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Dance & Religion: Christianity's Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Dance as a form of religious devotion is a cherished, universal norm. “Evidence for it in prehistory is provided by cave paintings; it was a normal feature of Egyptian and of Classical Greek religion; it was central to Shaker practice; it has never ceased to be an element in Hindu worship and at the present day it is found throughout the world: in Africa, Australia, and North America; in Israel, where Jews dance with the Torah; in Spain, where choristers dance before the high altar at mass” (Wakefield, 1983, p. 102-103). Although religious dance is universal, it is not always considered acceptable.

The use of dance for celebration and for praising God is prevalent throughout the Bible. The Israelites danced after winning victories in war (1 Sam. 18:6), Jeremiah prophesied that the Israelites would dance after returning to their land (Jer. 31:4b, 13), David danced when the ark was brought back to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:14-16), and Miriam danced after the Israelites safely crossed the Red Sea (Ex. 15:20).

God even commands dancing as part of worship in Psalm 149:3: “Let them praise His name with dancing...” David says that God has “turned [his] mourning into dancing” (Ps. 30:11a). In fact,

“Dancing is so common that in passages alluding to rejoicing without specific mention of dancing, it can be assumed dance is implied” (Gagne, 1984, p. 24).

Yet today, many Christian denominations (and even individual churches within those denominations) still claim that dance is sinful, and prohibit it not only from the church, but also to their members. Why has dance in the Christian church become such a taboo? Where did the unreasonable fear of dance making a person sinful begin? For the answers to such questions, we must delve into the history of sacred dance.

BIBLICAL HISTORY

Coleman (1995) states, “In the Hebrew tradition, dance functioned as a medium of prayer and praise, as an expression of joy and reverence, as a mediator between God and humanity. This understanding of dance permeated the faith of the early Christian church. During the Middle Ages, despite increasing proscriptions against the use of dance, it continued to be utilized as a medium of prayer and praise. However, by the time of the Reformation, [both the Catholic and Protestant churches] had eliminated dance from worship” (p. 35).



In biblical times, dance was an essential part of the celebrations of the Israelites. It was used both in worship, festivals, and other special occasions. In Old Testament accounts of dance, it carries no condemnation, but only approval of it as a means to worship God. In fact, in one infamous story of King David in the midst of dancing “with all his might” before God, his wife was punished for criticizing him for it. Clearly, God meant dance to be included as a sacred part of our worship of Him.

According to Clark and Crisp (1981), “the most frequently used root for the word ‘dance’ in the Old Testament is *hul* which refers to the whirl of the dance and implies highly active movement. Of the 44 words in the Hebrew language for dancing, only in one is there a possible reference to secular movement as distinct from religious dancing” (p.35). The types of dance in Israelite society included the circular or ring dance, as well as the processional dance. They also used a very “haute” style, including hopping and whirling that were designed to express joy.

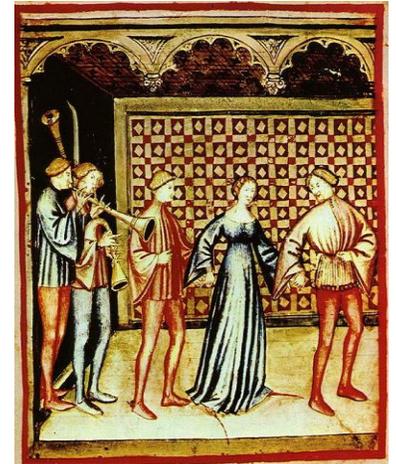
The New Testament provides few specific references to dance. According to Gagne, “this points to a possible parallel of the Jewish tradition of presuming the presence of dance without the need to mention it explicitly” (p.35). Additionally, Coleman states “in the Aramaic language which Jews spoke, the word for ‘rejoice’ and ‘dance’ are the same. Hence, in including ‘dance’ with ‘rejoice’ there are references to dancing and leaping for joy (Lk. 6:23) as well as ‘dancing in the Spirit’ (Lk. 10:21)” (p. 37).

EARLY HISTORY

In the first five centuries of the Christian church, dance was still generally accepted because it was rooted so deeply in the Judeo-Christian tradition. “In the two earliest Christian liturgies recorded in detail, dance is used in the order of service” (p. 37). In the early church, dance was seen as one of the “heavenly joys and part of the adoration of the divinity by the angels and by the saved” (Gagne, p. 36). This attitude towards dance is harshly different from the Roman society in which Christianity first appeared. In response to what the Christians thought was moral depravity, the church tried to purify the dance by “expunging all traces of paganism from the intention and expression of the movement” (Coleman, p.37). Influenced by Neo-Platonism, the Fathers in the church tried to discourage dancing, but it was not entirely eliminated and peasants found convenient ways around this prohibition.

“Many references to dance as part of worship in the fourth and fifth centuries are tempered by warnings about forms of dance which were considered sinful, dissolute and which smacked of Roman degeneracy. As membership in the Christian Church became popular, licentiousness began to characterize the sacred festivals” (p.37). By the start of the sixth century, dance was severely condemned in the church.

