

# Ritual, Symbol, and Experience: Understanding Catholic Worker House Masses

James V. Spickard\*

University of Redlands

and

Fielding Graduate Institute

*This article uses house masses in a Catholic Worker community to examine the interaction of symbols and experience in religious rituals. It argues that, during the period of this study, these weekly masses served to reinforce Worker identity by guiding participants' experiences along specific lines. Ritual symbolism and the moment-to-moment attention of the participants combined to move participants from despair at the state of the world to an experience of a community of solidarity and hope. A second phase of the ritual then expanded that community to include homeless people, by means of a symbolic second 'mass' of soup, bread, and water, delivered in the streets. The article demonstrates the need for sociology to consider the experiential dimension, along with the symbolic, in understanding rituals' role in religious life.*

Several years ago, I published an article on Navajo ceremonies that challenged the then prevailing system of 'reading' rituals (Spickard 1991). At the time, such readings focused primarily on symbols and sought to decode the meaning of ritual events using one or another interpretive scheme. I argued that such approaches are fruitful, but limited. They miss important aspects of ritual, specifically the fact that rituals occur in time and impress themselves on time-bound experience. That is, rituals are like music: polythetic rather than monothetic. They cannot be captured or summarized by any system of symbols, though our understanding of rituals can be enhanced by symbolic interpretation.

My article used the social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (1951) to explore the structure of ritual experience. I found a parallel between the Navajo sense

*\*Please direct all correspondence to: jim\_spickard@redlands.edu. My research on religious social activists has been supported by grants from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, the University of Redlands, the Farquhar Fund, and the Fielding Graduate Institute. I wish to thank the Los Angeles Catholic Worker community for welcoming me and many of my students and colleagues as visitors over the years. Previous versions of this paper were presented at the annual meetings of the Society for Anthropology of Religion (2002) and the Religious Research Association (2004).*

that ritual reconstitutes the world and Schutz's emphasis on the shared sociality of certain types of co-experiencing. Seen as a "life-world," ritual is not just a system of ideas or a set of institutional relationships, though it partakes of both. It is also a system for structuring time—a structuring that those co-present to the ritual share. Balancing the truth that experience cannot be separated from ideas with the truth that experiences cannot be reduced to them, I showed how Navajo ceremonies embody Navajo theology by recreating cosmic harmony—not just symbolically but in the time-structured experiences of ritual participants.

I had hoped to follow this article with a similar analysis of Christian ritual, showing how a Schutzian analysis of this better-known religion leads us beyond the symbolic realm, though without losing the richness that symbolic analysis brings. That task proved daunting, at least in part because Christianity is much more idea-oriented than is traditional Navajo religion. Where Navajo theology reflects (and follows) ritual life, Christian ritual seems subordinate to theology, at least for Christian intellectuals. The road past symbolism has here proved harder to travel.

In the meantime, my article has come in for a bit of constructive criticism. In a very worthwhile piece, David Yamane (2000) takes me to task on two grounds. First, he argues that my reconstruction of Navajo ritual fails because I provide "not a single word from any Navajo who had actually experienced any ritual." Second, he argues that experiencing is inherently private, "and therefore cannot be directly studied." One can, he says, only study *articulations of experience*—that is, the transformation of experiences into words. In his view, Schutz's (1951) description of musical performance—on which my description of the co-experienced sociality of ritual was based—is vacuous. Schutz's notion of a polythetic sharing of consciousness based on the common experience of structured time does not provide a parallel sociality to the sociality of ideas. Like the turtles standing on turtles that supported the classical Hindu cosmos, it seems that Yamane views experience as ideas all the way down.<sup>1</sup>

Both these criticisms involve a denial of the phenomenological project. The first criticism denies that one can describe the objective structure of experience; the second denies that experience can be social in and of itself, alongside the (clearly social) words with which that experience is apprehended. In Yamane's vision, events are only graspable through narratives: retrospective symbolically rendered accounts that translate the private into the public realm. Though he is certainly right about events being so graspable, it is his "only" that gives me pause. Philosophically, it seems to me presumptuous to dismiss Husserl, Heidegger, and the rest of the phenomenologists with a flick of the hand. Empirically, there seems to me to be sufficient evidence for shared time-structures

---

<sup>1</sup>Proudfoot (1985) makes a similar point. Cf. Spickard (2004).

independent of shared meaning-structures; to limit 'experience' to only the latter seems presumptuous as well.

