology that is of critical import—worship cannot and must not stop when church services end. God, in God's own Word, demands that we continue our service and that, when we see the least and lowest of our human siblings, we recognize Christ in them. This extension of worship into the world beyond the confines of the Church building requires an acceptance of an embodied spirituality. Ruth Burrows says, "A Christian joyfully accepts his bodiliness, knowing he can go to God only through the body and that God comes to him through his body..."³³ There is no pure spirit nor pure body—only the

31 Brunk, "Worshipful Pattern," 491–92. Quoting Lonergan, "The Response of the Jesuit as Priest and Apostle in the Modern World," in *A Second Collection, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* 13, ed. Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 147.

32 Bell, "An Elaboration of the Worshipful Pattern," 538–39; Brunk, "Worshipful Pattern," 487.

33 Mark Gibbard, "Adaptation of Historic Spirituality for Today," in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 578. Quoting Ruth Burrows, *To Believe in Jesus* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1978), 69.

odd admixture of both. Our experience of the world, then, is of an “already, not yet” foretaste of God’s kingdom—the fundament of all being, suffusing the very created order.

Thus, our worship, our spirituality, is contextualized by our embodied experience. We can articulate this contextualization with the notion of various overlapping patterns so as to better understand and appreciate our conscious experience. Additionally, there is no going to God without a body. But, and perhaps reassuringly, there is no time at which God comes to us disembodied either. The primary mode of God’s revelation, after all, was an embodied person—Jesus. Spirituality, then, is located in the body, at least from the standpoint of subjective experience. One’s experience may be directed in this or that fashion, but, at root, the subject of the experience is an incarnate being—as Thomas Jeannot puts it, “an integral psychophysical unity of body, mind, and spirit.” Lonergan’s notion of the pattern of experience can aid us in understanding our own experience better—organizing the data of consciousness into discrete forms. An activity like the Examen, wherein one looks back upon one’s day, is critical in a spirituality. Self-reflection, with the grace of the Holy Spirit, allows us to see more clearly both where God was present in our lives and the kinds of lives that we are living—it is both an examination of conscience and consciousness. Ultimately, this self-reflection ought tend toward a recognition of spirituality as embodied. One’s life is not lived in a singular pattern nor is one’s life organizable, except by abstraction, into discrete instances of the spiritual or the material—it is always an admixture of both. It is neither pure nature nor pure grace, but nature completed and fulfilled by grace. As God came to us in a body, we go to God in our bodies.



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