

Embodied Peace: Cultivating Embodied Praxis to Develop Nonviolent Faith Communities

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Introduction

The majority of theological discourses on nonviolence focus on large-scale conflicts. In discourses which focus on nonviolence at smaller scales, the points at issue tend to be whether violence is permissible in any circumstances and, if so, to what extent. By contrast, this paper will be primarily concerned with how to cultivate nonviolent communities that mitigate the occurrence of violence. In the following paper, I will argue that embodied practices are key to cultivating nonviolent communities. I will begin by addressing why the body is an essential area to focus for peace theology. I will then focus on three areas of embodied praxis – physical literacy, martial arts, and sexual fluency—before presenting some suggestions for further development.

The Body and Violence

Johnson asserts that paying attention to the body is key for enacting social change for three main reasons. First, social change agents (those who work to accomplish social change) experience high rates of burnout. Second, microlevel interactions which involve body-body interactions, take place in the context of macrolevel social systems. As such, changes at the microlevel can achieve change at the macrolevel through a bottom-up strategy routed in emergence theory. Finally, it is the body which is the focus for many oppressive systems and practices. Oppressive systems and practices seek to control bodies by dictating which bodies can do what, when, and how. As a result, focusing on the body and cultivating practices of resistance rooted in the body holds liberatory potential.¹

Voelkel shares Johnson's conclusion that focusing on the body is key to achieving liberation from oppressive systems and forces. She adds a theological perspective which is

¹ Rae Johnson, *Embodied Activism: Engaging the Body to Cultivate Liberation, Justice, and Authentic Connection: A Practical Guide for Transformative Social Change*, North Atlantic Books, 2023, Kindle e-book

rooted in an incarnational theology. Voelkel asserts that the creation narratives in Genesis point towards God putting part of Godself into every created thing and being. This leads to a panentheistic reality in which there is an inseparable interconnectivity between divinity and the bodies. Voelkel also asserts that God taking human form in the person of Jesus provides God with a deep, intimate knowledge of humanity. She also shares the insight that the incarnational elements present in both creation and Jesus means that what is said about individual bodies can also be said about the communal body.²

The body is often a site of, and target for, violence by oppressive systems and structures. Given the incarnational theology outlined by Voelkel, violence against bodies is also violence against God. Cultivating practices to resist violence perpetrated against the body is crucial to achieving any potential liberation, challenging oppressive systems and structures, and reducing overall violence between bodies, in communities, and in the world.

Embodied Praxis

In North America and Western Europe, persistent sociocultural trends have contributed to a high rate of disembodiment. Dualistic, Neoplatonic, and Gnostic influences have affected Western epistemologies and practices contributing to the development of pervasive percepticide (a term coined by Diana Taylor and repurposed by Rae Johnson), wherein many people are divorced from their somatic perspective systems. Fortunately, this trend can be reversed through diligent and intentional practice.³ Three areas of embodied praxis will be particularly helpful: physical literacy, martial arts, and sexual fluency.

² Rebecca M. M. Voelkel, *Carnal Knowledge of God: Embodied Love and the Movement for Justice*, Fortress, 2017, Kindle e-book

³ Johnson, *Embodied Activism*, 49-64

Embodied Praxis: Physical Literacy

Physical literacy, which is also known as somatic vocabulary, refers to the knowledge of body and bodies. It encompasses knowledge of one's own body as well as how one's body relates to, and interacts with, other bodies. Johnson asserts that it is integral to develop an inter-corporeal ethos. This begins with increasing somatic bandwidth through honing the senses of interoception (information arising from within the body), proprioception (perception of relative position of neighbouring parts of the body and strength employed in movement of those parts), and exteroception (perception of stimuli from sources outside the body). The next step is to hone awareness of nonverbal cues as the majority of communication between humans takes place through nonverbal, bodily expression. Additionally, it is crucial to develop awareness of how the body moves through a space and is held in relation to other bodies within a space. A practical example is being aware of where one is in relation to the exit of a room, and whether one is between other bodies and the exit. One of the primary goals of developing these skills is to apply an inter-corporeal ethos where microaggressions are mitigated or avoided while also maintaining one's own health and well-being.⁴

