

## The Christian Body Dances:

### A History of Dance in the Christian Church

The heritage of the Christian Church is the Hebrew Testament. Part of the heritage of the Hebrew Testament is dance. In Genesis, "The dance began with God (moving over the face of the waters)!"<sup>1</sup> And it continues with abundant dancing: Miriam and the women with timbrels after the escape from the Egyptians (Exodus 15:20-21), David when the Ark is returned to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:16), and Jephthah's daughter when her father returns victorious from battle (Judges 12:34). The Psalms mention dance (e.g. 149, 150), and in Jeremiah's vision of the rebuilding of Israel the celebration will be led with timbrel and dance (Jeremiah 31:4). In the Hebrew tradition dance functioned as a medium of prayer and praise, as an expression of joy and reverence, and as a mediator between God and humanity.<sup>2</sup>

In the Christian Testament dance can be read between the lines, but is only specifically mentioned in connection with Salome. History has

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<sup>1</sup>Carla DeSola, The Sprit Moves, A Handbook of Dance and Prayer (Washington D.C.: The Liturgical Conference, 1977)

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<sup>2</sup>Margaret Fisk Taylor, A Time to Dance (Austin: The Sharing Company, 1976) 81.

infused this dance with a seamy quality, although the only stated negative is the devious use of this dance by the girl's mother. It may have been a dance Miriam would have done; the veils of seduction are not biblical. There was undoubtedly dancing at the wedding of Cana in which Jesus probably participated (John 2:1-11). He was there, and certainly did not condemn it. Jesus often told the people to, "rejoice" (e.g. Luke 6:23, John 14:28). In the original Aramaic language, it can be translated, "dance."<sup>3</sup> Thus, he was telling them to celebrate with all of their being, which included their bodies. The lame man cured by Peter and John in Acts 3:1-8 leaped (translate danced) into the temple. Paul exhorts us to, "glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:20). In the Acts of John, a non canonical gospel possibly written in the second half of the first century, Jesus himself is depicted as leading the people in a circle dance.

*But before Jesus was arrested  
he assembled us all So told us to form  
a circle, holding one another's hands,  
and himself stood in the middle, and  
said. "Answer Amen to me." So he  
began to sing the hymn and to say,*

*"Glory be to thee Father"*

*And we circled round him and  
answered him, "Amen."*

*(The song continues at length.)*

*After the Lord had so danced  
us, my beloved, he went out.<sup>4</sup>*

*with*

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<sup>3</sup> Doug Adams, Congregational Dancing in Christian Worship (Austin: The Sharing Company, 1983) 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ron Cameron, ed., The Other Gospels (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982) 91, 94.

The early church has a legacy of dance, of using the body in a holistic way. Dance was perceived as one of the, "Heavenly joys and part of the adoration of the divinity by the angels and the saved."<sup>5</sup> Hal Taussig asserts that biblical form criticism recognizes that many passages of the Christian Testament were written for and used for action-oriented occasions within the church, which probably included dancing.<sup>6</sup> He suggests that dance was undoubtedly a mode of scriptural proclamation and education within the first-century church.<sup>7</sup> Dance was a part of the, "Fabric of the Church's life."<sup>8</sup> For the first Hebrew Christians dance was normative. The Gentile Hellenists, when they became a part of the Christian Church, were allowed to keep their dances but to attach new meanings in the Pauline churches.<sup>9</sup> In the Hebrew Jerusalem church, however, these dances were seen as "unclean," and these converts were forced to stop them.<sup>10</sup> There were, then, both inclusive and exclusive centers for dance. A dualism of cultures was created. All did dance, however. The types included: processional, rotation (ring or circle), hopping, stamping, and

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<sup>5</sup> Ronald Gagne, Thomas Kane & Robert VerEecke, Introducing Dance in Christian Worship (Washington D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1984) 36.

<sup>6</sup> Hal Taussig, Dancing the New Testament (Austin: The Sharing Company, 1977) 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> E. Louis Backman, Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1952) 9.

<sup>10</sup> Adams, 7.

burial.<sup>11</sup> Also at that time a controversy (which still exists today) was begun as to whether Jesus was more spirit or body; thus a dualism of mind and body was also established.

During the era of the martyrs there was much dancing on the graves, in the belief that the martyred and the angels came down to dance with those left behind.<sup>12</sup> In 300 C.E. the first ban (of which there came to be a legion number) of dancing was issued, directed at the gravesite dances in the churchyards. These dances were led by women, in the tradition of Miriam, and women were specifically forbidden to dance in the churchyards.<sup>13</sup> A dualism of sexes was created. After Constantine, who became the ruler of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century, officially recognized Christianity as a religion and stopped its persecution, cathedrals were built in which grand dancing became the norm.

