

Sacrifice of Praise: Emotion and Collective Participation in an African-American Worship Service

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On the corner of a rundown street in Charleston, South Carolina there is a small African Methodist Episcopal church. The modest brick structure sits on a lot entirely enclosed, as are all of the church lots in this poor urban neighborhood, by a substantial fence. Visible through the straight iron bars is a sign that proclaims "Eastside Chapel AME Church. Sunday morning worship 11:00 AM. Thursday Prayer Service 7:00 PM. Rev. R. L. Wright, Pastor."¹ If one were to open the doors of this building on a Sunday morning shortly after 11:00, step through the tiny narthex and into the red-carpeted sanctuary, the scene would look something like this: James Ravenel, organist and choir director, is seated at his instrument directly behind and slightly above the pulpit. While the worshippers continue to arrive and file into the pews, he quietly plays a gospel song. On the back wall above the choir loft, a computer-generated banner proclaims "WE'VE COME THIS FAR BY FAITH." The adjacent wall holds a similar banner that features a rendition of praying hands and the caption "WHAT A MIGHTY GOD WE SERVE." These banners are the sanctuary's only adornment. As Ravenel plays, Tony Green sets up his drums on the floor to the side of the pulpit.

After several minutes, as most of the hundred and fifty or so worshippers have settled into their places, Ravenel begins playing the refrain to the Isaac Watts hymn "Alas! and Did My Savior Bleed," more popularly known as "At the Cross." At this cue the congregation stands for the processional, their singing scattered at first but quickly gathering force. . . .

So begins another Sunday morning worship service at Eastside Chapel. Starting off slow and measured, with an opening prayer and hymn, the service rapidly builds in intensity and congregational involvement. By the time the choir sings its first selection, swaying slowly from side to side, many worshippers are standing and clapping to the music. Soon several of the "church mothers," older women in the first row or in the front flanking pews known collectively as the "amen corner," start to "shout" or dance in a stylized way with their heads down and eyes closed, moving across the front of the sanctuary. The choir stops singing but the music continues while several other worshippers begin to shout in the pews, some moving out into the center aisle. Cries of "Glory!" and "Hallelujah!" punctuate the heavy beat and churning bass of the organ and drums. This continues for over ten minutes before the shouters move back to their seats, worshippers begin to sit down, and organist Ravenel plays several closing chords. Service leader Nazarene Simmons

¹The names of the church and all persons have been changed to protect their identity.

steps up to the pulpit and announces the next activity in the order of worship.

The display of enthusiastic response and shouting I have just described (and which is often repeated two or three more times throughout the three-hour service) is a common one at Eastside Chapel. Sociologists, anthropologists, and other observers have labeled this type of worship as "emotional," and it is most characteristic of lower-class African-American congregations. . . .

Emotion Norms and Their Fulfillment

An "emotional" worship service, like a funeral, carries with it a proper definition of itself. According to the understanding which Eastside Chapel members have of the Sunday morning service, it provides an occasion for God to meet with his people in a time of celebration and praise; it is a party which worshippers give in honor of God for who he is and in gratitude for what he had done in their lives. This definition of the situation carries with it implications for the particular emotions that congregants should feel throughout the service. Hochschild calls these emotional standards "feeling rules" and indicates that these rules not only pressure people into *displaying* the situationally "correct" emotion (what she calls "surface acting") but actually motivates them to try and *experience* appropriate emotions and suppress inappropriate ones (or "deep acting"). From my participant-observation at Eastside Chapel I have identified five particular emotions that operate as normative standards throughout the worship service.

This particular list—praise, gratitude, love, joy, and hope—are the individual feelings which constitute Eastside Chapel's normative constellation of emo-

tion, and through the liturgical discourse worshippers are constantly reminded of these standards. Thus far I have shown how feeling rules are incorporated into an "emotional" service through the discourse within hymns, prayers, sermons, Sunday School lessons, and segments of the liturgy. . . .

Despite the traditional label for this type of ritual there appears to be nothing unique about the emotions generated within an "emotional" worship service. Certainly, "nonemotional" Christian worship services also have feeling rules (which probably involve the same set of particular emotions) and they also have methods for evoking these emotions in the service (perhaps even using many of the same hymns, at least in Protestant congregations). Rather, the observable difference between the two types of services lies in the types of expressive behavior worshippers engage in, and it is to that topic that I now turn.