Cultivating physical literacy is key to developing communities conducive to nonviolence as violence can occur through ignorance and lack of awareness about how non-verbal cues are perceived. Different cultural groups have different norms around whether eye contact is a sign of respect or a sign of aggression, and of how much space is too close for a conversation.⁵ Increasing one's ability to perceive these dynamics and respond appropriately is key to preventing violence from occurring and mitigating it when it does arise. Sensitivity to, and respect for, these dynamics is a practical way to demonstrate compassion and respect for fellow

⁴ Johnson, *Embodied Activism*, 53-160

⁵ Johnson, *Embodied Activism*, 65-76

human beings and the *imago Dei* within each. These skills must be practiced consistently and intentionally in order to increase somatic bandwidth. As such, they are a form of embodied faith practice.

Scripture provides many models of these skills for faith communities to draw upon. God recognizes and provides for the bodily needs of Hagar during both of her flights from Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 16, 21:8-20) and the Israelites during their years in the wilderness. Jesus honours his bodily needs for rest on numerous occasions (Matthew 9:35-38, 14:13a, 14:22-23) and also honours the needs of his followers and others for eating, drinking, and healing even when doing so conflicts with other religious practices of the day (Matthew 9:14-17, 12:1-14, 14:13b-21). Wink also highlights how Jesus outlines several practices for resistance rooted in knowledge of bodily norms and interactions rooted in his sociocultural context. Turning the other cheek, surrendering one's coat in court, and going the second mile were all highly contextual ways of resisting that required an acute understanding of the inter-corporeal ethos in effect and how to challenge and subvert it to cultivate a more egalitarian one.⁶

Embodied Praxis: Martial Arts

One key method to increase one's physical literacy is through movement practices such as dance, yoga, and organized sports. One movement practice that is of practical benefit for increasing physical literacy in relation to violence is martial arts.

Raposa asserts that martial arts and meditation, the latter of which encompasses religious/spiritual meditations, are deeply connected. He asserts that there is a benefit in cultivating a martial spirituality which recognizes constant battles for people's attention and

⁶ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Fortress, 1992, Kindle e-book

empowers people to channel their attention to life-giving sources through the diligent and intentional cultivation of self-control.⁷

Thomas highlights the difference between force and violence where force is motivated by the desire to protect and restrain, preventing greater harm and violence having an intention of deliberate and disproportionate harm. Under this framework force, even when physical, is permissible in certain circumstances. Thomas further argues that there are certain circumstances where assertive action is a third way that is more effective than the usual binary options of aggression on one hand, and submission on the other. He points to examples where physical force was used to prevent rapes and sexual assaults, or to restrain drug-addled people from committing lethal violence with weapons. In such circumstances, Thomas argues the limited use of physical force most accurately balances the right to protect with the duty to respect life.⁸

Thomas points specifically to traditional martial arts such as aikido and taekwondo as models for the use of assertive force. He highlights how traditional martial arts often emphasize the use of physical force as a last resort. He points to research which suggests training in traditional arts has potential to reduce aggression, increase self-control, and develop greater respect for others. Thomas also asserts that training in martial arts facilitates facing potential threats with awareness, courage, and self-control.⁹

Placido and Pedrini sound a note of caution, however. They investigate *Boxe Poplare* and *Odaka Yoga*, both martial arts with connections to political and social change movements. They

⁷ Michael L. Raposa, "Martial Spirituality and the Logic of Pragmatism," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (May 2007): 165-177

⁸ Steve Thomas, "Martial Arts as Model for Nonviolence: Resisting Interpersonal Violence with Assertive Force," *Conrad Grebel Review* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 72-91

⁹ Thomas, "Martial Arts as Model for Nonviolence," 81-82

find that the arts do not consistently facilitate social change due to highly individualistic focus that fails to challenge established social hierarchies and norms.¹⁰

