

## ABSTRACT

Praise Him with the Dance:  
Incarnation, Creation, and the Sacred Art of Movement

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The art of dance is central to many cultures and religions worldwide, but has sometimes been neglected by the Christian community – especially in its discussion of theology and the arts. Though there is clear biblical, historical, and literary precedent for dance as a form of Christian worship and celebration, the beauty of this art has often been obscured by stigmas against embodiment itself. However, for Christians, who profess a theology of the Word made flesh, this embodied art has great potential for experiencing and communicating spiritual truths. In my thesis, I explore subjects including the significance of dance in Western Christian culture, the value of art as a spiritual language, and dance as a form of communion with God and with others. My research incorporates scholarship on theology and the arts and builds on the work of scholars, artists, and organizations that pursue excellence in the arts, advocating for dance as a sacred art. Through this project, I hope to reconnect Christians to an ancient but often forgotten tradition, inspiring a new awareness of the movement of the Spirit and the value of integrating dance in the life of the church.

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PRAISE HIM WITH THE DANCE:  
INCARNATION, CREATION, AND THE SACRED ART OF MOVEMENT

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## DEDICATION

*“A dancer of the highest order is one who can perfect an inner purity  
as well as an external beauty.”*

~ CHENG PHON, Khmer court dancer, Cambodia<sup>1</sup>

For Cassie, a dancer of the highest order.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric N. Franklin, *Dance Imagery for Technique and Performance*, Second edition. (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2014), 109.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

*“Dance and game are frivolous, unimportant down here; for ‘down here’ is not their natural place. Here, they are a moment’s rest from the life we were placed here to live. But in this world everything is upside down. That which, if it could be prolonged here, would be a truancy, is likest that which in a better country is the End of ends. Joy is the serious business of heaven.”<sup>1</sup>*

~ C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*

### *Sacred Dance and Spirituality*

Martha Graham, considered by many to be one of the great pioneers of modern dance in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, once spoke of dance as the hidden language of the soul.<sup>2</sup> Dancers, she wrote in one of her memoirs, are the athletes of God.<sup>3</sup> Deeply religious, Graham believed in the power of her art to embody truths about our spiritual existence. Perhaps in this she was mentored by her teacher, Ruth St. Denis, who wrote of experiencing through dance the “exultant unity” of her “threefold self – physical, emotional and spiritual,” and became devoted to exploring the potential of dance as a means of communicating transcendent realities.<sup>4</sup> Lamenting the neglect of dance in the study and practice of western religions, St. Denis envisioned Cathedrals of the Future as spaces that would “surpass in sheer attracting power any theater or other secular

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer: Reflections on the Intimate Dialogue between Man and God* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1992), 92–93.

<sup>2</sup> James Renshaw, *In Search of the Greeks* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2008), 92.

<sup>3</sup> Martha Graham, *Blood Memory*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth St. Denis, “Religious Manifestations in the Dance,” *The Dance Has Many Faces*, edited by Walter Sorrell, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia UP, 1966), 13.

exposition of the arts,” employing innovations in architecture, technology, and design to promote the use of dance in congregational worship services.<sup>5</sup> “To state it briefly,” she said, “I want to see the House of God the most fascinating and perfect creative center ever conceived, the flower of civilization.”<sup>6</sup> St. Denis felt that in failing to incorporate the arts in worship, religious practice was failing to speak to an essential aspect of our spiritual existence as creations of God: our incarnation and our creativity, an embodied reflection of God’s own creative spirit.

In cultures all across the globe, dancing is integral to both community celebration and the expression of the spiritual life. For the Mevlevi, members of a Persian Sufi order often referred to as the whirling dervishes,<sup>7</sup> the ritual of stylized turning is a spiritual practice of the *sema* ceremony.<sup>8</sup> The worshippers spin with one palm facing to the sky and one to the earth, encompassing in one movement both the grounded weight of our physical bodies and the lightness of our ascending spirits. This motion represents the joy of turning toward the transcendent truth: the “Persian dervish poet Rumi tells us that, ‘Whosoever knoweth the power of the dance, dwelleth in God.’”<sup>9</sup> In other religions, too, human hands speak a spiritual language beyond words, as illustrated by the *hasta mudras*, the ritualized hand gestures of Hinduism. During performances of Cambodian classical dance, with its serene composure and use of these delicate hand movements,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> W. G. Raffé, “Dervish,” in *Dictionary of the Dance* (New York; London: A.S. Barnes; Thomas Yoseloff, 1975), 146.

<sup>8</sup> “Dervishes,” *The Whirling Dervishes of Rumi* (8 April, 2014) <http://www.whirlingdervishes.org/whirlingdervishes.htm> (accessed 3 April, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> David Michael Levin, “Balanchine’s Formalism,” in *What Is Dance?: Readings in Theory and Criticism*, edited by Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, 123–45, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1983), 134.



there is a ceremony called *sompeah kru* – “prayer to the teachers” – in which students celebrate the gods and their teachers, those who came before and those who continue the legacy of sacred dance.<sup>10</sup> With gifts of fruits, flowers, incense, and dance, the students “call to the spirits of those who came before them to witness the performance, to witness the continuation of their ideas and beliefs, and to witness truth and beauty.”<sup>11</sup>

Dance and prayer are sometimes united in Native American cultures as well. In the ceremonies and dances of the Hopi *katsinam*, dance is a form of beseeching and thanking the gods for the life-sustaining rain and the harvest.<sup>12</sup> Wearing sacred masks, honored members of the community dance the part of the gods, at once retelling and continuing the stories of their ancestors. The ceremony involves a procession of the dancers through the village to a shrine at the village plaza.<sup>13</sup> In an article comparing the similarities between Hebrew and Hopi dance rituals, Cassie Mitchell, a classically trained dancer who studied dance at Brigham Young University, writes, “I often observed Katsinam dances in my village of Kikotsmovi [Arizona]. As a young Hopi girl, I was taught the beauty of my religion, and came to understand that dance is sacred. . . . dance serves as a communicator, educator, and expresser of faith. Dance is essential to Hopi religion and life.”<sup>14</sup> As Mitchell’s article makes clear, the use of dance in religious expression is also important in the history and practice of Judaism. The feast celebrations

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<sup>10</sup> Prumsodun Ok, “Call to the Teachers,” *TEDFellows Blog* (9 July 2011) <http://fellowsblog.ted.com/tag/chhengphon> (accessed April 3, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> “Rainmakers from the Gods: Hopi Katsinam,” President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1997 (9 April 2014) <http://peabody2.ad.fas.harvard.edu/katsina/> (accessed 3 April 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Cassie Mitchell, “Parallels in the Dance Ritual and Ceremonies of the Jewish and Hopi People,” *Brigham Young University*, no. 18 (Winter 2006): 55–61, 57. Note that Kachina is an alternate spelling of Katsina.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 56.

of the Hebrew culture incorporate communal dancing, a custom that recognizes both the gladness and grief in a people's history.

Christianity also has its ties to dance. The sacred texts of the Judeo-Christian faith contain numerous references to dancing as a demonstration of joyous worship, perhaps the most notable example being the story of David's supposedly undignified dancing before the ark of the Lord in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 6:14. "Praise his name with dancing," states Psalm 149:3, for he has transformed our sorrow to joy. In such narratives and verses, the act of dancing seems connected to both the human experience and the divine reality.

Because dance involves a synthesis of the mind, body, and spirit, it has a unique purity of expression that may be absent in more "disembodied" forms of communication. Dance can express ideas and emotions truthfully, because it shows us a person undisguised and invites our response. It is thus a form of communion. Dancing in the presence of others requires an added level of openness and honesty, since it communicates through the physical body and the whole self. In a 1946 essay titled "Dance as a Means of Communication," John Martin writes that this physical vulnerability is part of what makes the language of dance so powerful:

Because of the inherent contagion of bodily movement, which makes the onlooker feel sympathetically in his own musculature the exertions he sees in somebody else's musculature, the dancer is able to convey through movement the most intangible emotional experiences. This is the prime purpose of the modern dance; it is not interested in spectacle, but in the communication of emotional experiences – intuitive perceptions, elusive truths – which cannot be communicated in reasoned terms or reduced to mere statement of fact.<sup>15</sup>

With the ability of dance to communicate such intangible truths and the precedent set by various other religions, it would seem that dance would have also have an important

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<sup>15</sup> John Martin, "Dance as a Means of Communication," in *What Is Dance?: Readings in Theory and Criticism*, ed. Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 22–23, 22.

place in today's Christian art, worship, and vocations.

Despite the great potential and the long history of dance incorporated in spiritual and community life, however, this tradition does not often seem to be celebrated in Western Christianity today. As a dancer, I have struggled to find opportunities to practice my art in ways that are accepted by the Christian community. Prior to my research for this project, I had rarely encountered dance in connection to Christianity, even in settings specifically devoted to the study of faith and the arts. This tension seems to point to a greater conflict between religious belief and the art world in general.

### *Dance and Christian Art*

Some might say that in American culture today, Christianity and the arts rarely connect; when they do, it can be at the expense of excellence in either category. Sadly, to certain scholars and artists, the phrase "Christian art" comes across as a limitation, as if to be considered Christian the art must be tame, uncontroversial, modest, surface-level, puritanical. Christian movies, though produced with good intentions, may present obvious moral messages but lack the powerful acting that would inspire viewers to ponder what they've seen. Christian songs may meet a certain quota of biblical references or allusions to Jesus, but lack the musical artistry that would make them truly poignant. Alternately, some art is with created Christian intent but presented in such an obscure way that it is nearly impossible for anyone to decipher any sort of underlying religious or edifying message. In such cases, the words of Tolstoy seem fitting: "to say that a work of art is good, but incomprehensible to the majority of men, is the same as saying of some

kind of food that it is very good but that most people can't eat it."<sup>16</sup> It is clearly a difficult task to determine the right balance and interaction between religion and art. But it is, without a doubt, a question worth pursuing and an achievement worth striving for.