Behavioral Norms

Norms not only operate internally upon the feelings of the congregants but upon their external behaviors as well. These standards of appropriate behavior cannot be reduced to the internal feelings of the participants—as both Goffman's observation on funerals and Durkheim's discussion of mourning rites illustrate quite clearly. Instead, they form a separate but related system of expectations, and these expectations can differ quite markedly from one congregation to another. The following account gives a graphic picture of the kind of behavior that was considered completely appropriate at Eastside Chapel that would be out of place (to put it mildly) during a "nonemotional" worship ritual.

One Sunday morning in mid-November Reverend Wright invited Reverend Rose Drayton, an assistant pastor at a nearby AME congregation, to act as guest preacher. The delivery of her sermon started out calm and measured, began to build in intensity and congregational response, and ended with most of the congregation on its feet clapping, while a handful of members engaged in prolonged shouting. Here is how it happened.

She began by reading a portion of scripture from the Old Testament book of Daniel, where the Babylonian king Belshazzar sees a disembodied hand writing on the wall during a banquet. When a Jewish captive named Daniel translates the writing, the King hears a prophecy regarding his impending demise. After reading this passage, Rev. Drayton closed the Bible and announced that her theme was going to be "The Party's Over." The gist of the sermon, which was delivered in the traditional call-and-response style, was that people should start living right because God was going to come back soon and announce to the world that "the party's over." The congregation was very quiet during the scripture reading and remained quite still for the several minutes it took Rev. Drayton to set out her general theme and establish her rhythm. Then she moved out from behind the pulpit and said, "Pray with me for a little while, now," and people started to come alive.

It happened gradually. At first one person in the choir stood up. Then after about half a minute, another choir member stood up. Then more choir members stood, and then people in the congregation started standing up, until after several minutes almost the whole choir and about half of the congregation was on its feet. The responses to her phrases became louder and more emphatic during this time. Several women choir members in the front started smiling and waving

their arms at Rev. Drayton in a "go on now" motion. The drummer tossed a drumstick in the air and caught it again with a flourish. People began clapping and shouting back at her during the response time in the cadence. One young man started running to the front of the center aisle, pointing his finger and shouting at her, then running back to his seat. He did this over and over. The organ and drums started chiming in during the response times, building in volume and emphasis until finally at the end of the sermon they took the congregation immediately into a song. As they started playing several members began to "shout" in earnest, moving out to dance in the unconfined spaces of the aisles and in front of the pulpit.

A close examination of this scene reveals two types of behavior. First there is what I will call "response behavior" which includes both vocal and physical reactions to the music, preaching, prayer, or whatever provides the current focus of attention and stimulus. The response behavior in the above story includes cries of "amen," and "hallelujah" as well as the bodily actions of standing, running, pointing, and clapping.

In nonemotional churches, the norms guiding response behavior are quite simple: none is allowed, not even the polite smattering of applause at the conclusion of a performance which characterizes secular occasions. Contrast those standards with the response behavior exhibited at Eastside Chapel, where those in highly visible positions (in the choir loft behind the pulpit) stood up and waved their arms, where a congregant ran down the aisle pointing and shouting at the preacher, where the musical instruments played loudly during the pauses in the preacher's delivery. If congregants in a "nonemotional" service behaved in this overtly responsive manner they would

immediately disrupt the proceedings; the situational order would be completely shattered and all such behavior would have to cease before the service could proceed.

However, in some important respects the norms of behavior at Eastside Chapel are not so different from standards operating in other types of gatherings. For example, the response behaviors at Eastside Chapel bear a resemblance to those at sporting events where it is expected that spectators will cheer a good performance by their team of choice. In fact, a visiting pastor once scolded the congregation for not responding to his point with sufficient enthusiasm by saying, "You should be on your feet and cheering about that. If you had just seen Michael Jordan slam-dunk the ball on the court, you would be up on your feet. Well, the Lord has slam-dunked your sins into the sea of forgetfulness, and that is something to cheer about!"

One fundamental difference, then, between "emotional" and "nonemotional" worship services is simply the set of rules governing congregational response. The range of permitted response behavior sometimes leads a naive observer who is used to "nonemotional" norms to the assumption that there are no holds barred concerning congregational activity. However, it was my observation that at Eastside Chapel and other "emotional" churches, the conduct of worshippers was very tightly monitored.

