

# Flesh becomes word: The incarnational poetry of Scott Cairns

by [Jeff Gundy](#) in the [November 6, 2002](#) issue

From Baptist to Presbyterian to Orthodox—that's hardly a conventional trajectory for an American Christian. Even less usual, perhaps, than claiming to be a Christian poet, or being summarily unhired from a Christian university because a single poem was deemed unsuitable by the administration. But Scott Cairns has never managed to be typical.

One of the better-known poets who accepts the label "Christian writer," he is probably best known for a single erotic poem, "Interval with Erato," and the controversy that erupted when the administration of Seattle Pacific University became aware of the poem and withdrew a job offer as a result. A rather public scandal resulted, with earnest defenders of propriety on one side and equally earnest defenders of artistic freedom on the other.

Cairns's close encounter with fundamentalist conservative forces at SPU clearly left its mark on his poetry and on his faith; not long after, he joined the Orthodox Church. Yet he now says that all he wants is to "forgive everybody and keep writing." He agrees with Bishop Kallistos Ware that "we can say where the church is, but cannot say where the church is not. I would say, however, that it is in Orthodoxy that I perceive the fullness of the faith."

Cairns's journey includes an innovative and challenging rethinking of the relation between religion and poetry. He is currently working to define what he calls a "sacramental poetics." He perceives both religion and poetry as sacramental, incarnational acts. Many Protestants have tended to understand the elements of communion as mere reminders of Jesus, Cairns points out, and many people think of poetry in a similar way: as a mere reminiscence of something that has happened or an explanation of some previously known idea. Communion then becomes essentially a memorial, and poems become mere "delivery systems" for memories and opinions.

From a sacramental viewpoint, however, communion does much more than just point back: the bread and wine take on regenerative, healing, creative agency, and one who partakes of them quite literally becomes someone else. Similarly, Cairns believes, poetic language is not merely retrospective: it also points ahead, provokes, troubles its recipient with an inducement to collaborate in the construction of meaning.

This theory reflects Cairns's life journey from low to high church. He recognizes the magnitude of this change. In the essay "Elemental Metonymy: Poems, Icons, Holy Mysteries," Cairns writes: "When I was a child attending a Baptist church in Tacoma, Washington, . . . neither the juice nor the cracker were, in themselves, mysterious, though they may have served as signs directing the mind to a very great Mystery. These days, most 'poems' I come across in a given week seem to work that way too. Their words point to an event, to a stilled moment, or to a sentiment, which, mysterious as it may have been, remains an occasion distinct from the 'poem' and its language. . . .

"The poetic, however, is something else: it is an occasion of immediate and observed—which is to say, present—presence; it is an occasion of ongoing, generative agency. And this is a condition far more nearly suggestive of Eucharistic communion as it is understood and performed in the Eastern Church and in those elements of the Western Church which embrace a sacramental theology. The wine becomes the mystical blood of Jesus Christ and the bread becomes His mystical body. . . . At any rate, as we partake of those Mysteries we are in the present presence of Very God of Very God dipped into our mouths on a spoon, and we partake, incrementally, in His Entire and Indivisible Being. . . . This is appalling, and it serves to exemplify what I would call the poetic: the presence and activity of inexhaustible, indeterminate enormity apprehended in a discrete space."

Cairns describes his upbringing as less conservative and fundamentalist than the church of his youth; his parents, especially his father, encouraged reading and learning. This relatively open atmosphere may help to explain why Cairns moved away from fundamentalism without rejecting Christianity altogether.

A key event occurred during his sophomore year at Western Washington University, when Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Dillard turned up to teach a class he had registered for months before. "I showed up in class to find about 50 people trying to get in the door. Annie's first words were something like: 'This isn't going to work.' She

apologized to all the folks who wanted to add the class, but said she would only allow those already registered (about 15 of us) to remain. Call it dumb luck or call it grace (same thing?), I had a class that utterly changed my life.

“When it came time to go to graduate school, Annie pretty much single-handedly got me into Hollins [University’s highly regarded M.A. program in creative writing], despite a fairly mediocre undergraduate career. I always thought of myself as Annie Dillard’s slowest student; I think I still am.”

