

Praising as bodily practice

The neocharismatic culture of celebration

When people describe their experiences, even the spiritual ones, there are often physiological components to their descriptions. The stronger the emotional effect of an event has been, the more likely it is that a person's narration of it will include a comment about having had goose pumps, or of shivering, sweating, not being able to stand still, jumping, lifting up one's arms, falling down, being swept off one's feet, and so forth. It appears that, as embodied selves, we must have bodily *feelings* to be able to claim to have *experienced* something. Material bodies also allow us to experience spiritual things (e.g. Fuller 2008). Physiological processes, such as arousal, may be involved in some aspects of religious experience, and they may be actively sought, too. However, as the psychologists of religion have indicated, within religious experience the whole story is not simply the arousal as such, but the arousal as it is *contextualised* and *interpreted*. Emotional experience, be it religious or not, requires both a physiological arousal and a cognitive framework for identifying the meanings of the feelings. Learned traditions provide the relevant cognitions, roles or models for experiencing 'the right things'. Traditions do not provide merely the context in which arousal is interpreted to be religious, but are also the source and facilitators of such an experience. (Hood *et al.* 1996: 193.)

Physiological arousal as a religious experience has been studied, for instance, in the context of healing and ecstasy in many different religious traditions. Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity in particular has provided a research field for the study of speaking in tongues as an act in which a human body is interpreted as a channel for the supernatural power (e.g. Poloma & Hoelter 1998). The question of how the body is understood, how it is experienced, and how its spiritual functions are made explicit in words, is integral to all religious experience. As Thomas Csordas has outlined it, from a phenomenological perspective, *embodiment* is the existential condition in which culture and the self are grounded and, to bring the question closer to the

grass roots of anthropology, the body can be seen as a locus of social practice (Csordas 2002: 241–2).

Meredith McGuire's study includes Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and claims that *lived religion* is based more on practices than on religious ideas or beliefs (2008: 15). Spirituality fully involves people's material bodies, not just their minds or spirits. Bodies come to be linked with spirituality through social senses and through ritual acts which restructure experiences of space and time (McGuire 2008: 118). Thus, the human material body matters very much spiritually. Embodied practices can produce both individual and communal spiritual experiences. As an example, McGuire discusses an embodied spiritual practice as intersubjectivity within a ritual of singing together. It is a practice that produces a religious experience and a sense of community, 'an apprehension of subjective experience that is mediated by conscious thought'. (McGuire 2008: 112–13.)

Rhythmic body movements and dancing, as well as singing, have also been used as a means and inspiration for both individual and communal spiritual experience throughout the history of religions. In this presentation, I will tentatively look at the contemporary neocharismatic culture of *celebration* as a means of aiming at religious experience through collective bodily practice; namely *praising*, which is generally understood to take the form of singing but is, in fact, expressed also in bodily movements such as dancing. In the neocharismatic context, a celebration means a certain type of a meeting with a special focus on contemplative worship and prayer, accompanied with lively music of praise. A celebration can also be a part of a bigger event; a conference, attended by visiting evangelists. It is often arranged with the help of a performing praise group.

First, I will very shortly outline the historical background of the neocharismatic branch. Secondly, as the main topic of this paper, I will describe the tradition of praise itself within this context. I will look what are the insider definitions and what kinds of forms praise in the culture of celebration actually includes, especially in Finland. The description is basically based on internet material and my previous field experiences in the Word of Life congregational meetings and other charismatic Christian events. In conclusion, I discuss acts of praise as a source of religious experience.

The background of the tradition

The neocharismatic movement has its roots especially in the Pentecostal healing revival, which occurred between 1947 and 1958 in the United States (e.g. Harrell 1975). Today, Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity in its numerous versions is the most expansive form of Christian religion in the world (Anderson 2004). The focus of its teaching is the doctrine of *charismata*, which are the gifts of the Holy Spirit; for example, speaking in tongues, prophesy or healing. The most characteristic features of the movement are certainly the animated meetings, where the special music of praise plays an important role among long sermons and prayers in tongues.