This is true even of the more sensational behavior known as shouting. On one hand, shouting may be seen as an extreme form of physical response—like clapping, only with the whole body rather than just the hands. Certainly this is true from a behavioral standpoint. One can watch congregants progress from clapping and verbal responses to more vigorous behaviors like swaying and stomping their feet and finally "cutting loose" into a full-blown shout, and from this perspec-

tive the transition from clapping to shouting seems to be simply a matter of degree.

Yet from the perspective of the individual undergoing this transition, there is a radical break between clapping and other response behavior and shouting. To get a sense of the internal state of the actor during a shout I interviewed several Eastside members in detail about their experiences while shouting. When a congregant engages in response behavior such as standing, clapping, pointing, waving, and their verbal counterparts, it involves them more completely in the service. Indeed, this behavior is only possible for the congregant who is completely "tuned-in" to the sermon, prayer, song, or testimony that is providing the stimulus (it's hard to clap to the rhythm when you're not listening to the music). But a congregant who is shouting has entered another realm of consciousness; he or she has left the service far behind and is aware only of the presence of God. I asked Darryl Lawson, a teacher's aide in his mid-twenties and active member of the senior choir, about his state of consciousness when he was shouting and if he was aware of his surroundings. He replied:

You would know what's going on—cause I remember bumping into a couple of benches. [But that's not where I am focused] . . . I don't try to figure out who's around me or anything, because I'm just enjoying my Jesus.

This withdrawal of consciousness is taken by Eastsiders as the sign of a genuine shout and is attributed to the work of the Holy Ghost. However, shouts which congregants suspect are simply responses to external stimuli are considered counterfeits. Because music provides such a powerful stimulus, and because much shouting occurs during musical selections, congregants may have reason to suspect that some dancers are simply responding

to the music rather than undergoing a true shift of consciousness prompted by the Holy Ghost. Sherline Singleton told me that "it is a proven fact that every shouting doesn't have the Holy Ghost—they just shouting." When I asked her how congregants could shout without the prompting of the Spirit, she answered:

Music. Cause when you were younger and you hear something you like even if you didn't get up and dance, you knew how to move to the music. What are they doing? You know how to dance already—and when you hear drums or hear a good beat on an organ that you can dance to [then you can do it].

When a worshipper is in the midst of what members consider a genuine shout, they are perceived by others to have stopped responding to external stimuli and are acting solely upon the internal stimulus of the Holy Ghost. While in this state others treat the shouter as if she is not in control of her own behavior. However, despite the apparent chaos which sometimes erupts when many people shout at the same time, the conduct of the shouters is highly structured and strictly monitored. Although it may appear to the uninitiated observer that "anything goes," particularly when one sees such behavior as congregants running laps around the church aisles or jumping up and down like a child on a pogo stick, there is actually a tightly defined range of permissible behavior in effect even during these shouting episodes. . . .

"Emotional" Worship as Collective Behavior

Ambiguity, Reluctance and the Evocation of Expressive Behavior

So far I have argued that a key difference between an "emotional" and "unemo-

tional" service is simply that response behaviors and shouting are permitted in the former but not the latter. There is more to the story however. In fact, these "emotional" forms of participation are *required* of the congregation, but in a particular way. The norms pertaining to "emotional" response are not imposed in the same way as those which pertain to "nonemotional" activities like singing hymns or responsive liturgical readings. In responsive readings, for example, there is an obligation upon every individual congregant to contribute verbally in a prescribed manner, complete with cues for when to begin and end participation. Thus each person's role is scripted for these segments of the service and there is no ambiguity about what one should be doing from one moment to the next. Things are not so simple in an "emotional" service because expectations of response are diffused throughout the entire congregation and are not assigned to particular individuals. For example, the preacher expects that *somebody*, or a handful of people perhaps, will say "amen" when he or she makes a strong point, yet no person or group of persons is *designated* to respond in this way. According to this structure, the involvement of each congregant is constantly ambiguous in that at each point one may choose to respond or to not respond. There is no set script to follow, although each congregant knows the general story line.

There is another factor at work also. Responses are supposed to become more and more vigorous as the service progresses, culminating in shouting or, sometimes, speaking in tongues. This process was illustrated by the Eastside congregants' reactions to Reverend Drayton's sermon. At first there was only vocal responses of "amen" and "that's right." Responses progressed to standing, then clapping, then pointing or waving, and then finally into shouting. This process is

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normative and it is an expectation that is diffused throughout the congregation. That is, no one is designated as the first one to bring congregational responses to the next level. Yet while this process is normative, from the perspective of the individual there is a certain cost to initiating a higher level of response in that the more vigorous responses make one more visible to other congregants, who are in a position to critically evaluate the genuineness of the response. For example, the first person to stand may stand alone for several minutes before someone else joins them, and shouting always makes one highly visible while in the midst of a somewhat embarrassing display of ecstatic behavior. Thus, congregants may be reluctant to initiate the response level to a higher pitch.