Even beyond the question of defining criteria for "Christian art," however, dance is usually left out of the discussion altogether. Though the Christian community generally considers other art forms – music, singing, painting, sculpture, and the like – as having the potential to be morally enriching or spiritually expressive, dance is often avoided. Is there something about these art forms that dance does not have? While music and visual arts are widely considered media suitable for Christian artists, few Christians are familiar with the art of dance. Dance is often ignored, and sometimes even denounced, with certain Christian denominations condemning dance in general (regardless of the intent or occasion) as a source of sinfulness. To me, it seems strange that something with the natural potential to express pure joy – something we even use as a metaphor for love, when we speak of our spirits or hearts dancing – would be considered inappropriate for Christians. While it is not unusual to encounter such opinions against dancing, the reasons for this stigma against dance are less immediately apparent.

### *Fighting the Flesh*

Ruth St. Denis recognized a similar tension between the practice of dance and religion in her own era. "As I see it," she wrote, "the deepest lack of Western cultures is any true workable system for teaching a process of integration between soul and body. Obviously, no effort has been made by the church as a whole, probably because of its

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<sup>16</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*, translated by Alymer Maude (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1899), 87.

long fostered conflict between the Goodness of the Soul and the supposed Badness of the Body.”<sup>17</sup> While I would disagree that this is our culture’s “deepest lack,” St. Denis’ assessment rings true in certain ways. The New Testament, especially, does warn of the battle between the spirit and the flesh. Aware of this, it seems that many Christians have tried to avoid the difficult task of defining what an appropriate perspective toward our embodiment would be. And though St. Denis’ statement generalizes a nuanced issue, it does bring to light one of the main reasons Christians may be leery of dance: a discomfort with the physical body and, more specifically, a fear of sexual sin.

Like so many other essentially good things, dance can be “corrupted and used for ill.”<sup>18</sup> In a conversation I had with my friend Cassie, she told me that as a mother of young children, she struggles with the decision to allow her girls to take dance classes because of negative influences they may be exposed to in the studio: other students learning age-inappropriate or provocative choreography, wearing too little clothing and too much makeup for dance recitals, growing up too fast. This trend responds to and feeds a popular media culture where dance is often used to glorify sexuality above all, whether it’s on Broadway, MTV, or the Las Vegas strip. Religious groups who have only witnessed these negative aspects of secular dance may be suspicious of dance in general, because they “don’t want to deal with something good [that has the potential to edge] closer and closer to a negative influence.”<sup>19</sup> The challenge in this issue, like so many others, is determining how to be in the world, and yet not of it. It is right and good for Christians to think critically about the ways culture may or may not align with our faith

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<sup>17</sup> St. Denis, “Religious Manifestations in the Dance,” 13.

<sup>18</sup> Cassie Mitchell, “Stigmas Against Dance,” March 31, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

convictions.

It is possible, however, to counteract the negative trends of an exhibitionist culture, to dance in a way that glorifies God and celebrates humanity as well. Regardless of the style – hip hop or lindy hop, ballet or merengue – if we truly believe that we are created in God’s image and that our bodies are “sacred and special,” our approach to dance will and should look different from most of what popular media promotes.<sup>20</sup> This comes with the awareness that “Our bodies our not ours,” as Cassie said; “They are gifts, and we are supposed to be taking care of them, and doing things with them that bring ourselves and others to God.”<sup>21</sup> When glorifying God is the ultimate goal, the true *telos* of our art, it will not only be excellent art but also pure and acceptable worship. As an artist and a Christian, I have come to believe that, as Ruth St. Denis wrote, “in order to attain the fullest self-realization through the dance we must understand that the arts . . . are never a religion in themselves, never objects of worship, but are the symbol and language for communicating spiritual truths.”<sup>22</sup> St. Denis’ words remind us that art in its highest form is art that points to the Good, the transcendent and eternal. Art is one of God’s many good gifts, which we may practice and experience both to witness and to reflect his glory while we are here on earth. And the art of dance, I believe, is uniquely adapted to portray the truth of Christ. When we see God as the Lord of the dance, as the old hymn goes, dance can be a beautiful art form that celebrates the most meaningful things: faith, joy, empowerment, love, redemption.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> St. Denis, “Religious Manifestations in the Dance,” 13–14.

### *Looking Ahead*

How might Christians redeem dance in the eyes of the faith community and earn back the respect of the art world? How can we, as Christians, reclaim the art of dance as a work of beauty with the potential to edify, to inspire, to spark contemplation and wonder? Questions like these have served as the impetus for my exploration of the connection between faith and art. My desire to advocate for the art of dance has prompted me to study the history of dance within Western Christian culture,<sup>23</sup> to consider embodiment and artistic creativity as essential aspects of our status as created beings, and to present dance as a worthy and transformative manner of spiritual expression.

To begin to situate my study of dance in a religious context, the next chapter discusses the characteristics of dance that give it potential for being sacred art, both in terms of worship and encouraging spiritual communion with God and other believers. Chapter three focuses on the historical use of dance as a spiritual practice, specifically within the Judeo-Christian faith. Chapter four outlines the role of Christian dance as a form of high art, both artistic and spiritual in its best sense. The final chapter includes reflections on my own experience with sacred dance. Using the work of C. S. Lewis as a framework, I contemplate the eternal significance of dance as an expression of Christian faith, hope, and love.

In this project, I hope to make visible an art form that is extraordinary, but that has sometimes been overlooked by the Christian community in its discussion of theology and the arts. I hope to show that though the beauty of dance has sometimes been obscured by societal stigmas against embodied expression, there is clear biblical and historical

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<sup>23</sup> For the purpose of limiting the scope of this project, I have chosen to focus primarily on European and American Christianity.

precedent for the value of dance as a form of worship and community celebration. In doing so, perhaps I can inspire others, too, if not to dance, at least to see dance in a new way.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Sacred Dance

*“Does God pay attention only to the movements of the lips  
and not to the movements of the hands and body?”<sup>1</sup>*

~ Allen Knight Chambers, *Adventures in Prayer*

#### *Communication and Communion*

Though it may not often be recognized, the practice of dance as a sacred ritual has had a presence within Christian history arguably since the beginning of the faith. Before the advent of the Christian era, it was prominent within the ancient Hebrew culture and the religions of the Greeks. My thesis will focus on these cultures specifically, but as I have discussed in my introduction, it is well known that dance is incorporated in the religious rituals of various other peoples around the world, including the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Scholars of dance have asserted that it is a universal practice and one of the earliest, if not the earliest, forms of sacred ritual. Dance, then, must have certain qualities that give it the potential for being a sacred art and practice.

A basic definition of dance is that it is gesture, movement carried out with the intention of communicating a message, which is perceived through the senses. Philosopher Susanne K. Langer writes that all dance motion is gesture, which she describes as a kinetic experience that is “at once subjective and objective, personal and

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Fisk Taylor, *A Time to Dance: Symbolic Movement in Worship* (1976), 12.

public, willed (or evoked) and perceived.”<sup>2</sup> In the transposition of physical movement into gesture with meaning, the temporal action of dancing is given lasting significance.<sup>3</sup> The exchange of meaning between the dancer and the observer, which requires both expression and analysis, allows for a plurality of interpretations. At its essence, dance is a language, albeit a nonverbal one. This nonverbal quality, however, is no reason to belittle the potential of dance movement as a form of communication; in fact, it is one of its greatest strengths. The language of dance, because of its combination of artistry, emotion, and the body, is particularly arresting.

In the process of communication, gesture, facial expression, and the movements of other parts of the body are crucial to conveying messages.<sup>4</sup> Before we are born, movement serves as our first form of communication, and even spoken language depends on the physical movement of specialized vocal organs. Developmental psychologists such as Jean Piaget emphasize the primary significance of these physical aspects of language, being part of our sensory motor skills, as one of our most meaningful early learning experiences as humans. Referring to Piaget’s work in an interview, Sheila Kogan, an educational psychologist, modern dancer, and liturgical dance director, explained that this is one of the reasons dance is an eloquent language: “the earliest mode of learning is the sensory motor, so something that ‘touches our gut’ is going to be the

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<sup>2</sup> Susanne K. Langer, “Feeling and Form,” in *What Is Dance?: Readings in Theory and Criticism*, edited by Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, 28–47 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Langer writes, “During the presentation of a dance, the performer “transform[s] the stage for the audience as well as for themselves into an autonomous, complete, virtual realm, and all motions into a play of visible forces in unbroken, virtual time . . . Both space and time, as perceptible factors, disappear almost entirely in the dance illusion, serving to beget the appearance of interacting powers rather than to be themselves apparent” (43–44). In other words, though the action of the dance exists on a literal level (i.e., at a certain time and place, for a certain length of time), as a form of communication it exists in its own created setting. See Langer, “Feeling and Form,” 43–44.