The most recent significant boom in charismatic Christianity which has emerged in the 1980s from the Canadian Vineyard revival is commonly called the neo-Pentecostal, or neocharismatic trend. I prefer to call it neocharismatic to differentiate it from so called classical Pentecostalism that, in the form of traditional congregations in Finland, tends to avoid the latest fashions in charismatic worship. As a matter of fact, neocharismatic Christianity is not a consistent movement, but rather includes numerous branches of culturally, socially and even individually accommodated versions. In addition to the organised local congregations, there are evangelizing organisations, as well as increasing supplies of nondenominational charismatic networks, which do not preconceive congregational membership of participants, but work in less official formations, such as home cell groups, for instance. One of the latest examples in Finland is the Vineyard Home Cell Network that also announces monthly celebrations on its website (the website of the Finnish Vineyard Home Cell Network).

Despite variations in their practices, neocharismatic communities simultaneously represent a biblical fundamentalism which is understood as a religious system of meaning that relies exclusively upon a sacred text (cf. Hood *et al.* 2005: 6, 9). The theme that all variants of the movement share is the importance of personal experience in encountering the Holy Spirit. In principle, religious virtue as a means of communicating directly with the supreme power without the mediation of a specialist is equally available to every believer, and believers are supposed to seek a personal mystical encounter with the Holy Spirit, above all by acts of praise.

Classical Pentecostalism has been represented in Finland since the early decades of the twentieth century, and today it has pretty much established its status as a church, with organized guidelines for functions. From the 1990s onwards the neocharismatic trend in Finland, with its independent local con-

gregations and evangelizing organizations has introduced its popular devotional practices also to the wider Christian field. In some cases these influences have even reached the mainstream church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, which traditionally represents an institutionalised, 'religious stiffness' to those who seek more experiential ways of 'living their religion.' For most Finns the saying 'like sitting in a church' means strict self-control: not moving in a pew, not making noise, only answering the liturgy and singing the hymns accompanied by the organist. In many traditional Evangelical Lutheran parishes, lively celebration has been regarded as disturbing, and in some cases, the problems caused by it have been solved by organizing special occasions for different interest groups; those who want to praise may have their own charismatic evenings and home cells. (PalMBERG 2003.)

Strong emphasis on an individual's personal experience and openness to practical innovations links neocharismatic Christianity with the larger processes in the post-secular religious landscape. There is a certain shift away from institutionalized religion, or religion constituted mostly by its public role. Simultaneously, a growing trend is taking the form of a more or less privatized spirituality corresponding to personal needs. (GILLIAT-RAY 2005: 358.) From this perspective, the rise of the charismatic movement in its various forms can be regarded as a response to the search for a more holistic spirituality within Christianity. However, another strong theme of the movement is a sense of community, its intersubjectivity between the believers who, more or less, claim to have the same personal spiritual experience.

Spirituality has various meanings, depending on the context in which it is used. Historically and etymologically, the word 'spirituality' is linked to the history of Christian theology and praxis. However, today the concept is used generically to refer to a transcendence of the assumptions of specific religious traditions, and spirituality has come to be seen as being rooted in a search, in experimentation, in questioning and exploring. (KING 1998.) In her recent article, Ulrike Popp-Baier discusses different approaches to the religion-spirituality debate, and ends up criticising the definitions which link spirituality with the 'inner life', thus maintaining the mind-body dualism. Instead of drawing the line between spirituality and religion, she suggests that the psychologists of religion should look for a way of understanding spirituality as it is used by people in different contexts. (POPP-BAIER 2010.) This point of view, which actually is an ethnographic approach to the phenomenon, is a useful perspective in the study of post-secular culture in general, with its starting point in ambiguity, and in particular, in the study of neocharismatic experience that contests the mind-body dualism quite explicitly.

The culture of celebration

In neocharismatic communities, worship and praise are an integral part of the meetings. Thirty minutes of praise at the beginning of a meeting is meant to create the right atmosphere for praying and receiving the biblical teaching. Rhythmic, emotionally charged and electronically amplified celebratory music is usually accompanied by collective dance and traditional praising gestures, typically the raising of hands. Music, together with dance and other forms of body language, serve as learned techniques for a believer's endeavour to achieve the experience of the Holy Spirit.