These factors of structural ambiguity and resistance to high visibility, both of which operate to inhibit congregational response, must be overcome. It is the task of those in performance roles to evoke congregational participation through the nature and quality of their performances, and in this they draw upon several resources. . . .

From my observations of Eastside Chapel, I noted two rhetorical strategies used for different types of ritual speech. First, there is the use of standard formulas and stock phrases which appear primarily in prayers and testimonies, a phenomenon noted by many other scholars of the African-American church. . . . Such phrases as "I thank the Lord that he woke me up this morning clothed in my right mind. He didn't have to do it but he did," and "He took my feet out of the miry clay and He placed them on a rock to stay" are particular favorites.

Although one might expect that this formulaic repetition would act to dampen congregational response, at Eastside

Chapel the use of certain well-worn phrases invariably brought about an enthusiastic, emotional response. In fact, they elicited much more response than a less formulaic statement with the same content would evoke. This was brought home to me in a personal way one morning during the monthly "Men's Prayer Breakfast." When it was my turn to pray, I began to ask for safety on the road for my wife and myself as we were going to be driving a long distance on the following day. In my spontaneous prayer, I framed the request as if I was making ordinary conversation, making it up as I went along. While previous prayers had evoked heartfelt cries of "Yes, Lord" and "amen" from the other men, my prayer did not meet with the same agreement until Lenard Singleton interjected the phrase "We ask for your traveling mercies" over my own words. When this stock phrase was uttered, all of the men responded "Yes, Lord" in unison.

While the use of verbal formulas seem to work during prayers and testimonies, sermons made much more use of metaphor to evoke a strong congregational response. The most effective metaphors were those which were spontaneously generated (or at least appeared that way), involved some sort of word play, and which subverted items of modern life or popular culture into the congregation's spiritual world view. For example, by using the metaphorical strategies recorded in the following short excerpt, Reverend Wright was able to take the congregation into a peak of response and even stimulate about ten minutes of shouting at the very beginning of his sermon. (The congregational responses are indicated in the brackets.)

And I'll tell you what—I'm excited about my Jesus! ["Yeah"]

I'm gettin' more and more excited about
 him daily
 He's my bread you know
 That's right, if you come to my house, I
 got some bread there
 That's right, and I didn't get it from the
 Pig⁶ ["That's right"]
 But I got it at the foot of the cross
 ["Well"]
 He is my Wonder Bread ["Yeah"]
 He is my Roman Meal ["Oh yes"]
 Oh yes, when you read Romans 8, I tell
 you, it will tell you about that Roman
 meal bread!
 [clapping, "Yes Lord!," someone starts
 shouting—organ starts playing]
 He is my Galations bread! ["All right"—
 more vigorous response]
 He is my Revelation bread!
 Then, what I like about him—he is not
 only my bread, but he is meat in the
 middle of my bread [clapping, shout-
 ing, organ]
 And you can eat him alllllll the day
 long! [more shouting, organ, drums
 kick in]
 He is good for what ails yah!
 Then, I I I I [stutters] can take you to
 my refrigerator
 Then I can take you to my faucet and I
 can turn it on
 And I've got water in my house [drum/
 organ beat]
 I'm not talking about the water that
 comes out of the ground
 But I'm talking about the Living Water
 that come down from God out of
 Heaven!
 It's good for you if you're thirsty!
 It'll quench your thirst!
 And give you life on the inside!
 My God, my God!
 Oh yes! My God! Hallelujah! Oh yes!
 [Reverend Wright pauses here as many
 congregants are now shouting]

In fact, many of Rev. Wright's sermons are built around extended metaphors, some of which can be discerned by their titles alone, including "Does the Church

Know First Aid?" or "Hostile Takeovers, Friendly Mergers."

Call, Response, and "Circular Reaction"

At Eastside Chapel it is not entirely up to the preacher or choir to move the congregation to higher levels of excitement. A good deal of the responsibility rests upon the congregation itself. In fact, it is impossible for a preacher to fulfill his or her role without the active support and response of the congregation. . . .