<sup>4</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 246.

most deeply felt; when someone sees a beautiful dancer do a move that brings a visceral response, that's very powerful."<sup>5</sup> Movement and gesture often speak to us on an instinctual level. In *The Principles of Art*, philosopher R. G. Collingwood even claims that "dance is the mother of all languages" – not in the sense that, by some attempt at reconstructing humanity's "distant past without any archeological data," dance necessarily came *before* spoken language, but that dance, as a total bodily gesture, is an original language of humanity.<sup>6</sup> Collingwood writes, "a person using [the language of dance] would be speaking with every part of himself."<sup>7</sup>

Whether we are aware of it or not, we make use of an extensive vocabulary of movement. José Limón, one of the great innovators of modern dance in the early twentieth century, once said that "We all dance a little every day." In this statement, Limón points to the fact that there is so much more involved in our daily communication and movement than simply walking from place to place, sitting down, standing up. We tap our toes when we are impatient, roll our heads and arch our backs when we are exhausted or frustrated, raise our arms emphatically to embrace friends we've missed. Dancing, then, is a comprehensive language, uniting the whole person – mind, body, emotions, and spirit – in the process of expressing meaning. This is one of the primary reasons that dance, as a sacred ritual for the purpose of communing with God and with other believers, is valued in so many different religious faiths.

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<sup>5</sup> Sheila Kogan, personal interview (15 September 2014). For the rest of this interview, see Appendix D.

<sup>6</sup> Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, 246.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

### *Uncomfortable with Embodiment: Disdain of the Body in Christian Heritage*

Despite the ability of dance to act as a vibrant form of expression, it has been sometimes overlooked as a legitimate form of such communion in the Christian tradition. Addressing the decline of dance in Western cultures, especially as it pertains to the influence of Christianity, scholars of dance will often cite the Western tendency to rank the different elements of human experience in a system that places the exercise of the intellect above all, isolated from the emotions and physicality. In the historical reception of dance in the Western Christian church, many negative connotations associated with dancing were not inherent to scripture but were a result of this imposed hierarchy. Perhaps if the doctrine of the incarnation had been more widely interpreted as an affirmation of the importance of our own physical nature, biblical exhortations to dance for joy in the Lord might have had greater longevity and significance in Christian practice. Instead, however, a suspicion toward dance developed. This came in part due instances of misbehavior associated with dancing in the church setting, but largely from a disdain of the physical body inherited from dualist philosophies.<sup>8</sup>

### *Dualism in Greek Philosophy*

The roots of this discomfort with embodiment stem from myriad sources. One is ancient Greek schools of thought, such as Platonism, which maintained that because the physical world is ultimately an inferior imitation of the transcendent realm of the Forms,

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<sup>8</sup> See Sara B. Savage, “Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive,” in *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts*, ed. Jeremy Begbie (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 64–82, 68.

the body is not only inferior to the soul but actually a *defilement* to the soul.<sup>9</sup> Such philosophies promoted the concept that the body was merely a shell: that the mind was imprisoned in the body and could only reach fulfillment upon discarding the flesh.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, based on this notion of the inferiority of the earthly versions of the transcendent Forms, representative art – as an imitation of an imitation – was even further from the truth.<sup>11</sup> In an essay included in a book titled, *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts*, Sara B. Savage suggests that another reason for the gradual rejection of dance comes from another aspect of Greek philosophy: Aristotle’s concept of God as the unmoved mover. According to Savage, “The idea of God as impassable, the unmoved mover (a notion arguably more Greek than biblical), is thus reflected in human stillness. An absence of movement became the signifier of the ideal, the spiritual.”<sup>12</sup> In the Christian religious service, then, it became proper for worshippers to remain still not only as a sign of concentration and respect, but in some sense, as an imitation of the Holy.<sup>13</sup> Western Christianity, informed by these Greek influences, seems to have developed a concept of the physical body being in direct opposition to the pursuit of righteousness. The communication of religious beliefs and concepts was primarily limited to the spoken and written word.

However, as Trevor Hart writes, “those who espouse a theology centered on the

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith: A Form of Knowing* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2011), 120.

<sup>10</sup> Savage, “Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive,” 69.

<sup>11</sup> Trevor A. Hart, “Through the Arts: Hearing, Seeing and Touching the Truth,” in *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts*, edited by Jeremy Begbie, 1–26, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Savage, “Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive,” 68.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

incarnation have good reason . . . to . . . challenge . . . the residual Platonism of some accounts of our relationship to language (many of which would apparently prefer to strip it of its ‘flesh’ altogether in pursuit of an immediate engagement with a preexistent *logos asarkos*,<sup>14</sup> a move challengeable on christological grounds alone).”<sup>15</sup> Many of Plato’s concepts, of course, hold Christian truths. It would be folly to elevate the earthly *at the expense* of the category of the transcendentals, for example; we of course recognize that there is more to ourselves than our mortal, physical bodies. However, because the embodiment of Christ is central to Christian doctrine, we must engage with the fact of our physical existence, knowing that God has created us as embodied creatures for his own good purpose, though we cannot yet fully understand what that purpose is.

#### *Dualism, Christian Asceticism, Intellectualism, and the Arts*

Another source of disdain for the physical body stems from the belief of certain early church fathers, like Augustine, that original sin was essentially a hereditary defect transmitted through the physical process of human reproduction. This belief led, in part, to the extreme asceticism associated with certain aspects of the monastic movement of medieval Christian spirituality. In the current of asceticism that developed in the spirituality of the early medieval era, for many Christians, “abhorrence of the physical body remained a way of progressing religiously.”<sup>16</sup> When Christianity was legalized and persecution and martyrdom became less of a reality for the majority of believers, the

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<sup>14</sup> Or, the Word *un*-incarnate; the second person of the trinity, but preexisting before the incarnation of Christ.

<sup>15</sup> Trevor A. Hart, *Making Good: Creation, Creativity, and Artistry*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 132.

<sup>16</sup> Savage, “Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive,” 69.

question became about how to pursue holiness when simply identifying with Christianity would no longer set one apart or warrant punishment from governing authorities. In response to this change of circumstances, “deny[ing] the body of food or sleep [and sex] was often normative in monastic tradition,” demonstrating a general “cultural aversion towards embodiment.”<sup>17</sup>

The dualistic impulse and rejection of the physical body were also perpetuated by later influences on Christianity. The Reformation’s emphasis on the written word,<sup>18</sup> the dualism of the philosopher Descartes, and Enlightenment philosophies that elevated reason above emotion or other ways of understanding all contributed to a general tendency to undervalue the physical and exalt the intellect.<sup>19</sup> In other words, these various movements created a climate of intellectualism, not only in the secular realm, but in the religious realm as well.

It would be ludicrous to denounce intellectualism as a whole – it is responsible for many of the greatest achievements in modern society. Still, intellectualism is not without its repercussions. One negative result of intellectualism is that in some respects, it “[demotes] and [marginalizes] other aspects of our humanity,” and has left us with an impaired vocabulary for understanding, expressing, and valuing our humanity.<sup>20</sup> The arts, as has already been discussed, are one such language that has been restricted by a focus on intellectualism, especially within Christianity. Concerning the tense relationship of

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<sup>17</sup> This “was all the more damning for women,” whose value in society was tied primarily to their physical bodies and their reproductive role. See Savage, “Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive,” 70.

<sup>18</sup> Alan W. Smith, “Dancers Exult at the Awakening,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 7, no. 1 (January 2004: 20–29, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Savage, “Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive,” 65.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Christianity and the arts in general, Richard Viladesau “sees the primacy of the Word that emerged out of these related intellectual movements [the Reformation and the Enlightenment] as a significant factor in the denigration of all the arts in the life of the church in the period since the seventeenth century.”<sup>21</sup> In the “mind-body dichotomy” that epitomizes intellectualist ideologies, the body is seen as the lesser element, and therefore becomes “suspect because of its connections with the base emotions and baser appetites and impulses.”<sup>22</sup> This explains a significant reason for the loss of acceptance for dance within Christianity, since it gave dance, as a bodily activity, the supposed taint of sin.

Together, the dualistic tendencies inherited from Greek philosophy and the almost exclusive emphasis on the intellect in spirituality has meant that in some ways, Christians have developed a fear of the physical body. This tension with embodiment has necessarily influenced our beliefs about Jesus, as well. According to Savage’s analysis,

Western Christianity especially has inadvertently screened out whole swathes of human reality and offered us a preferred flavour of being a Christian: cerebral, disembodied, male, emotionally controlled, hierarchically ordered. Very often, we have portrayed Jesus in similar terms, and at the same time attenuate our capacity to relate to him: typically, we know him only with our minds and allow him to know only our minds.<sup>23</sup>

By favoring the intellect and verbal language, Western Christians have had a tendency to take a theology based on the Word made flesh and fashion a theology of the flesh made word.

With this cultural background, it makes sense that dance is rarely considered as a form of Christian expression today. Dance, because it is necessarily an embodied art, has

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, “Dancers Exult at the Awakening,” 26.

<sup>23</sup> Savage, “Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive,” 72.



perhaps suffered most from our history of discomfort with the physical aspect of our Christian lives, whether or not we recognize the underlying source of that discomfort. However, it is possible to come to a perspective about the way our dual nature of body and spirit relates to our Christian faith that celebrates, rather than fears, our embodiment as humans. With this perspective, we may find that dance can actually be very spiritually fruitful.