The Council of Nicea in 325 CE made a distinction between individual and group dancing. Individual dancing was sanctioned, but only in connection with the Mass, allowing primarily the priests, deacons and choir boys the privilege of dancing. Group dancing was prohibited.<sup>14</sup> The churchyard dances often did turn into naked and drunken orgies, so perhaps there was some wisdom in it. However, the expressed fear cannot escape notice that, "Invading hoards of pagans threatened to overwhelm the church. The superior position that clergy maintained over their laity had

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<sup>11</sup> Blackman, 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>14</sup> Adams, 34.

required that dancing together be suppressed as too equalizing and revolutionary."<sup>15</sup> A dualism of classes was set up. Christians of higher social status were kept from intimate contact with Christians of other social classes, and from intimate contact with those outside the Christian community.<sup>16</sup> Augustine hated all dancing and wanted to ban it entirely, but there were too many objections.<sup>17</sup>

The priests danced on St. John's Day, and the Deacons' festival dance was on St. Stephen's.<sup>18</sup> These fairly tame, although once elaborate, dances deteriorated by the 11th century into bowing and movement patterns in the chancel, which are still evident in the higher liturgical churches today. The choir boys' Innocent's Day dance became the Children's Festival which had its corrupt and raucous seasons, and the Sub Deacons danced on the Feast of Circumcision and Epiphany. This latter became the corrupt Festival of Fools, against which there were innumerable bans through the centuries.<sup>19</sup>

The laity were encouraged to dance in their spirits rather than their bodies, knowing that when they reached heaven they could dance with the angels around the throne. The people would not stop dancing, however, and the bans against dancing continued. The one dance permitted for everyone was the labyrinth dance on the floors of many churches. It was an elaborate maze which

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>17</sup> Blackman, 154.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

one danced alone, into the center and out again. For some it was a journey to the underworld to defeat Satan, and back again, symbolizing Jesus' resurrection. For others it was a journey to heaven for healing and back to earth.<sup>20</sup>

During the Middle Ages the church was a prolific sponsor of music, visual arts and architecture, resulting in some extraordinary arts. Theater became an important vehicle of the church and the community through its mystery plays, and later its morality and miracle plays.

Dance was either largely ignored or banned, leaving its development in the hands of the people. Dance epidemics for healing began in the 7th-8th centuries. In the 14th century while the Black Plague raged, dancing in churchyards (which were also graveyards) was at its height.<sup>21</sup> Children's rhymes such as "Ring Around the Rosie" were once a part of these dances, which included clapping to give God approval, movement for protection from the devil, laughter to break the power of death, and incantations for healing.<sup>22</sup> The phenomena of choreomania, a frenzied dance at the end of which the dancer dies, was especially banned. It is now believed that was a disease which attacked the nervous system, manifested by uncontrollable movements in which death was not from the dance but a natural result of the disease.<sup>23</sup>

The 15th century Renaissance began to introduce angelic balletic style movements into the church, but the 16th century Reformation and its

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 191.

aftermath stopped all dancing in both Catholic and Protestant churches. (Protestants banned all of the arts except some types of music, and Catholics took the opportunity to also abolish the controversial dance.) It should be noted, however, that not all early Reformers were anti-dance. Martin Luther wrote the carol *From Heaven High* for children to dance, and William Tyndale wrote of the roles of joyous song and dance in Christianity.<sup>24</sup> The 17th century Enlightenment further widened the dualistic gulf between the mind and the body, relegating the latter to a valueless status. The Victorians, the Puritans, the dance halls of the American Wild West, vaudeville, and bawdy burlesque shows all strengthened the belief that dance was not fit for a Christian. "To look at the body with devotion has been most difficult for some in Christendom."<sup>25</sup>

In 1912 Ruth St. Denis became the first American pioneer in the field of religious dance due to her interest in Asian religious ceremonies and the Shakers (who followed Jeremiah's sense of dancing to bring about the end of the age). She and her husband and dance partner Ted Shawn presented the first dance in Protestant worship in 1917 at the Interdenominational Church in San Francisco.<sup>26</sup> Together they toured cathedrals, churches and theaters with "Dance Church Service."<sup>27</sup> The climate was not ripe, however, and

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<sup>24</sup> Doug Adams & Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, ed., *Dance as Religious Studies* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 26.