I further note that Yamane's approach relies on a core principle of European folk philosophy, the separation of words from things. Westerners generally think that things exist independently of people and that words are tools with which to represent them. Traditional Navajo thought gives humans a much greater role in creating the world, especially through thought and language. As Gary Witherspoon (1983:575) writes,

Navajos do not postulate the possibility that language may distort reality or the perception of reality. ... [O]n the contrary, reality was created or transformed as a manifestation of language. In the Navajo view of the world, language is not a mirror of reality; reality is a mirror of language.

It seems again a bit presumptuous to suppose that the Navajo are wrong about this and that Westerners are right. My approach to ritual parallels Navajo thought in emphasizing the connection between language and experience rather than their separation. Though one must always pay attention to narratives, it is at least as important to examine the flow of time that contains them. The ways that rituals structure such flow is a clue to their operation. So are the narratives by which our informants tell us how they experience them.

Mere theoretical riposte does not, however, advance the field. I think it is now possible to show the value of my previous work by applying it to a Christian ritual. Taking the weekly house masses at the Los Angeles Catholic Worker commune as my subject, I shall show how the analysis of symbols and time-structures complement each other, together producing a rounded picture of religious ritual. Unlike my previous article, however, I shall not overtly depend on Schutzian phenomenology. Instead, I shall take a clue from Navajo philosophy itself. I previously showed how Navajo rituals are designed to recreate a unitary world in the experiences of their participants. In the present article, I shall show how, during my fieldwork, the experience of house masses helped Catholic Workers reconstitute a sense of themselves as a committed egalitarian activist community.

Navajo rituals are justly called healing rituals, because they move the world back toward the harmony that traditional Navajos believe it had at its creation (Csordas 2000). The Catholic Worker ritual that I describe below is not so bold, but it does serve to reinforce a sense of the rightness of the religious path that Workers have chosen.

My interaction with the Los Angeles Catholic Worker community began in 1991 as part of a study of religious social activists, continued for many years as a field trip venue for students in my university courses (on homelessness and the sociology of religion), and since 2001 has been part of my personal calling. A Quaker, not a Catholic, I am now something of a fellow traveler in this community. Both insider and outsider, ethnographer and participant, I journey along the rim of Worker life (Flynn 1989).

- Neitz, M.J. and J.V. Spickard. 1990. Steps toward a sociology of religious experience: The theories of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Alfred Schutz. *Sociological Analysis* 51(1):15-33.
- Ortiz, A., ed. 1983. *Southwest*. Vol. 10 of the *Handbook of American Indians*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press
- Piehl, M. 1982. *The Catholic Worker and the origin of Catholic radicalism*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Proudfoot, W. 1985. *Religious experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Roberts, N.L. 1984. *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker*. Albany, SUNY Press.
- Schutz, Alfred. 1951. Making music together: A study in social relationship. In *Alfred Schutz: Collected Papers II: Studies in Social Theory*, edited by A. Brodersen, 159-178. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964.
- Spickard, J.V. 1991. Experiencing religious rituals: A Schutzian analysis of Navajo ceremonies. *Sociological Analysis* 52(2):191-204.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004. Charting the inward journey: Applying Blackmore's model to meditative religious experience. *Archiv für Religionspsychologie* 26:157-80.
- Spickard, J.V. and J.S. Landres. 2002. Introduction: Whither ethnography? Transforming the social-scientific study of religion. In *Personal knowledge and beyond: Reshaping the ethnography of religion*, edited by J.V. Spickard, J.S. Landres, and M.B. McGuire, 1-14. New York: New York University Press.
- Spradley, J.P. 1970. *You owe yourself a drunk: An ethnography of urban nomads*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Thorn, W.J., P.M. Runkel, and S. Mountin, eds. 2001. *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement: Centenary essays*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.
- Troester, R.R., ed. 1993. *Voices from the Catholic Worker*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Weingart Center. 2004. Just the facts: Homelessness in Los Angeles. (Posted at <http://www.weingart.org/institute/research/facts/pdf/JusttheFactsHomelessnessLA.pdf>. Accessed September, 2004)
- Witherspoon, G. 1977. *Language and art in the Navajo universe*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1983. Language and reality in Navajo world view. In *Southwest*, edited by A. Ortiz, 570-91. Vol. 10 of the *Handbook of American Indians*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Wolf, E.R. 1982. *Europe and the people without history*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Yamane, D. 2000. Narrative and religious experience. *Sociology of Religion* 61(2):171-89.
- Zwick, M. and L. Zwick. 2005. *The Catholic Worker movement: Intellectual and spiritual origins*. New York: Paulist Press.