*Interacting with the Incarnation: Coming to Know Ourselves and Others*

*Dance as a Form of “Person Knowledge”*

If we neglect dance as a Christian art form simply for its associations with the physical body, we’ve hindered ourselves from making use of a powerful language and method for understanding our relationship to others. Savage writes that dance has the ability to convey meaning and increase our “person knowledge,” a term she uses to describe our understanding of other people, which includes our emotions and our bodies. Importantly, as Savage explains, person knowledge is not simply limited to other humans. Because God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, we need not attempt to come to know God only through our intellect. Savage writes that because movement is “a language that connects us to our bodies, and to our emotions which resonate within our physical bodies,” we may use movement “to enrich our person knowledge of Christ (whom we must approach by faith with our whole selves, not only our intellect).”<sup>24</sup> Susan Bauer affirms the importance of the person knowledge we gain through our embodiment:

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<sup>24</sup> Savage, “Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive,” 66–67.

We both know and communicate through the physical dimension of the body. In Western Christianity, the rational mind has been emphasized at the expense of how we know through the body. There is a body knowledge or kinesthetic intelligence that facilitates an understanding of our world and relationships with people. The vitality and more fully informed perceptions that result from a unity of body and mind need to be recognized.<sup>25</sup>

Dance, perhaps even more than other arts, can help us understand and engage with the doctrine of the incarnation.

As discussed above, Western culture tends to emphasize the acquisition of information through intellectual pursuits. Person knowledge, however, does not come exclusively from our mental faculties. Commenting on this method of understanding, Savage asserts that the “cognitive tools we have inherited in our culture are often severely inadequate to the task of exploring the mystery of the incarnation.”<sup>26</sup> You would not consider yourself to know someone well if you had merely contemplated who she was (or might be) without ever sharing a space with her, speaking with her, or observing the way she interacted with you and others. In a similar way, attempting to relegate our understanding of Christ to the realm of reason alone – discounting the value of emotional and physical experience – can give us a stunted, one-dimensional view of God. Christians are often conditioned to think of religion in exclusively spiritual terms, sometimes forgetting to consider the messy reality of Christ’s earthly life and, along the same lines, our Christian vocation to be the active hands and feet of Christ on Earth. When we understand more deeply the nature of our own physical bodies, our frailties and strengths, we can come to a more complete understanding of the significance of the radical truth that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Through Christ’s incarnation,

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<sup>25</sup> Susan Bauer, “Dance as Performance Fine Art in Liturgy,” in *Dance as Religious Studies*, edited by Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, 167–183, (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 1990), 180.

<sup>26</sup> Savage, “Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive,” 65.

spiritual truth was embodied in physical form; God became like us, that we might know him.

*Embracing the Mystery of Incarnation through Dance*

Choosing to come in human flesh, God revealed himself to the world in a way that would not intimidate us, but in a way we could identify with. Writing on the importance of this concept of embodiment to the Christian view of Christ, James Nelson states, “God is uniquely known to us through human presence, and human presence is always embodied presence.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in the words of Carla DeSola, an innovator in the art of modern liturgical dance, “Embodied spirituality is the constant reference point. Both practice and performance include body, soul, and spirit in tandem. You are body, you are spirit.”<sup>28</sup> We are spiritual beings, but here on Earth, it is impossible for us to separate our human bodies from our souls.

Our own incarnation means that our spiritual lives would be incomplete if we rejected the reality of our human bodies. Our physicality is an integral part of our spiritual existence here on earth. Doug Adams explains how dance can illustrate this religious concept: “dance is not separate from the body, but is more than just body, not materially but intentionally. Thus dance is to the body as spirit is to the body – one and inseparable but more.”<sup>29</sup> Dance, as an inherently bodily activity and yet one that is

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<sup>27</sup> Bauer, “Dance as Performance Fine Art in Liturgy,” 180.

<sup>28</sup> See Smith, “Dancers Exult at the Awakening,” 27.

<sup>29</sup> Doug Adams, “Communal Dance Forms and Consequences in Biblical Worship,” in *Dance as Religious Studies*, ed. Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 1990), 35–47, 42.

naturally adept at expressing emotion,<sup>30</sup> can be a method for uniting our emotions, bodies, and Christian beliefs in practice. Embracing this art form, which “embodies concept, emotion, and message, could stand as a powerful reminder to us that we need to embody the faith we espouse.”<sup>31</sup> If, as the monastic adage *ora et labora* expresses, even our work can be a form of prayer, and if, as Colossians 3:17 exhorts us, we are to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, then we should strive to praise God with our whole selves: body and spirit together.

This conviction – that we should praise God with our bodies as well as our spirits and our voices – has led some Christian dancers to advocate for formally incorporating dance into the liturgy of worship services. This specific form of Christian dance, intended for performance within the church itself, is often referred to as religious or liturgical dance. It is important not to limit the category of Christian dance to liturgical dance alone, because to do so would be to assume that other styles or expressions of dance cannot serve a spiritual purpose. I firmly believe that the work of professional dance companies, individual performing artists, and even commercial artists, for instance, can be just as worshipful and “Christian” as a liturgical dance done within a church setting. I also believe that social dance (often in the form of partner dance or group dancing) can also be a perfectly suitable activity for Christians – it is another way of enjoying life together and appreciating the bodies God has given us. If we recognize that God inhabits every part of our lives, the artificial lines we draw between what we see as religious and secular become much less relevant. In this way, the social dance we participate in when we celebrate a wedding, for example, may also be Christian dance. As I will discuss in later

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<sup>30</sup> Savage, “Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive,” 65.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, “Dancers Exult at the Awakening,” 27.

chapters, there is no rigid criteria for defining what is and is not Christian dance.

That said, however, liturgical dancers and liturgical dance organizations have contributed greatly to the discussion of dance and the Christian faith. One particularly influential organization is the Sacred Dance Guild, an “international, interdenominational organization devoted to furthering the dance as a dimension of worship.”<sup>32</sup> The guild began in the 1950s as a nonprofit to promote the teaching and appreciation of dance as a sacred Christian art. In an article published in 1957, Pixie Hamond wrote about the value of religious dance on behalf of the Sacred Dance Guild: dance choirs<sup>33</sup> “[accept] the responsibility of leading congregations in worship through the art of movement just as a singing choir does with music. Choirs and congregations alike are discovering that wonder and joy are elements that too frequently are lacking.”<sup>34</sup> In this, Hamond touches on the qualities of dance that give it such powerful spiritual potential. As an art and a language, dance can communicate joy without having to resort to abstraction or metaphor. If the New Testament states that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, Hamond asks, then “should we not glorify God with our bodies? Is not the body a worthy channel for the expression of grace and beauty? Is it not the most logical and immediately available tool for expressing divine message?”<sup>35</sup> When dance is included in the worship service, it can be a powerful way of sharing the Gospel, like music of instruments or voices can be.

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<sup>32</sup> Mary Jane Wolbers, “To Dance or Not to Dance,” in *Focus on Dance*, edited by Dennis J. Fallon and Mary Jane Wolbers, 73–75 (Washington, D.C: National Dance Association, 1982), 75.

<sup>33</sup> Hamond and others use the term “dance choirs” to describe groups of dancers who perform during the worship service, like vocal choirs.

<sup>34</sup> Pixie Hamond, “Praise the Lord with Dance,” *Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter* 9, no. 1 (Fall 1957).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Hamond also asserts that qualms about the use of religious dance come from mistaken beliefs about the human body, as discussed earlier: “I think our reticence to use dance in the church stems partly from our thinking that the human body is somehow ugly or sinful—something that we can’t get rid of, but that we ought to ignore.” However, she continues, “If the word dance in the context of worship seems to be an anomaly to you, then disinfect the word. Lift it out of any unworthy connotation.”<sup>36</sup> Scripture itself offers a way for us to do so.

### *Toward a Theology of the Body*

As Christians, we should seek understanding of what is meant by the conflict between “the spirit and the flesh” and what a right view of embodiment should be. A true perspective about our bodies, as given in the Bible, is that we are created by God, fearfully and wonderfully made in his image, and the dwelling place of his Holy Spirit. Would God not only give us physical bodies, but deem it important enough to clothe his own Son in flesh, if there were anything inherently sinful about embodiment itself? We must remember that “body-denying piety needs to be contrasted with Jesus’ rather relaxed attitude to the physical side of life: “The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Here is a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners’” (Matt. 11:19).<sup>37</sup> Jesus also reversed the understanding of what truly defiles the body and makes a person “unclean,” saying that it isn’t what goes into the mouth, but what comes out of the mouth

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Savage, “Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive,” 72.

that defiles a person.<sup>38</sup> Christ's affirmation of the physical body is apparent throughout the Gospels. In the account found in the Book of John, the resurrected Jesus shared a meal of fish and bread with his disciples to assure them that he was not a ghost but, in fact, a resurrected physical body. God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, an incarnation made even more significant by the fact that his physical, human body was brought back to life as a sign of his triumph over sin and death. God chose to present himself to us in human form, because "what God wills to give us cannot really be given in words, but only in manifestation; Jesus Christ. God Himself in *persona* is the real gift. The word of God in its ultimate meaning is thus precisely not 'a word from God', but God in person, God Himself speaking, Himself present, Immanuel."<sup>39</sup> Jesus' physical embodiment is clearly an important element of his salvific work for our sake.

The human body itself, as Genesis tells us, is pure and good, certainly worthy of being used as an instrument of praise and worship. This is why the art of dance can have a place in our spiritual practice, and may even help us to better understand and express the value of Christ's incarnation. While we may usually think of the divine in a purely spiritual sense, we must also contend with the truth of Christ's human life in order to appreciate both the gravity of his sacrifice and the extent of his ability to identify with us.