Attracted both to poetry and to Reformed theology, Cairns worshiped in Presbyterian churches in Utah and Texas as he studied, taught and wrote. Yet during this time, Cairns says now, he “was still very far from establishing my life as prayer.” Not too many years ago, after a rather bitter dispute at work, he started to pray in earnest: “I began an actual ‘rule’ of prayer. I would pray every evening, and most mornings, and I also began to pray ‘The Jesus Prayer’ during the day. The change was palpable. The Jesus Prayer, in particular, tilted my head in an amazing way, making it not only possible to smile in the face of perceived insult, but to feel warmly towards those who I thought were hurting me.”

The Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”) also drew his attention to the Desert Fathers and the patristic writings. When Cairns moved with his family to Virginia to teach at Old Dominion, they began to worship at an Episcopal church, which fed his increasing sense of sacramental reality. But not until he spent a month as visiting writer at Wichita State University, immediately after his interview at Seattle Pacific, did matters come to a head. Just before leaving for Wichita Cairns received a job offer from SPU, and he at once resigned from Old Dominion. He tells what happened next this way:

“As you might suppose, living alone in a basement apartment in Wichita in February can be a little disheartening. My salvation came in the shape of Eighth Day Books, a bookstore owned and operated by Warren Farha, an Antiochian Orthodox believer and, as it happens, an unfailingly generous man who is ever on the side of the stranger. He and his staff (most of them also Orthodox Christians) took me in and gave me a welcoming place to sit with books and coffee during the long afternoons away from my family. It was here that my ignorance about the continuity of Orthodox Christian worship was first abated.

“My first experience of Divine Liturgy was like a homecoming. I wept through most of it. The palpable presence of God and the palpable sense of liturgy as worship were unprecedented in my experience.

“Then, days later, when the folks from SPU tracked me down in Wichita to revoke my contract, I was suddenly made mindful of two very distinct expressions of Christian faith and practice.

“Upon my return to Virginia, I immediately set out to find an Orthodox church. I’ve been attending Divine Liturgy at every opportunity ever since.” Cairns was chrismated into the Orthodox faith at St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church in Virginia Beach.

Cairns’s new book, *philokalia* (Zoo Press), reflects his religious journey in a generous gathering of new poems and selections from four earlier books. The title comes from a collection of texts—written in Greek between the fourth and 15th centuries—which include the most important spiritual writings of the Orthodox tradition. Cairns’s choice of title, and the cover painting of St. Isaac the Syrian (a seventh-century Desert Father whose works are included in the original *Philokalia*), reflects his immersion in these texts and his conversion, but much more is going on as well.

Cairns’s early poems attracted attention for their conversational tone and unpretentious but searching interest in moral issues. “Imperative” instructs readers to remember “how / tentative all of this really is. / You could wake up dead.” There are “no sure things” in life or in love, we are warned; most important is the final advice: “Just don’t go thinking / you deserve any of it.” The diction and situation are contemporary, but beneath the genial tone lies a traditional and serious theme; it is only a slight stretch to say that the poem is about grace. The reminder that it is prideful to think we “deserve any of it” need not be drawn from the Bible, but it is certainly congruent with traditional Christian theology.

This poem and others from Cairns’s first book, *The Theology of Doubt* (1985), probably take something of their tone and strategies from William Stafford (1914-1993), another poet whose work often reflects Christian themes and ideas in an unassuming style. But as the book’s title suggests, from the beginning Cairns was unafraid of the language and categories of organized Christianity, though he tended to embody them in immediate and contemporary narrative situations.

Critic Jonathan Holden saw Cairns's early work as a significant innovation in American poetry in its effort to "retrieve some of the important subject matter" and "moral urgency" that poets had long ceded to prose writers. Writing about "Harbor Seals," also from *The Theology of Doubt*, Holden said the poem "charms the reader, even as it tempts the reader into a corner . . . that will require the reader to make a moral choice as well as to reconsider many other kinds of choices about what to 'believe.' Belief—in God, in any kind of moral stance—is a matter of free choice; the poem cheerfully . . . tells us this over and over again."