The term *celebration* in neocharismatic movements refers to a certain type of meeting that is focused particularly on collective praise and worship, which are partly the same and partly different acts. The difference between praise and worship is that joyful and upbeat songs of praise, often accompanied by dance or jumping, should lead the person towards more contemplative worship, into experiencing God's presence more deeply, so that everything else loses its meaning. For this reason, when singing the slower and more repetitive songs of worship, many participants in the meetings even keep their eyes closed in order to exclude the physical environment from their consciousness for a moment. Consequently, praising is supposed to function as a method that moves a believer to a particular state of mind: 'to hear God's talk'. In these circumstances God is also said to be able 'to heal' a person and make him or her 'whole'. The experience of getting healed or receiving power in one way or another is often described in narratives concerning acts of praise.

In some Finnish neocharismatic communities, this intensive worship is described as 'soaking in the Spirit', being completely surrounded or drowned by the Holy Spirit, as if the Holy Spirit was some kind of fluid or liquid into which one could dive.¹ Obviously, in more traditional charismatic discourse, the experience is known as 'resting in the Spirit'.

According to Mr Pekka Hautakangas, the praise leader at the Nokia Missio Church, 'worship is a way to experience and receive love between a believer and God'. It is supposed to be a private relationship, and that is why everyone may worship in his or her own personal way. As a matter of fact, private worship in everyday life is said to be the most important form of praise. Even

1 In fact, no proper Finnish word for the verb 'to soak' is used, but it is twisted into a more Finnish form as 'soukata'. It is not unique in this respect in the Finnish neo-charismatic rhetoric. For instance, the 'celebration' itself is called 'celebraatio', following or imitating the original language of the movement.

though music is an inseparable part of the collective service, it is only one way to worship. Hautakangas explains that one can worship God just as well without music, even without words. Thus, praising is said to be a way of life, not just a ritual. As another praise singer, Ms Tytti Taipale also from the Nokia Missio Church, emphasises that what counts is the right attitude; praise and worship must be 'wholehearted'. However, typically in congregational life one worships together with other believers. In collective worship, likewise, there is said to be an enormous power in praying together. (See the praise website of Nokia Missio Church.)

As was already implied above by the praise singers of Nokia Missio, there are no strict rules for praising styles. It depends on a believer's mood. One can sing, play an instrument, dance, laugh or cry. Some pray silently, whereas some shout for joy. Bowing or kneeling can be expressions of worship, as well as standing, jumping or raising arms and clapping hands to the rhythm. It is possible, or even preferable, that a believer's spiritual body language does not always stay the same. Changes and variations in the movements of acts of praise belong to the idea that God liberates the worshipper from inhibitions and constricted assumptions; these being social aversions and other negative limitations in life. This is supposed to be apparent in the worshipper's manners and appearance; in the *believer's habitus*, his or her internalized way of being affected by biblical teaching in the community of believers. Applying a concept of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Simon Coleman has correspondingly described the *evangelical habitus* that the Word of Life people gradually adopt by following the example of the leaders and advanced members of the congregation in the meetings (cf. Coleman 2000: 134).

Thus, the believer's habitus can be seen as a result of social learning process. The social psychologist Albert Bandura's theory of social cognition is very much based on the idea of observational learning—in other words modelling—rather than learning from direct experience, through trial and error. Verbal modelling is an important source of instructive and inspirational exemplars, of course, and it is the mode of symbolic modelling, by which values, lifestyles etc. are personalized. Speaking of spiritual modelling, Bandura reminds us also of the importance of linking beliefs to practices. (Bandura 2003: 169–70.) The neocharismatic culture of celebration is a practice that typically is a result of modelling. The art of celebration is learned by means of participation, imitation and rehearsal with other believers.

Converts and other newcomers to neocharismatic communities often find it difficult at first to participate in the action-packed and fast-paced collective acts of praise. As I indicated earlier, the routine of active participation and

noisy interaction in church is not typical in Finland. In neocharismatic circles, praise as a way of life and as a ritual in a service is a prerequisite for teaching and training to become proficient in leading a believer to the expected experience. Referring to such spiritual training, the anthropologist Simon Coleman uses the bodybuilding metaphor in the context of the Word of Life community in Sweden. He says that the body actually becomes ‘an index of the spiritual state of the believer’. The Christian engaged in a process of ‘spiritual bodybuilding’ learns not only to glean the truth from biblical and other spiritually inspired writings, but also to read the body as a text that can give an inductive proof of the power of the ingested Word, the biblical message. Coleman refers here also to the idea of the ‘positive confession’ in the Word of Life teaching, which means avoiding a negative attitude because it is self-actualizing. The positive confession can thus be extended beyond the realm of spoken language into embodied forms of self-presentation that demonstrate the empowerment of physical and spiritual well-being in dancing and raising hands in a collective praising situation. Acting out of a joyful state produces the desired effect. (Coleman 2006: 171.) The desired effect is, of course, well-being; a happy and healthy believer.