Savage writes:

Although it is easier to divorce ourselves from the messiness of embodied human life, its emotional anguish and physical pains, and to prefer a 'spiritualised' Christianity, in doing so, we lose sight of much of the human reality of Christ's earthly life. . . . Dance as window to the incarnation is possible, unless we underestimate the humility of God. These sweating, groaning, hormone-driven bodies make an unlikely tabernacle for the divine. Yet God embraces the things

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, (Westminster Press, 1943), 109.

we reject<sup>40</sup>: our bodies, emotions, woundedness, mortality: We can glimpse Christ there, unless we are offended that God should choose to be limited by what we despise.<sup>41</sup>

When we allow Christ's incarnation to inform our view of the human body, we recognize both its beauty and its connection to the divine spirit in each of us. We can come closer to understanding the integration of the soul and the body.

When we see people who have trained their bodies to accomplish amazing things – sprinters, gymnasts, rock climbers, musicians with lightning-fast fingers – their spirits and passions seem perfectly incorporated with their bodies. Likewise, in those times we bear witness to the most overwhelming emotional experiences – like when a woman holds her baby for the first time – how could we truly isolate the body from the soul? What we see in these moments is not simply a physical event, but neither is it a simply emotional event. It is a “personal” event, in the fullest sense: one that invites the participation of the whole person and of the community of persons, mind, heart, body, and soul. These moments unite the physical and the spiritual, the ephemeral and the eternal, the individual and the community.

I believe that the Christian dancer can communicate and feel this same sense of fulfillment, a glimpse of an eternity in which our mortal bodies put on immortality and “Death is swallowed up in victory.”<sup>42</sup> When dance is worshipful (whether it occurs in a worship service or in a secular, professional ballet), it is a vivid illustration of offering the

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<sup>40</sup> See Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 23. In C. S. Lewis' discussion of the value of petitionary prayer, he addresses the belief of some that certain topics are too trivial or “childish” to bring to God in prayer – things like our distractions, our cravings, our jealousies, or things we simply wish we had. But Lewis maintains that it does no good to avoid talking to God about what is really on our minds. To have an honest, personal relationship with God, we must “not be too high-minded,” Lewis writes, suggesting that “we may sometimes be deterred from small prayers by a sense of our own dignity rather than of God's.”

<sup>41</sup> Savage, “Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive,” 77.

<sup>42</sup> 1 Cor 15:54, *The Holy Bible, ESV*, Crossway Bibles, 2007.



body as a truly “living sacrifice” to God – wholly surrendered to God, yet actively embodied at the same time. The work and art of the Christian dancer shows the flaws of interpreting the exhortation to “deny the flesh” as a rejection of the physical body itself. Dancing is an avenue through which we can embody our conviction to offer to God not just the physical body, but the whole self, in our worship.

### *Dance as a Language of the Spirit*

#### *Words and “The Word”*

Dance, like other arts, can function as a spiritual language. This concept is likely unfamiliar to many Christians, because when we think of language our tendency is to focus on the written and spoken word. This tendency may be especially strong when it comes to our spiritual lives as Christians; after all, we must elevate Scripture as being the primary way in which we may come to know God in this time and in this life. All Scripture is God-breathed, and in the inspired word of the Bible, God has given us everything we need to understand His plan for our salvation. We must test all other spiritual experiences against the standard of Scripture and the attributes of God as revealed to us, by God himself, in the Bible.

However, we must also be careful not to equate any use of language with the ultimate reality being communicated *through* the language – the language is a vehicle for truth, not the Truth itself. In the case of Scripture, we need to remember that there is a distinction between the Word of God, the active verbal noun *logos* – Jesus, the Word made flesh – and the Bible as we come to know it through our reading and study. In

Scripture, the truth of God is made manifest to us through the language with which we speak and write – in English, Spanish, Arabic, Syriac, and the like. But a comparison of the seemingly countless differing translations of the same Bible verses – even just within English – demonstrates that language, by itself, is an imperfect tool. Human languages, while beautiful, useful, and good, are still limited in their ability to describe an infinite God. The language through which we communicate truth is not, in itself, the Truth, which transcends speech. When we have an understanding of this distinction, we may approach Scripture with the utmost reverence without discounting other “languages” through which God allows us to encounter spiritual truths – prayer, emotion, physical experience, and others, like art.<sup>43</sup>

### *Communicating Spiritual Truths through Art*

The arts are useful in presenting messages in new ways. Many scholars have shared the hypothesis that we are progressing towards a “post-literate world,” where literacy is no longer as crucial to education and understanding because of the revolution in digital media. In a post-literate society, the challenge of communication has become to make a message distinctive in some aspect other than simply being verbal, because we are flooded with verbal information on a daily basis. Writing on the context of this challenge, Margaret Fisk Taylor asserts that

The Gutenberg era of verbalization brought on the inactive, argumentative, and secondary involvement of manipulating millions of words. We present-day Christians, according to Harvey Cox, are now moving from written and spoken communication to visual imagery as the communication with more impact and acceptance. We are beginning to face the problem of communicating the gospel to the ‘postliterate man’ who will be reached through direct and immediate

experience.<sup>44</sup>

The arts are often useful as examples of the “direct and immediate” experiences Taylor mentions.

That said, it is vital that (as mentioned above) we test these other languages for alignment with what we know about God from Scripture. Just because there is potential for these alternate languages to communicate truth does not mean that this is the case in every use of the medium, nor does it mean that they may always be the best possible language to use for the occasion. The language of dance, therefore, is no “automatic good in the life of the Church.”<sup>45</sup> Just like music or film, dance “can be badly done, the theology that informs it trite, the expression inappropriate to the shared meanings and values of the audience.”<sup>46</sup> Like stories with plot lines that present moral decisions as simple either-or situations, smoothing over the confusing and painful complexity of real life problems, Christian dances that ignore the darker aspects of human experience and rely on clichéd or saccharine portrayals of Christian joy may miss the truth. And, because dance is still an unfamiliar medium of Christian expression for many, it can perhaps prove even more distracting than other well-intentioned but mediocre artistic endeavors.<sup>47</sup>

To guard against these potentially negative aspects of dance, it is crucial that the artistic expression of dance is informed by right theology and a sensitivity to the reality of human experience in relation to God. As Martin Blogg argues, the arts can be a perfectly acceptable and effective form of sharing the Gospel: the “‘language’ of dance,

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<sup>44</sup> Taylor, *A Time to Dance*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> Savage, “Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive,” 73.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 73–74.

music, and drama – popular and effective contemporary forms of communication in society in general and evangelism in particular – are as reliable and valid as the traditional sermons provided that, like the sermon, all communication is rooted in scripture . . . and is effective in communicating the *truth*.<sup>48</sup> Christian dancers should strive to make their dancing a true reflection of what they believe:

If we believe that faith is largely an intellectual matter, then our dances will mostly involve the upper body, head, and arms. If, however, our theology includes strong feelings and gutsy experiences, then we must also dance from and with the center of the body – the spine and the pelvis. If we believe that the human-divine encounter is always a pleasant, comfortable meeting, that belief will be reflected in our dances. If, however, we sometimes say, with Isaiah, ‘Woe is me, for mine eyes have seen the Lord of Hosts...’ then that cry must be danced.<sup>49</sup>

Ultimately, however, Christians also believe that Christ’s death and resurrection has overcome the darkness of the world, making possible our eternal and perfect communion with God. This recognition and hope allows us to dance with an authentic joy in spite of the present reality of suffering and sin. When we dance honestly, the art “has the potential to subvert the effects of dualism, both with regard to the way we approach the person of Christ, and with regard to Christ as the one we know. Dance can bring back more of ourselves with which to know Christ, and, in a sense, can bring back to us more of Christ.”<sup>50</sup> Because dance draws “both performer and onlooker into its story on an intuitive, visceral level,” it can teach us to speak and to listen “in a new, holistic way.”<sup>51</sup>

Regardless of whether or not the content of a dance is specifically Christian,

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<sup>48</sup> Martin Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith: A Form of Knowing*, (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2011), 60.

<sup>49</sup> Judith Rock, *Theology in the Shape of Dance: Using Dance in Worship and in Theological Process*, (Sharing Co., 1978), 7–8.

<sup>50</sup> Savage, “Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive,” 74.

<sup>51</sup> See Smith, “Dancers Exult at the Awakening,” 27.

watching a dance can “call us to be momentarily quiet and receptive to reality in much the same way that contemplative prayer does. It can call us to wait, to look, to listen, so that we can receive something new, see something new, and travel to a new place.”<sup>52</sup> And when dance is presented in a way that aligns with Scripture, it can even contribute to our understanding of the Gospel. While Blogg writes that while he does not want to “give the impression that religious dance is essentially a language of tongues, [he believes] that more often than not it functions in a very similar way by giving expression to the ineffable . . . . Dance is essentially a language of the heart and spirit.”<sup>53</sup> As long as the performing arts are “rooted in the Word,” they can serve as a non-verbal language to help express, communicate, elucidate spiritual truths, sometimes, perhaps, more clearly than written language: “My experience is that when the Word is expressed exclusively in terms of the written word and especially within the highly elaborate, linguistic code of theology, the Word is frequently lost!” A perspective toward spiritual experience that values the arts and other spiritual languages allows us to have a multi-faceted experience and understanding of God.

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<sup>52</sup> Judith Rock, “Dance, Texts, and Shrines,” in *Dance as Religious Studies*, edited by Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, 184–192, (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 1990) 187.

<sup>53</sup> Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith*, 91.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Historical Evidence of Christian Dance

Building on the previous discussion of the spiritual qualities of dance, the following chapter explores the historical evidence of dance being used for such sacred purposes in the Christian faith.