While the cautions of Placido and Petrini are worth bearing in mind, the hopes and insights of Thomas and Raposa should not be dismissed either. Thomas and Raposa pin the majority of their hopes on traditional martial arts that stand within more enduring traditions than the arts covered by Placido and Petrini, and they outline several benefits that do not sound out of place with the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

My own experience with taijiquan, which is one of the arts Raposa views favourably, resonate with the ideas put forward by Raposa and Thomas. Chen style taijiquan favours avoiding conflict when possible. When it is not possible, the conflict resolution philosophy underlying taijiquan is to redirect and neutralize incoming force rather than attempting to overpower it with greater force. This is accomplished through achieving a dynamic balance between “soft” and “hard” within oneself, connecting with incoming force, and using circular movements to unbalance that force so that it is neutralized. In practice, this means connecting with an opponent, sensing their intention and following it to a certain point before strategically taking away force in order to lead them into a state of unbalance where there is an opportunity to neutralize the opponent. This is not peaceful, but it is fundamentally defensive in orientation and recognizes the harms inherent in escalation of conflict.

Martial arts, like any movement practice, facilitates the development of physical literacy that can prevent violence by being mindful of various interactions between bodies. The unique benefit of martial arts as a movement practice is that, if violence should erupt, one has the

¹⁰ Matteo de Placido and Lorenzo Pedrini, “Exploring Engaged Spirituality Through Martial Arts: Pedagogies of Engagement in *Boxe Poplare* and *Odaka Yoga*,” *Fieldwork in Religion* 17, no. 2, (2022): 165-185, DOI: 10.1558/firn.23097

training and ability to respond to that violence creatively. Training in martial arts allows for a range of options including avoidance and evasion, distraction and diversion, temporary incapacitation to disrupt or longer-term restraint to prevent greater harm.

In scripture, there are not many direct models of traditional martial arts to draw upon. There are, however, three possibilities for creative comparisons. First, the fruits of the Spirit are demonstrable outcomes of much training in traditional martial arts and can be used as criteria for whether martial arts is helping or hindering the development of a nonviolent faith community. Second, the Spirit (Hebrew *ruach* and Greek *pneuma*) has many linguistic and descriptive similarities with *qi* (also known as *chi* and *ki*) which are crucial to understanding and training in many Chinese, Japanese, and Korean traditional martial arts.¹¹ A robust intersectional pneumatology may be developed through the practice of traditional martial arts, and a greater respect for other cultural and spiritual/religious traditions can also facilitate the development of a nonviolent faith community. Finally, a maxim of many traditional martial arts is that the best defence is never to be in the place that is attacked. In that respect, Jesus is a master of defence. In several instances he is said to pass through crowds that intend him harm or to leave a place because he has discerned a threat to him (Matthew 12:14-15; Luke 4:28-30; John 6:15, 7:1-9, 10:31-39). This is not to suggest that Jesus had martial arts training. It does align with a survival instinct honed by exposure to, and familiarity with, the violence that came of being of low socioeconomic status in a Roman-occupied territory in the first century. As such, it may provide a source of inspiration and reflection for faith communities adapting to emerging conflicts and persistent violence in their own contexts as they strive to remain nonviolent.

¹¹ Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide*, Fortress, 2018, Kindle e-book

Embodied Praxis: Sexual Fluency

Sexual fluency is integral to include as an embodied praxis for cultivating communities of non-violence. Althaus-Reed emphasizes that theologians have too often ignored their sexual selves. This cordoning off of sexual and theological selves has led to the replication of hierarchical structures and the perpetuation of oppressive practices and harmful theologies. This, in turn, has directly contributed to colonial and exploitative practices and projects.¹²

Voelkel agrees with Althaus-Reed on the importance of bringing one's sexual self into one's theological work. Voelkel also asserts that honouring desire can lead to greater intimacy with, and knowledge of, the divine. She joins a chorus of theological voices which strive to reclaim the concept of *eros* and channel it towards creative and transformative faith practices and concepts.¹³