<sup>25</sup> Cynthia -Winton Henry & Phil Porter, *Body & Soul* (Oakland, CA: Wing It! Press, 1993) 55.

<sup>26</sup> Adams, 138.

<sup>27</sup> Marilyn Daniels, *The Dance In Christianity* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981) 74.

was more persuaded by Billy Sunday (a revivalist forerunner of Billy Graham) who delivered a sermon in 1915 entitled, "Dancing, Drinking, Card Playing."

*You sow the dance and you reap a crop of brothels... I am asked to give a reason to the unsaved, why they should not do it (the dance). The church of God forbids it... The dance is simply a hugging match set to music. The dance is a sexual love feast... I have more respect for a saloonkeeper than for a dancing teacher. I don't believe the saloons will do as much to damn the morals of young people as the dancing school... People say to me: "Well, didn't they dance in the Bible?" Yes, they danced in the Bible, and they committed adultery, too; and they got punished.<sup>28</sup>*

Despite this climate, liturgical dancing began to grow, especially with the influences of Martha Graham, Mary Wigman, Mary Anthony, Margaret Taylor Doane and many others. In 1958 the Sacred Dance Guild was formed, which still remains a relatively small but important force in the field with a yearly international festival, and assorted other workshops and activities. (SDG is interfaith, but its members are primarily Christian.)

Vatican II in the mid-sixties did not address dance per se, but spoke in generalities and often about the full, conscious and active participation of the people, encouraging actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. However, in a 1975 *National Catholic Report* Cardinal Giuseppe Casoria,

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<sup>28</sup> Clyde E. Fant, Jr. & William M. Pinson, Jr., eds., *20 Centuries of Great Preaching: An Encyclopedia of Preaching*, Vol. 7 (Waco: Word Books, 1971) 280-93.

prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Sacraments and Divine Worship wrote, "Current liturgical norms do not provide any possibility to introduce (dance) into liturgical celebrations."<sup>29</sup> In the same article Secretariat director Father John Gurrien stated, "Within the church, the word 'norm' is equivalent to the words 'church law'."<sup>30</sup>

The early church views of clean and unclean, manifested in the dance, have wound their way through churches in Europe, the United States and Canada, leaving a difficult trail of segregation, oppression, isolation, unhealthy attitudes toward the body, and false dualisms of mind/body, male/female class structures and cultures.

Other cultures around the world, because they have had an indigenous sense of dance as a part of total life, have not inherited these negative attitudes toward dance. Western Europe had no true native dancing that permeated the masses. The peasants folk danced, but not in church; the upper classes waltzed, but not in church. The only dance forms born in America are the tap dance and break dancing, both originating in the culture of Harlem. Americans do not have a heritage of dance and do not know how to incorporate dance easily into their total life.

In Africa, on the other hand, "To dance is to breathe, to be connected with the earth. To dance is to be alive, and to be in touch with the rhythms of the universe. There is no separation between the secular and the sacred; no difference between the

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<sup>29</sup>Gordon Oliver, "Memo to diocesan newspapers: Don't run photos like this." In Sacred Dance Guild Journal (6:2, '83-'84) 27, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

sacred and the profane."<sup>31</sup> American liturgical dancing is done mostly by women, often dressed in white using primarily their arms in balletic upward kinds of movements. The sense is of angels waving to God. There is little community involvement. In Africa, on the other hand, the movements come from nature: waving grasses and lumbering animals. The whole body and spine are involved with downward, earth connected movements. Much repetition and improvisation happens so that the community can be easily involved. Both men and women are leaders in the dance. The norm of dancing as a religious activity here is the opposite of that in America.<sup>32</sup>

Syncretism, which is the blending of elements from at least two different cultures, has worked well in the churches of Africa. "African spirituality starts from the principle that the only objective approach in trying to encircle reality is through the body and that in rediscovering the body one rediscovers one's own identity in the midst of humanity and returns it to its rightful place in the macrocosm."<sup>33</sup> The Masses in the African Catholic Churches have been restructured so that this use of the body in dance can become an integral part of them, just as it is an integral part of the lives of the people outside the church walls.<sup>34</sup> Integration has taken place. Whether it is a processional, preparation for the reading of the gospel, or the

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Kane, The Dancing Church (Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, ND) Videotape.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Alphonse Tierou Doople, The Eternal Law of African Dance (Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1989) 12.

<sup>34</sup> Kane.

Eucharist, the African church dances, and brings about liberation of the body.