In the early Middle Ages, dance was restricted in the church. However, approved popular sacred dances emerged in conjunction with church ceremonies and festivals, and were performed to hymns or carols. Later on, during this time, the sacred dance form gradually changed to devotional dance, which was more theatrical and dramatic. Aside from this approved dance, “in struggling to unify and control Christian dance, the church hierarchy issued a number of edicts against the use of dance” (p. 41). In reaction to this restriction, peasants resorted to such alternatives as “danse macabre” and “danseomania.”



The Renaissance brought more restrictions to the sacred dance world. “Prior to the Renaissance, religious dance had become severely ritualized within the church, and only in popular sacred dances did it retain the element of spontaneity. Yet within the ensuing changes brought by circumstances of the Renaissance, the church and civil authorities sought to sedate, proscribe and ritualize these dances also” (p. 42).

“Ultimately, however, it was the Reformation, which tended, in its extreme forms, to do away with Christian dance. All dances and processions, except funeral processions, were abolished” (p. 43). As a result, religious dance all but vanished, and dance was pushed back into the secular realm once again. Ironically, such prominent Reformation leaders as Martin Luther and William Tyndale did not object to the use of dance in worship, but their views were squelched.

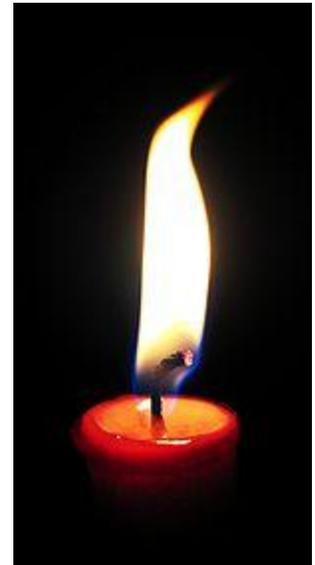
MODERN HISTORY

Slowly, with the revitalization of the church in the twentieth century, dance discovered mounting reception in the church's ideas of worship. Because of its rich biblical tradition, "in the twentieth century, dance [became] more and more recognized as a means not simply of recreation but of spirituality, it being understood as a religious exercise whereby the interior homage rendered to God may be externalized. Without doubt, dance can express adoration, praise, supplication, spiritual joy; it can become a prayer, articulated not by words but by the movements of a person's whole body. Since worship is not only the offering to God of ourselves as bodies (Rom. 12:1), but also of the best we are capable of, the gift of dance, equally with other creative talents, such as music, painting, architecture... [became] an oblation" (Wakefield, p. 103).

RELIGIOUS DANCE TODAY

Two common objections (and misconceptions) from the Christian perspective today are that dancing does not bring glory to God and that the costumes and physical contact are sinful. In the New Testament, Paul reminds Christians that their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and that they should glorify God with their bodies (1 Cor. 6:19-20). In religious dance, the entire point is to glorify God with one's body, and thus the movements are very careful to do just that. In regards to the issues of costumes and of physical contact, liturgical dance is, again, designed to lead people in worship. Costumes and contact are therefore vigilant about preserving the sacredness and propriety of worship.

Although dancing is still not fully accepted by all Christian denominations, it is gaining in popularity and someday will hopefully become a standard element of worship. There are many professional liturgical dance companies, including Ballet Magnificat!, Omega Liturgical Dance Company, and the Asaph Ensemble. An international interfaith organization, the Sacred Dance Guild, holds an annual festival and publishes its own journal three times a year. While not all churches within those denominations agree with their leaderships' choices, again, at least it is leading to a widespread acceptance. One might say that the spirit of God lights our dance.



USING DANCE IN WORSHIP

“Many religious groups believe that the faithful should praise the name and glory of God not only with their lips, but also with their whole being, heart, soul, and body...they believe that dance helps the individual more completely, and more intensely, to pray and to praise God. One of the psychological [benefits of] dancing is that it creates a happy disposition. The dancer, joyful, and with a contented heart, praises the Lord and expresses his gratitude to Him” (Nalbandian, 1989, para. 8). Dance may be used in a choreographed format, in which it is done in a more “theatrical” setting, or can be done spontaneously as a free act of worship by the congregation.

Using dance within a dance-drama format draws “attention to the mimetic aspect of dance, which may take balletic form, but modern or free dance is equally appropriate. It is particularly so when what is envisaged includes both a dance-choir and an entire congregation. It is scarcely necessary to point out that if dance can contribute to public worship, it can also play a role in private devotions” (Wakefield, p.103). This is just one other way to worship God through dance.



CONCLUSION

We have seen how dance is important throughout biblical history, and explored the use of sacred dance through early and modern world history. We have discussed ways in which dance can be used in worship, and have seen that dance is one important method of Christian worship. “Such a mode of spirituality corresponds to a biblical view of God as a living being, not static but dynamic, the one who according to Jewish eschatology will Himself, when the Kingdom comes in its fullness, lead His people in a triumphant dance” (Wakefield, p. 103). Also, “religious dancing for many is a source of religious inspiration, and [is] therefore necessary” (Nalbandian, para. 8). That is why Christians should feel free, and perhaps even obliged, to take flight in worshipping God through the art of dance.



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