Less ambitious poets might have been quite content to write such "cheerful" and subtly challenging poems forever. But *philokalia* reveals that with each new book Cairns has explored new styles, issues and poetic strategies. *The Translation of Babel* (1990) includes many experimental poems, often openly or subtly indebted to some of the most original writers of the 20th century: Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino and C. P. Cavafy.

Especially worth note is the long poem in the spirit of Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa titled "The Translation of Raimundo Luz." Pessoa wrote poems in the voices of four carefully defined alter egos; Cairns's pseudo-autobiography of Luz, "the greatest postmodern poet writing in Portuguese," notes that he is "a devoted family man, a fan of American rhythm and blues, an accomplished cook, and a fiction." The poem is filled with playful and mainly good-humored commentary on recent poetry and contemporary life: "I confess that I am not / a modern man. As a modern man / I am a little flawed. / Raimundo is far too happy."

*Figures for the Ghost* (1994) includes further experiments and homages, but also a number of explicitly theological poems. The most sustained is "Disciplinary Treatises"; its 12 sections include meditations on such subjects as the Holy Spirit, sacraments, angels, Satan and grace. The complex challenge that Cairns has set for himself becomes clearer in these poems: to embody in language a religious awareness that is at once traditional and newfound, at once an essential part of his being and recognized for all its fragile, tentative humanity.

This poem's entangling of human and divine desire, and its subtle intimation that "love's body" may be physical as well as spiritual, marks a crucial turn in Cairns's work and life. He became increasingly fascinated with—and troubled by—the tendency of much Christian thought and practice to separate body and spirit at the expense of the body. The poems published in *Recovered Body* (1998) reflect his

reading of the Desert Fathers and his search for imagery and material that might aid in recuperating the body for Christianity.

One of the more dramatic poems is "Loves." In the voice of Mary Magdalen it offers a strong critique of the separation of flesh and spirit: "All loves are bodily, require / that the lips part, and press their trace / of secrecy upon the one / beloved . . ." The poem notes "the damage Greek / has wrought upon your tongue." These ideas may not seem wildly radical to those who read Norman O. Brown and Herbert Marcuse in the '60s, but Cairns was soon to discover that bodies are still a dangerous subject in some circles.

"I have kissed / his feet. I have looked long / into the trouble of his face . . .," Magdalen says. Cairns's own troubles were not triggered by this poem, which is perhaps heterodox, yet not particularly explicit in its descriptive language, but by another one written about the same time which was accepted by the *Paris Review*.

Shortly after the poem was accepted, Cairns interviewed at Seattle Pacific University, a Free Methodist school with strong evangelical ties, near his native Tacoma. He pursued the SPU job despite a secure position at Old Dominion partly because of the appeal of a return to his home territory, but also because he wished to live and work in a professing Christian community.

Given the competitive job market, desperate academics have been known to present their convictions and qualifications rather creatively to hiring committees. But one senses that Cairns was not fudging when he wrote in his application letter, "I am intentional and candid in acknowledging Christ as Lord of the world and of my life." Given his publications and background, he seemed an excellent catch for a school like SPU that prides itself on both academic excellence and Christian character.

During his interviews Cairns by all accounts wowed students, faculty and administrators; he was offered a full professorship and a significant pay raise. He mentioned during his campus visit that an erotic poem was about to appear in the *Paris Review*, but the English department chair, Mark Walhout, assured him that the college would not object. Shortly thereafter, however, Arts and Sciences dean Tom Trzyna happened across "Interval with Erato" at a local bookstore. He quickly took the poem to SPU president Philip Eaton, and the ensuing controversy was intense and sustained. The president, who had been in office only a year and served under a

conservative board of trustees dominated by fundamentalists, had lengthy conversations with many parties. Asked for a letter of explanation, Cairns himself went so far as to write, "I have come to see the poem as a mistake," adding that it was intended for a secular audience and that he had underestimated its effect on conservative Christians.