#### *The Importance of Developing a Historical Perspective on Dance and Christianity*

When I began this study of dance, I was of the opinion, perhaps like most Christians, that the practice of dance and Christianity had rarely, if ever, been connected in the history of the faith. As a dancer, I already felt that dance was a significant way of understanding and sharing my personal faith. However, since I had not encountered much discussion of dance related to theology and the arts and was mostly familiar with contemporary Christian denominations that reject dance, I assumed there was little historical evidence of Christian dance. The more I have researched this subject, however, the more this initial assumption has proven false. There is, in fact, a great wealth of historical, literary, and contemporary evidence of dance being used as an expression of Christian faith.

While dance is significant in the heritage of Christianity, though, the fact that it is so rarely considered to be a sacred Christian art today makes it clear that perspectives toward dance gradually changed over time. In general, today's culture is more accepting of dance than it was in previous generations, and the conviction that "real Christians don't dance" is perhaps less of an issue now than it might have been in the recent past.

Still, the idea that dance is inherently sinful does, in fact, continue to persist. It is not my intention to belittle deeply held beliefs about morality, and I consider it important to address concerns of those who believe that dancing goes against the Christian religion. I do believe, however, that it is vital to have a broad understanding of history and Christian tradition before making a judgment call either way. As Judith Rock explains,

One common historical error which leads to the rejection of dance is the assumption that religious tradition means “what was done in our community in 1910.” The truth is that it is possible to have a deep understanding of what we do now, and why we do it, only if one has some knowledge of what was also done in 1810, 1510, 810, and so on, and not only “here in our community” but in colonial America, 18<sup>th</sup> century Poland, medieval Prague, and Byzantine Athens as well.<sup>1</sup>

As with any issue of significance, it is important to make informed decisions based on an understanding of multiple perspectives. Having a broad historical perspective and an awareness of different cultures helps us come to a better knowledge of the lasting truth. In the words of C. S. Lewis, “A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village; the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age.”<sup>2</sup> For these reasons, I have endeavored to research the historical significance of dance within the Judeo-Christian faith, from its roots to modernity, in order to situate the place of dance within religious practice today. Though my discussion of Christian dance cannot, in the scope of this project, encompass the entirety of the history of dance and Western Christianity, I have chosen to begin with the use of dance in Hebrew culture and move towards the Pre-Reformation period, which was in many ways the high point of Christian dance until just the last century.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Learning in Wartime,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, 1<sup>st</sup> HarperCollins ed., [rev.]. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 58–59.

### *The Dance in Judeo-Christian Culture and Texts*

Since ancient times, dance has been central to many traditions of Jewish culture. There are dances to commemorate significant events in the cycle of life: birth, circumcision, coming of age, marriage. There are also dances to accompany religious observances. Even today, the tradition of ritual dance is practiced in synagogues in remembrance of the great feast days and in reverence for God's revelation as given in the Torah. As Laraine Catmull writes, dance in Jewish culture was rarely without purpose; it was a holy and communal activity that "served to sanctify religious objects, to express joyous thanksgiving and honor to God, and to unite man's spirit with God's."<sup>3</sup> According to Catmull,

In the ancient Midrashic commentaries the following question was put to the rabbinical scholars of Israel: "Can you furnish for us such a dance as that which the Holy One, blessed be He, will provide for the righteous in the time to come?" The rabbis replied, "The Holy One, blessed be He, will in the time to come lead the dance among the righteous. . . ."<sup>4</sup>

For the Jews, dance was not simply a human invention for human purposes, but a divinely inspired and ordained activity. The cultural importance of dance within Judaism is reflected in the Hebrew scripture recorded in what Christians know as the Old Testament. This heritage of dance means that for Christians, too, there is a biblical precedent for the use of dance in religious practice, both as worship and as part of other forms of celebration.

For most readers, dance may not seem to be a significant topic of the Bible. The memorable image of David's ecstatic dancing before the Ark of the Covenant may come

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<sup>3</sup> Laraine Catmull, "Jewish Religious Dance," in *Focus on Dance*, edited by Dennis J. Fallon and Mary Jane Wolbers, (*National Dance Association*: 1982), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



to mind immediately, perhaps followed by the negative connotations of dance related to the Israelites' worship of the golden calf, or the dance of Salome associated with the beheading of John the Baptist. These select narratives tend to inform most opinions either for or against the practice of dance by Christians. However, while these examples should of course be considered in the study of dance and Christianity, they do not, on their own, capture the significance or variety of dance imagery present in both the Old and New Testaments. Through a more comprehensive analysis and careful interpretation of both the language and content of Scripture, we may discover that the Bible offers a rich description of how dance might play a meaningful role in the lives of God's people.

#### *A Look at the Hebrew Language and Culture*

An etymological study of Hebrew Scripture can provide evidence for the importance of dance as a traditional form of worship, celebration, and communion with God and others. According to scholars of religious dance, there are “in either the restricted sense or the more extended sense no less than eleven Hebrew verb roots to describe dancing activities and to highlight the nuances of dance movements.”<sup>5</sup> The specialized vocabulary related to sacred dancing in Jewish tradition offers a visual not only of different motions of the body but of distinct forms or styles of dance, such as the ecstatic dance (as of David before the ark), the processional dance, and the ring dance.

Some of the Hebrew words describing dance or dance-like motion include *mahol*, referring to a brisk whirling or twisting motion of the body or a violent motion of the

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<sup>5</sup> Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith*, 9.

feet; *karar*,<sup>6</sup> to rotate; *pazaz*, to spring, leap with agility or be excited; *raqad*, to skip about; *kafaz*, to jump with both feet; *dalag*, to leap or skip over.<sup>7</sup> The verb *sabab*, which appears in verses such as Psalm 26:6 and Psalm 48:12, means “to go around,” but often refers specifically to the action of encircling an altar or other sacred object as a form of ritual dance.<sup>8</sup> According to J. B. Gross, *mahol* is the substantive word for dance in Hebrew, and “invariably signifies a *choral* or round dance – the dancers, while performing it, moving in *chorus*.”<sup>9</sup> The round dance described by the Hebrew words is one of the various forms of traditional Jewish dance that carried over into the ritual and community worship practices of Christianity. In what is a “relatively poor [undescriptive] language,” according to W. O. E. Oesterley in *The Sacred Dance*, the number of Hebrew verb roots related to dance “is not without significance.”<sup>10</sup>

The extensive Hebrew vocabulary that exists to describe dancing movements reveals the prevalence of dance in both worship and social events, and in addition to “indicating how large a role in its various forms dance must have played among the Israelites, it surely points to an advanced stage of choreography among the Jews.”<sup>11</sup> Many of the terms given above connote multiple definitions, some of which do not necessarily relate to dancing. This leads to difficulty of translation, but also adds to the

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<sup>6</sup> See Robert Young, “Dance,” in *Analytical Concordance to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Funk & Wagnalls, 1955), 220.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Gee, “Dance in the Old Testament and Ancient Israel,” *Brigham Young University*, no. 18 (Winter 2006: 12–25), 12–13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>9</sup> J. B. Gross, *The Parson on Dancing: As It Is Taught in the Bible, and Was Practiced among the Ancient Greeks and Romans*, (New York: Dance Horizons, 1875), 70.

<sup>10</sup> W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Sacred Dance: A Study in Comparative Folklore*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1923), 44.

<sup>11</sup> Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith*, 9–10.

complexity of meanings conveyed in each usage. In his book, *Dance and the Christian Faith*, Martin Blogg explains that the descriptions of David's ecstatic dance before the ark<sup>12</sup> alone contain four different descriptive terms: "Not only did he dance in the normal sense of the term *sahek*, he rotated with all his might, *karar*<sup>13</sup>; he jumped, *pazez*; he skipped, *rakad*."<sup>14</sup> These Hebrew terms provide detailed images of different actions which might simply be rendered in English translations as "dance," or in some cases, in a phrase which evokes the idea of music or celebration but masks the implication of movement altogether.

Such is the case with the Hebrew words *hagag* and *hag*, the definition of which can clearly refer to dancing but also to the more general notions of celebrating a feast, rejoicing, or making merry.<sup>15</sup> Specifically in relation to dancing, the root of these words implies turning, moving, or dancing around in a circle, but when this word appears in the Old Testament, it is usually translated in English as simply feasting or celebrating. This means that *hagag*, while being one of the most fundamental Hebrew words used to describe religious dance, may also perhaps have the most contested definition in context.<sup>16</sup> It would be incorrect to assume that every instance of the root word *hag* necessarily refers to dancing. Still, it is true that "almost all of the references to dancing in the Old Testament concern occasions of worship" and "in many Old Testament passages alluding to cultic rejoicing but without explicit mention of dancing we can

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<sup>12</sup> See 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 6 and 1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles 13 and 15.

<sup>13</sup> See Young, "Dance," 220.

<sup>14</sup> Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Oesterley, *The Sacred Dance*, 48–49. See also Young, "Dance," 220.

