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'The Experience of Worship': research, engagement and transcendence

by Keith Beasley

'The experience of worship in late medieval cathedral and parish church' is an innovative research project funded by the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Research Programme. By enacting medieval worship it is hoped to shed new light on the process by which sacred spaces, texts, artefacts and music become an act or worship, i.e. a religious experience. The enactments are taking place during 2011 at Salisbury Cathedral and at St Teilo's Church, part of St Fagans National History Museum in Cardiff. This report provides one viewpoint (of many) of the first enactments at St Teilo's in June.

Key to the essence of this interdisciplinary project is the range of research methodologies that experts in liturgy, music, theology and history (and others) bring to it. By encouraging, comparing and then integrating different viewpoints it is hoped to come to a greater understanding as to how the people, places and rituals of worship contribute to the 'Experience of Worship'. From 2012 the project team will be describing the enactment process and disseminating results of the project at a number of conferences around the UK (see www.experienceofworship.org.uk for details). This report represents my personal perspective as a researcher into transcendence and member of the AHS.

My role during the enactment was two fold, firstly as project administrator, concerned with practical arrangements. Secondly, like more than half of the thirty or so directly involved during the week long enactment period, I was in medieval costume trying to experience medieval worship as my character (a carpenter) might have done. I, like many fellow participants reviewing the event immediately afterwards, described periods of the enactments as 'moving'. Others described the week of research as 'special'. As 'action research' it certainly provided research material that one cannot obtain from reading nor even from attending an event as observer.

A major factor in the success of the enactment (in that everybody involved felt it had been a worthwhile and powerful experience) was the sense of community that quickly built up amongst the participants. This was almost certainly due to the commitment shown by all and to the inspiration and leadership of Prof John Harper of the International Centre for

Sacred Music Studies (ICSMuS) at Bangor University. The resulting trust between a group of diverse age, academic discipline and faith denominations, was remarked on in many of the 'review' discussions at the end of the week. It also contributed greatly to the ability of those challenged by events (as discussed below) to continue to take part. Such a sense of community, commitment and personal interest in the project enabled us all to engage with the tasks at hand during the week.

Given the often conflicting roles of minister, performer (particularly the singers), worshiper and researcher, questions were raised as to what should be our focus? Or put another way, at any given moment, in what should we be engaged with and committed to? In the event we each had to find our own answers to these dilemmas. For me, the focus had to be in the moment, to be as 'present' as possible, using whichever of my available roles best enabled that.

Commitment to pre-determined goals, I felt, could disable the spontaneity which so often plays a part in a free-flowing, meaningful experience. An example of this occurred during our day of filming, when two errors from the singers led to a retake of significant portions of the enactment. Whereas the original take (despite technical errors) was a very moving experience, the (technically precise) retakes were felt by a number of us to be an anti-climax, and for me at least, lacking in depth.

By comparison, there were times when 'everything clicked'. Everybody was immersed in the experience and flowing with it. These high levels of engagement by all participants were constantly reported on in debriefing sessions, in the sense of consistently being open and aware of those around and being able to respond, emotionally and physically, to developments. This, in turn, for many of us on many occasions, greatly assisted the sense of this being a genuine experience of worship.

Perhaps this is where engaging is also 'being present': when we are fully aware of our situation and engaged through the words, images, music and scenario, and thus open to higher states of consciousness. In such cases, I would suggest, our sensory focus is merely a portal. Perhaps more importantly, I would also suggest, to enable the depth of a genuine worship experience, we need to be able to feel the moment, inwardly.

Many singing participants, however, reported that they were too busy getting the words right to feel it as a worship. The rational mind being in a 'language consciousness' mode, presumably makes feeling the experience far more difficult. Those, like myself, who had

roles of laity were spared such difficulty. Not only were the words being sung in Latin, so incomprehensible to most of us, but many were deliberately inaudible, and we were separated from the action of the clergy by the rood screen. We were however provided with a number of keys: by watching and following the Lord of the Manor, we would stand or kneel at appropriate moments; our character staying respectful of our patron in the process. We were also provided with the striking wall paintings of Teilo's: recreated as they would have been in 1520 (See: www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/1240/).