Still, Cairns was unceremoniously unhired. The official letter stated that the president had come to believe that to appoint him would "compromise the moral and ethical foundations of the university." Many at SPU were outraged, especially in the English department; Walhout resigned as department chair in protest.

Angry at what he could hardly avoid seeing as a betrayal, Cairns demanded his full first-year salary (President Eaton had offered a \$5,000 settlement). After more discussions, Cairns and SPU reached an undisclosed settlement, and he managed to unresign from his position at Old Dominion. With Kathryn Robinson's lengthy article on the case, "Sins of the Poet," first published in *Seattle Weekly* and reprinted in revised form in *Lingua Franca*, the story became widely known in academic circles—an embarrassment to the university, but an ironic boost for Cairns's name recognition. Shortly thereafter he published *Recovered Body*, which includes the unaltered "Interval with Erato."

Although the poem typically combines a playful quality with concern for serious ideas, "Erato" is unusual within Cairns's work for its quasi-pagan description of a poet's encounter with his Muse and its explicit sexual references. One can understand how certain Christians would find its detail troubling, although other sorts might find the poem amusing, slightly titillating and quite craftily composed.

Poet Julia Kasdorf remarks that she is somewhat troubled not by the poem's eroticism but by its reinforcement of gender roles and stereotypes; she notes that it "exploits all the old patterns of gender/inspiration without ever questioning them." The Muse wants to be paid attention, but she seems quite content to let the speaker be the poet; she is willingly critical of other poets, but has nothing but nice things to say about the narrator. Just the kind of woman that (some) men dream of.

However we respond to this poem, *philokalia* makes clear that it is not representative of Cairns's work, and that he has weightier things on his mind. The new poems are often quite abstract and essayistic; they may be as direct and sustained in their exploration of theological issues as any significant American

poetry in decades. A series titled “Adventures in New Testament Greek” explores terms such as *metanoia*, *hairesis*, *nous*, *mysterion* and *apocatastasis*—some of them likely to be unfamiliar even to regular churchgoers. Both in conversation and in the poems themselves Cairns seems a bit apologetic for their religious and rhetorical intensity. In “Formal Brief: The Name,” he writes, “Forgive my having recourse just above / to the legalistic idiom. Forgive / my having chosen to pursue a measured / argument—and in such lax verse. Forgive / as well my penchant for ironic tone . . .”

This shift might be explained in biographical terms as a reaction to the SPU debacle—Cairns responding to his fundamentalist doubters with plentiful evidence of the depth of his faith and commitment. But the new poems may represent a further stage rather than a sudden shift. Seeking to integrate body and spirit and pursuing a “sacramental poetics,” Cairns could hardly continue writing the small narratives and lyrics that are the dominant modes of poetry today if he hopes that his work might reach for the transformative power of the sacraments.

Cairns mentions *theosis* as the key term of Orthodox theology that has most challenged his Protestant mind-set. It has to do with our capacity to take on, not divinity, but some of the qualities of God. Thus, according to Athanasius, “God became man so that man might become God”—a startling suggestion, but one that Cairns insists we not dismiss too easily. The notion of salvation as a once-for-all event seems pale, he suggests, beside the idea that conversion from “the way of death” to “the way of life” is only the beginning: for surely we might go on endlessly increasing our capacity for apprehending God, and never cease in the great work of reconciling the universe to him.

“We have all eternity to become more like God,” Cairns says. “That idea is very Orthodox, very old, and an appealing alternative to the notion of a static, predetermined future. Human experience is not just a performance, not just our living out, or into, a foregone conclusion. I believe God has given us the opportunity to construct the future with him.”

In poems such as “Adventures in New Testament Greek: Mysterion,” which muses on the inadequacy of metaphor in the face of ultimate questions, we sense Cairns working out ideas and implications that he barely grasps, reaching toward mysteries that refuse to be fully held. This is, of course, quite congruent with his sense of the poet’s true work, which is prospective rather than retrospective: not merely to remind us of what has happened or what we already know, but to construct new knowledge and understanding through bold encounters with language.