<sup>16</sup> See Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith*, 9–10.

safely assume that dancing is implied.”<sup>17</sup> Affirming this view, Martin Blogg and many other scholars of religious dance maintain that “dance was such a normal, everyday event in Jewish life that it did not need mentioning.”<sup>18</sup> It may be, then, that the various Hebrew words used to describe rejoicing, feasting, and dancing, are, in certain instances at least, synonymous. Blogg writes that *hag* is used to designate the “great Jewish festivals distinguished by their dancing: *Hag ha Mazzoth* (Passover), *Hag ha Bikkurim* (festival of the first fruits), and *Hag ha Asif* (harvest festival).”<sup>19</sup> Other rituals of Temple worship, such as those associated with the Feast of Tabernacles, like the Levitic “Song of Ascents”<sup>20</sup> and the “Joy of House of Water Drawing”<sup>21</sup> (*Hag ha Mayim*), involved processions leading to the altar. According to the *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, this etymological connection would support the conclusion that while “the rendering ‘feast’ or ‘festival’ will indeed suffice in most cases,” is it because “religious festivals necessarily included the sacred dance.”<sup>22</sup>

As evidenced by the prevalence of dance-related vocabulary in the Hebrew language itself, dance was and remains important to Jewish culture, and this is reflected in the numerous references to dancing in Judeo-Christian scripture. In the majority of these verses, dance is portrayed in a positive light, and most often in reference to the worship of God. In instances where dance appears to be denounced, it is important to

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<sup>17</sup> Ronald Gagne, *Introducing Dance in Christian Worship*, (Portland: Pastoral Press, 1999), 24.

<sup>18</sup> Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> W. G. Raffé, “Songs of Ascents,” 470.

<sup>21</sup> See Raffé, “Joy of House of Water Drawing,” 249–250.

<sup>22</sup> Oesterley, *The Sacred Dance*, 50.

interpret the text critically, taking into account the historical and cultural context of the verse. Christian critics of dance have cited the account in Exodus of the Israelites dancing before the golden calf as proof of the supposedly inherent sinfulness of dance. However, it is possible to reach a more nuanced conclusion: in J. B. Gross' analysis, the text "does not convey the least intimation that Moses found fault with the dancing of the people . . . but simply with their worship of the golden calf."<sup>23</sup> The dancing itself, when "considered as a part of the religious exercises, was observed in honor of the golden calf, and, hence, in so far as this was the case, a perversion from its legitimate use."<sup>24</sup> The dance in this instance *was* sinful, because it was idolatrous, but the "abuse of the dance . . . is . . . by no means a sufficient reason why it should not be *properly* used" in devotion to and worship of the one true God.<sup>25</sup> The image of the Israelite's idolatrous dancing is from a prominent event in the biblical narrative, but Scripture also provides examples of righteous, worshipful dancing, which should not be overlooked.

### *Dancing as Celebration in the Old and New Testaments*

In the book of Exodus, Miriam and the women of Israel dance in celebration of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, after Moses had parted the Red Sea for them to escape from the Pharaoh's pursuit. The text states that "Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dances. And Miriam sang to them: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has

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<sup>23</sup> Gross, *The Parson on Dancing*, 67.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Gross, *The Parson on Dancing*, 80.

triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.”<sup>26</sup> While we cannot be sure what these dances looked like, the portrayal of Miriam as the leader of the dance, singing a verse to the chorus of the other women, evokes the common “call and response” form of folk music and folk dancing in many cultures, even today. In this situation, then, we may speculate that the women of Israel “imitated [Miriam’s] steps, which were not conducted by a set, well-known form, but which were of a purely extemporaneous character.”<sup>27</sup> The dance could have taken a variety of forms; it might have been a procession in a line, or a ring dance with Miriam in the center, initiating each new series of steps before the other women repeated them in a refrain, moving around in a circle together. Regardless of the choreography, the example is noteworthy in the study of religious dance, especially because the leader of the dance was a high-ranking and respected member of the community. If Miriam, as a prophetess and as the sister of Moses, found it appropriate and good to express her rejoicing through dance, and if, as Scripture tells us, the people readily joined her in celebration, there is nothing in this passage to suggest displeasure or impropriety.<sup>28</sup> The image of God’s people dancing together to the highly rhythmic music of timbrels<sup>29</sup> amplifies the exultant tone of this passage, illustrating the Israelites’ joy and thankfulness for redemption.

Another significant example of celebratory dance in the Bible comes from the New Testament in the parable of the prodigal son, as described in the Gospel of Luke,

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<sup>26</sup> Exodus 15:20–21.

<sup>27</sup> Gross, *The Parson on Dancing*, 64.

<sup>28</sup> Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> See Appendix A for an illustration of what a celebratory procession of this kind (including the use of timbrels, or tambourines) might have looked like. The photographs were taken during an Easter service in which I participated in a dancing processional to the sanctuary.

chapter 15, verses 25–27. In this case, dancing, rejoicing, and feasting are related in that they are all involved in the event of celebration. When the prodigal son returns, his father prepares a feast in celebration, inviting the whole household to join in the festivities. According to the parable, when the older son comes in from his work in the fields, he hears music and dancing.<sup>30</sup> The older son’s bitterness against his father for generously welcoming back his disobedient brother is set in stark contrast to the image of forgiveness shown by the rejoicing of the rest of the family and friends for the return and reconciliation of the lost son. The presence of dancing lends the parable even more poignancy if we consider it a representation of the celebration in heaven at the repentance of a lost soul. God values his children so greatly that he not only offers us reconciliation, restoring our relationship with him, but he rejoices over our decision to return. Though it may not be specifically mentioned in every case, this association of rejoicing with dancing gives special meaning to passages like as Zephaniah 3:

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel!

. . .  
The LORD has taken away the judgments against you . . .  
The LORD your God is in your midst,  
a mighty one who will save;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness;  
he will quiet you by his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing.<sup>31</sup>

The emotional tone of these verses is similar to the description of the father celebrating the return of his son. It is an invitation for the people to rejoice in their salvation, but significantly, it reminds them that the LORD joins in their delight. As they sing, the collective voice of the people blends in harmony with the voice of their God, and if we

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<sup>30</sup> The Greek word used here in reference to dancing is “choros,” (a chorus, company of dancers.) See Young, “Dancing,” 220.

<sup>31</sup> Excerpted from Zephaniah 3:14, 15, 17.

remember the numerous examples of feasting, rejoicing, and dancing elsewhere in Scripture, we can imagine the possibility that God joins in their dance, as well.

When dancing is given as a vivid illustration of rejoicing, it is often specifically in praise of the power and redemptive work of the Lord. One repeated concept relates to the LORD turning sorrow into dancing – a remarkable contrast, when we ponder and visualize the imagery of the verse.<sup>32</sup> This motif occurs in Jeremiah 31:13, referring to the promise of the eschaton, when God will gather his people together under his reign and turn their mourning into joy: “Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry.” Likewise, the set of contrasts given in Ecclesiastes 3:4 presents dancing<sup>33</sup> as the opposite of mourning, in the same way that laughing is the opposite of weeping. The assertion here, that “there is a time to dance,” demonstrates that dancing is a right reaction – even a culturally *expected* reaction – to good news. This is evidenced by the words of Christ in Matthew 11:16, where he gives an enigmatic description likening “this generation” to “children . . . calling to their playmates, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’” J. B. Gross, writing on this passage, says that dance must have been so common and admired that “if the loved dance did not immediately respond to the emphatic melody of the pipe, the omission created great astonishment . . . . The Savior here indirectly censures the listless and obdurate Jews, who were alike indifferent to the joyful or the humiliating visitations of Divine providence.”<sup>34</sup> Certain early church fathers valued dance, at least in a metaphorical sense, enough to incorporate it into their commentaries

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<sup>32</sup> See Psalm 30:11.

<sup>33</sup> See Young, “Dancing,” 220.

<sup>34</sup> Gross, *The Parson on Dancing*, 89.



on other New Testament passages: Ambrose utilizes “*tripudium* and the related verb *tripudiare* (from which derives the English verb, to trip in the sense of dance) in commentary on Luke 7:32: ‘. . . there is honest leaping by which the spirit dances, and the body rises with good works.’”<sup>35</sup> Likewise, Jerome’s commentaries frequently used the word *tripudium* to refer to those who dance energetically, or to exultation in general.<sup>36</sup>

Whether we interpret dancing in a literal or figurative sense in these many examples in Scripture, it seems clear that God created dancing as a meaningful way for us to express emotions, joy in particular. Psalm 149:3 is one of multiple verses which exhort us to dance for joy: “praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre! For the LORD takes pleasure in his people.” If our spirits soar at the recognition of God’s love for us, then surely there is nothing unworthy in the dance of the redeemed. As J. B. Gross asks, if the “Hebrews – members of the Old Testament Church, habitually and approvingly worshipped God in the dance . . . why should it not be proper to introduce the dance into the Christian Church, as a leading and holy element in the cultus of the New Testament? *Unto the pure all things are pure!*”<sup>37</sup> There is certainly a time to dance, when we feel most blessed, when we experience the favor of the Lord and the fellowship of his people. We need not wait for heaven to join in the heavenly dance.

### *Dance in Deuterocanonical and Apocryphal Christian Texts*

In addition to the Bible, dance imagery appears in significant apocryphal texts, as

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<sup>35</sup> Constant J. Mews, “Liturgists and Dance in the Twelfth Century: The Witness of John Beleth and Sicard of Cremona.” *Church History* 78, no. 03 (September 2009): 512–548, [http://www.journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0009640709990412](http://www.journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0009640709990412) (accessed 4 April 2015), 524.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 523.