Today in Finland, the Nokia Missio Church may be the most outstanding representative of the neocharismatic celebration culture, with its organized performance groups, musicians, singers and dancers, in events that draw large crowds. The pioneering work of the Nokia Missio Church in that area also includes systematic praise dance teaching, with an informative praise dance website on the internet (e.g. <http://www.nokiamissio.fi/jyvaskyla/index.php/worship-dance.html>). Dance performed by specialists—praise dancers—has gained a significant role alongside sung and played worship music. The spiritual body language of a performing praise dance group is not merely individual jumping or quaking, as it often is among participants in a pew, but rather more sophisticated and rehearsed choreographies. The function of praise dancers in a meeting is to strengthen the auspicious atmosphere for meeting the Holy Spirit. I would like to refer to these performers as ‘spiritual cheerleaders’. The special costumes they wear, their choreographies and brandishing of colourful flags easily give an impression of a cheerleader’s role. The reason for using flags in praise is explained in the Nokia Missio Church by use of an analogy between dancers and armies in war; ‘the enemy recognises the power that the flag represents’.

While performing a dance of praise, it is not insignificant what a dancer wears. The dancer’s costume is also meant to support the messages she (or he) is sending in the language of movements. I have found several online shops

for dancewear in the United States, offering both praise dance garments and accessories, such as shawls and veils. The items of praise wear are named thematically as ‘angel sleeve dress’, ‘glory dress’, ‘revelation dress’, ‘rejoice dress’, ‘adoration dress’ etc., with biblical connotations.² According to the American praise dance teacher Ann Stevenson, when planning a dance performance for a meeting, choreographers should not think too much of the artistic impression. Stevenson advises:

A truly God-appointed choreographer will not create a dance out of his or her own knowledge or skill, but will prayerfully wait upon the Lord for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for just the right music and movement (Stevenson 1998: 73).

The idea works much in the same way as pastors who are inspired to craft their sermons—waiting for the right words from God. It implies the idea that a dancer’s body and language of movements serve as an intermediary of the Word, as if it was spoken.

In addition to the performative and collectively intermediating function of praise dance, personal spiritual development can likewise be understood through the idea of bodily praising. The Finnish praise dancer, Ms Saara Taina, explains praise dance in her own terms as one of the channels by which God’s healing power can be transmitted into the lives of believers. She adds that it is a gift from God to be able to express oneself holistically, so that an individual’s spirit, soul and body are one. This comment describes well Meredith McGuire’s theorizing of religious ritual being as a chain of embodied practices presenting the human mind and body as a unity (cf. McGuire 2008: 100).

Role models for performing praise dance can be found in the United States. Just to mention one example of the flourishing praise dance scene, the *Dancing for Him Ministries* in Florida were founded in 1996 by Lynn Hayden. This is claimed to be ‘a Spirit filled, biblically based organization whose primary purpose is to minister to the body of Christ, the heart of God through creative expressions of worship, prophesy and dance’ (see the website of Dancing for Him Ministries). In Finland, the performance of praise dance has not, so far, become an important issue in neocharismatic meetings, except for at the Nokia Missio Church and some experimental occasions elsewhere. It

2 More praise wear fashion is easy to find in numerous praise dance videos on YouTube.

will be extremely interesting to see if performing praise dance becomes more popular in the future, as using the flags in the meetings has already. Generally speaking, dancing as a hobby in Finland is a very much a gendered practice; dance courses and studios are populated by women. Men in Finland traditionally have not expressed themselves by dancing individually; it is regarded as too feminine an activity. So, it is more or less a norm that performing praise dance is also done by women at Finnish charismatic events.