When the congregation did not respond with sufficient enthusiasm at Eastside it severely hampered the ability of the preacher to maintain his or her performance. Because Reverend Wright and other preachers depended so heavily on this response, they made sure that the congregation kept their responses up to a satisfactory level. If the congregation was quiet and unresponsive, the preacher had various ways to signal his or her dissatisfaction and provoke a more vigorous reaction. Such expressions ranged from gentle proddings ("Can I get an 'Amen'?") to somewhat harsher statements; when Eastside Chapel got too quiet, Reverend Wright would chide the congregation by saying, "Oh, I wish I had me a church!" and sometimes even pointedly switched roles and made the response himself ("I'll say it, 'Amen, preacher!'").

By using particular resources, performers are able to evoke a response from the congregation. This response increases the intensity and quality of the performer's actions, which in turn evoke a greater congregational response. . . . The overall trajectory of this type of behavior is one of oscillating movement toward higher levels of intensity and participation, culminating in widespread and prolonged shouting.

⁶Reference to the Piggly Wiggly supermarket chain.

"Emotional" Worship and the Transfer of Control

From the above discussion it is apparent that "emotional" worship services are not simply a matter of an energetic preacher or a particular style of music—the congregational response plays a crucial role facilitating the production of "emotion." In fact, we could say that an "emotional" service is a joint creation, produced cooperatively by both the designated performer, the organist and choir, the "amen" corner, and the rest of the congregation. One necessary precondition of this collective process is that individual congregants allow their actions to be increasingly influenced by the quality of the performance as well as by the actions of other members of the congregation as the levels of participation become more and more intense. The key dynamic here, one which operates in all forms of collective behavior, is the individual's willingness to transfer control over his or her actions to the group. . . .

Darryl Lawson indicated that when congregants had a common desire to worship God unclouded by factional rivalries or resistance toward the preacher, then a higher level of ecstatic behavior would be evident in the service.

If everybody in the church was in one accord—and there have been Sundays that people have been in one accord—God just moves through. But if everybody was on one accord, I mean people—you'd be stepping over people [in the aisle].

Discussion

. . . What are the benefits of a more "emotional" form of worship for the congregation as a whole and for individual participants? In order to answer this, one must first understand what members

themselves perceive to be the goal of the worship service. During my year of participant-observation at Eastside, Reverend Wright instituted his own Call to Worship in the Sunday service. The first line of Wright's self-authored liturgy has the minister proclaim: "Effective worship consists of two grand movements," to which the congregation responds, "The people of God must move toward God and God will move toward the people."

The first part of this double movement is represented by the congregation, who "move toward God" by expressing their humility, praise, love, joy, and gratitude in song, prayer, and testimony. By allowing themselves to be caught up in and contribute to the "circular reaction" of performance and energetic response, congregants offer God a "sacrifice of praise," a Biblical phrase which has been incorporated into contemporary African-American sermons and songs. Genuine shouting gives evidence that God has responded to this offering and is moving with power among the people. Thus, intense emotional and expressive participation first *invokes* the presence of God, and the shouting (or, more rarely, speaking in tongues) then *embodies* this presence within the congregation. This is why it is almost invariably congregants who engage in the most vigorous forms of response behaviors who shout, despite the vast difference in consciousness between the two acts that I discussed earlier. Shouting represents the end point of a process that is begun in such simple acts as saying "amen" or clapping along with a hymn.

It is important to underscore the fact that it is this experience of God's immediate and powerful presence, which Eastside members call a "breakthrough," which is the goal of the worship service. Shouting and other forms of ecstatic display are seen by congregants simply as

manifestations of this experience and are not considered to be the goal itself. It is necessary to highlight this because many observers have written as if the whole point of the service was to provoke an emotional release among congregants. . . .

In addition to providing an identity based upon religious fervor, the "emotional" style of worship may also serve to bolster African-American racial and cultural identity. Reverend Wright once remarked that the form of ritual practiced at Eastside Chapel was more true to African worship styles, but that it had been suppressed in the years following emancipation by AME Bishop Daniel

Alexander Payne and other highly educated religious leaders. Anthony Scott, one of Eastside's lay ministers, told me that the new type of shout that he had displayed at a recent Sunday morning service was African in origin because he had dreamed of performing the dance within an African tribal village.

In sum, the "emotional" service is a religious ritual guided by collectively recognized norms of emotive and expressive behavior. These norms provide participants the means of attaining a desired end—the experience of God within the worship service—and also serve to bolster congregational and racial identity.