Allison emphasizes the importance of fluency on matters of gender and sexuality in order to combat the pervasive instances of sexual abuse within the church. She asserts that both purity culture and anti-2SLBTQIA+ stances are intrinsically interconnected and motivators for sexual violence that must be resisted and rejected.¹⁴ Kim and Shaw agree with Allison and further assert that a more expansive theological imagination must be cultivated. They highlight the ways in which conceiving of God solely as white and male empowers abusers and oppressors and how exploring the diversity of theological imagination can contribute towards liberation and healing.¹⁵

¹² Marcella Althaus-Reed, *Indecent Theology: Theological perversions in sex, gender, and politics*, Routledge, 2000, Kindle e-book

¹³ Rebecca M.M. Voelkel, *Carnal Knowledge of God*

¹⁴ Emily Joy Allison, *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing*, Broadleaf, 2021, Kindle e-book

¹⁵ Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Surviving God: A New Vision of God through the Eyes of Sexual Abuse Survivors*, Broadleaf, 2024, Kindle e-book

Roberts recounts the abuses of Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder. She shares how his long history of abuse was known to some in his circles. She asserts that Yoder defended his actions as an experiential form of sexual ethics rooted in radical discipleship and that early efforts to stop Yoder's abuses were focused on convincing him that he misunderstood the nature of radical discipleship.¹⁶ While it is laudable that Yoder's justifications were not blindly accepted, these early interventions demonstrate a lack of awareness of the dynamics of power and privilege in such abuse cases.

To cultivate sexual fluency, individuals and communities must normalize frank and honest communication around issues of sexuality and gender. This facilitates self-knowledge from a young age and keeps lines of communication open. Individuals and communities must also be aware of the intersection of sexuality and politics, the ways that dynamics of power and privilege are inseparably connected with sexuality and gender. Normalizing communication about sexuality and gender and being aware of the dynamics of power and privilege involved in them, increases the recognition and reporting of sexual abuse when it does occur. Such practices also reduce the rates of sexual abuse in communities as it becomes more likely that perpetrators will be identified and held appropriately accountable.

There are many resources to draw upon in Christian scripture to support such endeavours within faith communities. The story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1-12:15) can be used to draw attention to the ways in which sexual abuse through the abuse of power and privilege was recognized millennia ago. Jesus' embrace of those on the margins of gender and sexuality and his inclusion of women as central to his mission can act as a positive model for more egalitarian ethics today. His embrace of those on the margins of gender and sexuality can draw

¹⁶ Laura Schmidt Roberts, "Addressing Sexual Violence in Mennonite Communities," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 41, no. 4, (January 2021): 87-94, DOI: 10.1353/bcs.2021.0012

from the honouring of eunuchs (Matthew 19:10-12) and dining with sinners (Matthew 11:19). His centering of women can be seen through his interactions with women such as Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha of Bethany, and the Samaritan woman at the well.

Conclusion: Summary and Suggestions

Intentionally engaging in embodied praxis is crucial to developing nonviolent faith communities. Scripture has many resources to draw upon to support this crucial work. Cultivating physical literacy is an essential first step that will increase somatic bandwidth overall and serve as a foundation for future development. Nearly all movement practices serve to increase physical literacy, but martial arts may be of particular interest in the context of a community striving to be nonviolent. Even if one does not accept distinctions between force and violence, martial arts contain many useful skills for avoiding and defusing violence even before any physical force is used. Sexual fluency must also be developed to empower communities with the necessary knowledge to mitigate and prevent the occurrence of sexual and gendered violence. This focus on embodied praxis to develop nonviolent faith communities affirms the goodness of creation and incarnation and reflects the interconnectedness of divinity and physicality.

Further theological reflections on this matter that may be fruitful include extensive looks at other movement practices such as dance, yoga, swimming, and organized sports. Similarly, in-depth examinations of specific martial arts to see which are particularly suited to this endeavour is advisable. Seeking insights from the breadth of church history, and more in-depth scriptural resources may also be a fruitful line of inquiry.

The role of the body in Christian faith practice and communities is an exciting and growing field of theological inquiry. This is a welcome corrective to the persistent disembodied

trends of Western epistemologies. The embrace of embodiment, affirming creation and incarnation, is an act of deep faith and still requires further theological exploration.

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