Concluding remarks

When I interviewed both male and female members of the local Word of Life congregation at the end of the 1990s I did not ask deliberately about acts of praise because I did not realise its multidimensional meanings to the believers, but understood it in rather narrow way, just as singing lively songs instead of traditional Lutheran hymns in the meetings of a community. Nevertheless, the theme that emerged in the interviews, even without asking about it was the effect of praising. The effects that were mentioned were having more courage to perform in public, being able to manipulate one's own mood and get over troublesome situations. However, after my short introductory excursion to the realm of praising now, I can see that it has several other aspects as well that are worthy of deeper analysis in the future.

To sum up the description of neocharismatic culture of celebration, praising as a bodily practice can be placed into three categories. First, there is praise and worship at an individual level of action. Private worship in everyday life can actualize without music, even without words. In this context, praising is said to be a way of life, not just a ritual. It can be integrated into daily routine activities as a silent prayer or meditation, concentrating on the divine. Secondly, praise as a collective ritual is the most characteristic form of praise in neocharismatic circles. The spiritual body language for this purpose is typically dancing in one way or another in a pew, with arms raised and, often, eyes closed. This moment of praise is led by the praise group, musicians and singers at the altar. Thirdly, I took up a relatively new form of praising in Finland, namely, the performance of praise dance, which I interpret as 'spiritual cheerleading' in a meeting. It is meant to express the power of the Holy Spirit through the bodies of the dancers. For some dancers themselves, praise dance also serves as a means of personal healing; it has therapeutic effects as a holistic practice, unifying the mind and the body.

Praise in its different forms seems to be the facilitator of a holistic spiritual experience that is dependent on how a believer understands herself as an embodied self. The Norwegian psychologist of religion, Dagfinn Ulland has analysed Toronto Blessing meetings as *bodily spirituality*. The expression of combining the body and the spirit sounds paradoxical, especially in the Christian and Western context, where there is a long history of separating these two realms from each other. Ulland explains the function of collective praise in a meeting—or the ‘warming-up sequence’, as he describes it—as being to engage people in a *somatic mode of attention*, borrowing the concept from Thomas Csordas. (Ulland 2007: 221). Consequently, acts of praise provide for a believer the capacity or preparedness to feel the expected supernatural contact. By means of intensive praising, the body becomes an instrument and an icon in the spiritual practice. However, this interpretation could not be possible without adequate knowledge of the tradition; the socially learned cognitive map of charismatic religious experience. (Ulland 2007: 222.) This process can be seen as observational learning, modelling, by practical rehearsal and following the other believers during the celebratory act.

Another point of view on these acts of praise is that of *watching* a praise dance performance, which is certainly a completely different experience from dancing by oneself. For instance, in *Ristin Voitto*, a Finnish Pentecostalist magazine, there was a discussion about praise dance in May 2010. Some people who participated in the discussion in the editorial column of the magazine, reported ‘meeting God’ during the dance performance, while others, in contrast to this, felt quite uncomfortable. One of the contributors discreetly pointed out the unwanted impact of the performance situation where the dancer (female) moving her body in front of others (male) gets too much attention even though she did not want to do so. As the writer articulates it:

For some people this is quite okay but for the others it is not. For instance a man who has his own ‘Miss Universe’ by his side sees a moving body of a female dancer in a different way than a man in an opposite life situation. A congregation consists of different people who are living through different life situations. That is why body movements in front of their eyes do not improve their concentration on divine matters but rather confuses them. (Okkonen 2010.)

Thus, the writer recommends pondering on whether it is wiser to dance at home or in a congregation, during the meetings or some other time, and in front of the audience or behind the pews. An opportunity for an erotically

or sensually experienced impact of observed praise dance is undoubtedly a paradox in a conservative or fundamentalist Christian context.

I was not aware of many of the psychological and anthropological dimensions of acts of praise. After a very superficial review of this tradition, I have found out that this fascinating theme needs further investigation and much ethnographic data, both from the field itself and from the internet which today is an indispensable resource, as regards the study of neocharismatic scene. Praise as a bodily spiritual practice is also both a collectively produced and an individual experience that presupposes a learned tradition, and that is used for personally desired effects. The culture of celebration is not just the collective animated singing in the pew, but a complex set of practices, experiences, styles and embodied meanings.

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