During the mass, without a bench for my lower class carpenter character, I had to lean against the wall to support my aching back. On the wall was an image of Jesus showing his crucifixion wounds. I was reminded of our enculturation session the night before where it was suggested that these paintings were more than just images: they could act as a means of connecting to the suffering of Christ. The ache (which I often get) in my lower back and side was in a place not dissimilar to the wound depicted on the wall painting of Christ. It was not difficult to focus on my own pain and to be aware that what I was feeling was so much less than he would have felt, and that somehow our pain was shared and common with that of humanity as a whole. I began to feel almost feverishly hot (particularly in the head) and with a sense of being not just in a reconstructed church in a museum in Wales but 'Being' in the sense that Heidegger uses the term. What may have started as 'play-acting' had certainly become worship, with at least some degree of what I would call Christ-Consciousness or transcendence.

On reflection I could imagine that the carpenter, in his day and without the distractions of project objectives, could well have been able to enter into a similar state. As a skilled craftsman he would quite likely have had a strong connection to wood, to the trees and natural world. It seems reasonable that he would also have related to Jesus the carpenter. To him the liturgy was of less importance than the opportunity physically to rest and to reflect. If he was able to detach from worries of whether or not he would finish the table that he was making for the Lord of the Manor (for example) or the latest illness in his family, he might have been transported into a transcendent state of consciousness, in a similar manner to myself as 'modern mystic'. However, whilst modern mystics have to make a conscious effort to stand aside from rational deliberations and detach from consciously thinking about the liturgy (for example), it might perhaps have been easier for our illiterate medieval laity.

Besides my own transcendent experiences during the enactment, at least one other

participant had a significant experience, but in his case, as an observer. Paul (real name, used with permission and thanks) was neither singing nor in period costume and thus, during the day of filming, had to remain outside the church door. Unable to see or hear most of the action inside the church he was detached from the detail of the enactment, but could hear enough to know to follow it. Alone in the tranquillity of the porch, his attention was engaged by his immediate surroundings: the birds singing in the church yard, butterflies and insects. By emptying his mind of everything else, he found that he was drawn to contemplate the work of Creation, God's presence in the world and, particularly at the moment of the consecration of the bread and wine, the Incarnation: it was neither planned nor deliberate, but took over and became all-absorbing. Contemplation of nature led to involuntary engagement with one part of the Christian message and one strand of the half-sensed Eucharistic liturgy, in the same way as the paintings inside engaged me in contemplation of Christ's Passion.

Such a lead-up to what I would call a transcendent experience is, I have found in my research, by no means unusual. Such experiences often occur once we 'let go' of expectations and allow ourselves to surrender into the moment. That such a moment, of if not 'Christ Consciousness' at least a step towards it, should occur outside the church might seem paradoxical, but such is the nature of original research: to report and make sense of what happens in practice. Why should 'Experience of Worship' not extend to the churchyard?

In general, the experiences of those directly involved in the 'performance' side of the enactments, challenge of words and notes aside, tended to be of a more personal nature. Typical were reports of a challenge to prior ideas (from within their own denomination) as to what constituted worship. In the context of my own research into transcendence, I have found that such questioning of expectations can be considered another facet of transcendence: a 'mental' transcendence of conditioned thinking, for example. This, I am suggesting, enables subsequent experience of a more numinous nature. Together mental transcendence and numinous experiences can be seen as part of a transcendence process, our personal journey towards Christ Consciousness. That a project aimed at exploring 'The Experience of Worship' enabled both sorts of experience in abundance would seem to both support this hypotheses and justify the project and its aims.

Further enactment will take place on Tues 13 September 2011, repeated Thurs 15 September at St Teilo's Church, St Fagans, Cardiff as follows:

11.30-12.45 Latin Mass of the Holy Name with procession (male singers and organ)

16.00-16.40 Latin Vespers of the Holy Name

Similar events are also taking place in Salisbury Cathedral on Oct 6th & 9th: see the following web site for details: <http://www.bangor.ac.uk/music/AHRC/dates.php.en>

Places are limited, so prior booking is required at all enactments. Contact: experienceofworship@bangor.ac.uk or 01248 382490.

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