Not all countries, however, have been as fortunate in the syncretic union between the Euro-American missionaries' sense of church and their native culture. Theology and culture professor Tom Driver has observed how dancing happens in Haiti, both in a Catholic Church and in a voodoo ritual. "It is said that the country is 95 percent Catholic and 90 percent voodoo."<sup>35</sup> In the cathedral the dancing was incidental, performed during the offertory by, "Six young girls dressed in white frocks, white stockings, white shoes, and flowered straw hats... They danced for several minutes... It was without question the most sedate dance I saw in Haiti."<sup>36</sup> In contrast, at the voodoo service everything is danced throughout the service by everyone. "Except for brief periods when the drummers rested, there was no break in the music the whole time. Everything I describe now is done to the drums' rhythms, with dancing and singing."<sup>37</sup>

In this same chapter of the book a visual dualism is described between male and female, clergy and laity in the Catholic Church. In voodoo there is no separation. The dance to the drum has made the people one. Moreover, in this Caribbean island Reggae music and dance were born. The sole intent was to provide a place for integration, which could happen in no other public place. On the dance floor there would be, if only temporarily, liberation from class systems. As the early church leaders knew, dance integrates. Dance is

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<sup>35</sup> Tom F. Driver, The Magic of Ritual (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991) 52.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

egalitarian. It levels, and removes dualism, class structures and isolation.

In that same part of the globe, it is through the dance of the traditional fiesta in Mexico that the people are able to find God. "We are most alive and free when we are together, in a celebration (and dance), not having to explain to others who we are or why we do the things we do."<sup>38</sup> Jesus declared his mission in Luke 4:18-19 as freedom for all. Mexicans find the freedom in the dance.

In Korea dance is used by the minjung (the lower class) to find transcendence from their poor and oppressed condition. With roots that stretch back to fertility festivals, their dances gradually became satirical in nature. They poke fun at the ruling classes using masks to depict particular people. Through the dance the minjung are able to, "Laugh and make fun of their own fate in this world, thereby transcending their own condition."<sup>39</sup> Their dance also, "Provides the minjung with the courage to fight for change and freedom."<sup>40</sup> "Beginning to do theology in such a way is exciting, for you feel theology with your body and dance with it before you think it."<sup>41</sup> The minjung, then, have found, "A power ethic not built on powerfulness but on powerlessness."<sup>42</sup> It is through the dance of these powerless people that freedom from the powerful becomes a vision of reality.

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<sup>38</sup> Virgilio Elizondo, The Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985) 30.

<sup>39</sup> Hyun Young-Hak, Minjung Theology: People As The Subjects of History (Maryknoll, NJ: Orbis Books, 1983) 50.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

Unfortunately the United States has a negative legacy concerning the use and perception of the body. Roger Betsworth, a scholar of American moral traditions, describes four cultural narratives in the United States. Each of the four narratives, "Has a master image or central metaphor."<sup>43</sup> None of them has an image of dance. The Puritan influence in the "Biblical Story," and the assimilation of the Enlightenment in the "Gospel of Success in America" have made these stories anti-dance. "The Mission of America" story has tried to transmit this negative attitude toward dance to other cultures through its missionaries with varying degrees of success. It is time for America to write a new cultural narrative concerning dance with the help of Africans, voodoo Haitians, Mexicans and Koreans. "America the Free" as a culture needs to be freed from body phobia and learn to dance. "As people, dance is our first language. As a culture in America we are movement dumb."<sup>44</sup>

Thankfully, dance is being recovered in the Christian church, primarily in evangelical and African American churches. Mainline Protestants are beginning to no longer see it as a four-letter word, and Catholic dance activists are working hard to once more allow dance in the Mass. As Christians it is especially vital to discover the richness of the body and the dance. "Dance is one of those rare human activities which simultaneously reconciles heart, body and spirit."<sup>45</sup> As

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<sup>43</sup> Roger G. Betsworth, Social Ethics: An Examination of American Moral Traditions (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1990) 181.

<sup>44</sup> John Rice, Shout Alleluia! Dance Alleluia! (Knoxville: WorshipWorks, ND) Videotape.

<sup>45</sup> Doople, 1.

anthropologist Paul Spencer says, "Dancing is the human spirit's participation in (the world)."<sup>46</sup> A Christian's highest calling is to participate in the world and its redemption. In our Euro-American culture, bodies need redemption.

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<sup>46</sup> Paul Spencer, ed., Society and the Dance (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 35.

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