<sup>37</sup> Gross, *The Parson on Dancing*, 85.

well. Whether or not we consider such sources to be worthy of veneration as canonical scripture, the presence of dance in these ancient documents at least gives precedence for the idea that dance has historically been an accepted religious and communal practice within Christianity. The Book of Judith, a deuterocanonical book, is one such text. Judith is part of the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, and was likely written around the second century B.C. in Hebrew. While it has been assigned by Protestants to the Apocrypha and is not considered a canonical text in Judaism, it is included in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christian Old Testaments. In Judith 15:12, we see a celebratory dance situation, similar to the dance of Miriam and the women of Israel in the book of Exodus:

All the women of Israel gathered to see [Judith], and blessed her, and some of them performed a dance in her honor. She took ivy-wreathed wands in her hands and distributed them to the women who were with her; and she and those who were with her crowned themselves with olive wreaths. She went before all the people in the dance, leading all the women, while all the men of Israel followed, bearing their arms and wearing garlands and singing hymns.<sup>38</sup>

In this passage, the women and men of Israel join together, dancing and singing in celebration of the deliverance God has brought to them through the work of Judith, who has defeated the commander of the enemy army. The lyrics of the song that follows this description express Judith's worship of God, inviting all the people to praise him with their voices. With Judith leading the way, the people dance and sing in a great procession to the city of Jerusalem.

Another notable instance of dance in the ancient texts of the Christian tradition is

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<sup>38</sup> Michael David Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

the “Hymn of Jesus” from the Acts of John, a Gnostic text dating from about 120 CE.<sup>39</sup> Unlike the Book of Judith, the Acts of John is not part of any formal Christian canon, primarily due to its docetic teachings.<sup>40</sup> Though neither the Gospel of John nor the Synoptic Gospels describe a dance of Jesus, Matthew and Mark “do refer to a hymn sung by the Lord and his disciples just after they had eaten the bread and drunk the wine at the First Eucharist.”<sup>41</sup> The author of “The Hymn of Jesus” expands this reference into an extended scene by including the lyrics to the hymn, as well as a description of an accompanying dance.

According to Havelock Ellis in *The Dance of Life*, the “Hymn of Jesus” offers proof that sacred dance was included among the earliest known Christian rituals.<sup>42</sup> The hymn describes an addition to the scene of the Last Supper, “where Christ, taking leave of his disciples, instituted the custom of Holy Communion”; but in addition to “the breaking of bread and sipping of wine testifying to the oneness of Christ’s body and blood, we have dancing.”<sup>43</sup> The text, excerpted in Marilyn Daniels’ book, *The Dance in*

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<sup>39</sup> Marilyn Daniels, *The Dance in Christianity*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 14.

<sup>40</sup> Docetism rejected the humanity of Christ, professing that his humanity was merely an illusion, and that only a select few who gain an esoteric “special knowledge” will win salvation. Docetism was rejected at the First Council of Nicea, and the Gnostic texts have since been considered heretical by the Catholic and Orthodox churches, among others. However, while we may reject the spiritual authority or accuracy of these texts, since they were deemed inappropriate for inclusion in the canon of scripture, we do not have to accept docetism to acknowledge the beauty and value in the literary truths they still hold and the evidence they provide for what religious ritual may have entailed in the earliest days of the Christian faith. See Jones, Victoria, “Jesus the Dancer, Part 6: The Round Dance of the Cross,” *The Jesus Question*, 15 March 2012 <http://thejesusquestion.org/2012/03/15/jesus-the-dancer-part-6-the-round-dance-of-the-cross/>.

<sup>41</sup> James L. Miller, *Measures of Wisdom: The Cosmic Dance in Classical and Christian Antiquity*, Visio, studies in the relations of art and literature 1 (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 98. See also Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26.

<sup>42</sup> Havelock Ellis, “The Dance of Life,” in *What Is Dance?: Readings in Theory and Criticism*, ed. Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 478–496, 481.

<sup>43</sup> Daniels, “The Dance in Christianity,” 14. See also Miller, *Measures of Wisdom*, 81–84.

*Christianity*, shows Jesus leading his disciples in a ring dance, where he calls out a verse and the disciples respond in unison.<sup>44</sup> The speaker, presumably one of the disciples and therefore a participant in the dance, narrates the scene:

Now before he was taken by the lawless Jews, he gathered all of us together and said, “Before I am delivered up unto them let us sing a hymn to the Father, and so go forth to that which lieth before us.” He bade us therefore make, as it were, a ring, holding one another’s hands, and, himself standing in the midst, he said, “Answer Amen unto me.” He began then to sing a hymn and to say: “Glory be to the Father.” And we, going around in a ring, answered him: Amen. . . . “Grace danceth. I would pipe; dance ye all.” Amen. . . . “The whole on high hath part in our dancing.” Amen. “Who so danceth not knoweth not what cometh to pass. . . . Thou that dancest, perceive what I do, for there is this passion of the manhood, which I am about to suffer. . . . Who I am, thou shalt know when I depart. . . . I would keep tune with holy souls. . . . Glory be to the Father.” Amen. Thus having danced with us the Lord went forth.<sup>45</sup>

Whether this specific moment of dancing did or did not actually happen in reality, its inclusion in such an early text implies that dancing was not considered an unusual social event, nor was it considered sinful at this time in the Christian church’s history. It also provides a powerful illustration of heavenly joy and spiritual communion, even in the face of imminent earthly suffering – an eloquent demonstration of the biblical exhortation to rejoice in all circumstances.<sup>46</sup>

While the Acts of John is now considered a heretical text, the recent discovery of a ninth century Coptic manuscript gives evidence that ritual dance may have also “enjoyed a place in established, orthodox Christianity, not only in medieval Nubia, where

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<sup>44</sup> See also “The Christian Gnostic Dance” in E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*, (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1952), 14–15.

<sup>45</sup> Daniels, “The Dance in Christianity,” 14–15. See also Miller, *Measures of Wisdom*, 81–84.

<sup>46</sup> “To dance with Jesus is . . . to break up the monotonous round of seasons and seasonable activities that the world-weary Preacher in Ecclesiastes had seen as the vain pattern of the law-bound future [i.e., ‘a time to mourn, and a time to dance’]. . . . The disciples dance while they are mourning, and mourn while they are dancing. Their dance must break down so that their faith may be built up. The choragus must be killed (or appear to be killed) so that the chorus may gain eternal life.” See Miller, *Measures of Wisdom*, 85–86.

the manuscript was found, but also in late Roman Egypt, where it was originally composed.” The manuscript describes a dance scene, titled by scholars as the *Dance of the Savior*, that is strikingly similar to the scene found in the Acts of John: “As the apostles circle around, Jesus addresses the cross in a series of short hymns, proclaiming the glory and triumph of the crucifixion.” Paul Dilley writes that “while apocryphal texts are themselves generally associated with heresy . . . many non-canonical texts such as the *Dance of the Savior* were produced and promoted by bishops, and employed liturgically in places like churches and martyr shrines.” This and other archeological sources support the conclusion that in the Christian Roman Empire, liturgical dancing was a part of common events, such as saints’ festivals or other celebrations.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, in early Christian worship services, there would naturally have been much more movement, because there was no concept of chairs or pews – during the service, worshippers stood or kneeled, and the traditional posture for prayer (since antiquity), called the *orans*, was one with arms lifted high above the head. Eusebius of Caesarea (264–339 A.D.) records that Christians danced after the victory of Constantine: “With dances and hymns, in city and country, they glorified first of all God the universal King, because they had been thus taught, and then the pious emperor with his God-beloved children.”<sup>48</sup> According to some scholars, the emperor Heraclius danced before the Holy Cross when it was returned to Jerusalem from Persian captivity in 630 C.E.<sup>49</sup> Though such examples of positive discussions of dance are often overlooked, they demonstrate that the Church has not

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Dilley, “Jesus as Lord of the Dance: From Early Christianity to Medieval Nubia,” *Bible History Daily: Biblical Archaeology*, August 8, 2014, <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/post-biblical-period/jesus-as-lord-of-the-dance/>.

<sup>48</sup> Gagne, *Introducing Dance in Christian Worship*, 45–46.

<sup>49</sup> Dilley, “Jesus as Lord of the Dance.”

always considered dance to be an inappropriate expression of worship. In fact, the idea of dance as an angelic, holy activity persisted to the medieval era and on in literature and art; Backman offers Sandro Botticelli's painting "Supplication Dance of the Shepherds" as a representative example, in which angels dance a ring dance in flight above the Nativity.<sup>50</sup>

### *Early Christian Dance*

#### *"The Ring Dance of the Angels": Greek Influences on Christian Dance*

In addition to the heritage of dance derived from Judaism, Christians of the Roman Empire inherited ideas about ritual dance from various other pre-Christian cultures, and especially from Greek, Hellenic, Etruscan, Teutonic, and Egyptian rituals that were later imported into Rome.<sup>51</sup> According to Raffé's *Dictionary of the Dance*, "There has never been a period when there was no dance associated with the Latin religious system."<sup>52</sup> One form of dance that seems to have been held in common by many of the world's earliest cultures is the ring dance. The philosopher Susanne K. Langer comments on why this specific form of ritual seems to have been shared by so many ancient religions: "the circle dance really symbolizes a most important reality in the life of primitive men – the sacred realm, the magic circle. The *Reigen* [circle dance] . . . has nothing to do with spontaneous prancing; it fulfills a holy office, perhaps the *first* holy

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<sup>50</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*, 23.

<sup>51</sup> Raffé, "Christian Dance," 109.

<sup>52</sup> Raffé, "Church Dances," 112.

office of the dance – it divides the sphere of holiness from that of profane existence.”<sup>53</sup>

The circular shape, which creates a distinct sacred space while unifying those included in the ring, lends itself to symbolism of eternal love and perfection. Thus, as well as serving as a religious practice, the dance was also used as a metaphor for certain abstract spiritual concepts.

The Greeks compared the movement of the stars and planets to a great ring dance, illustrating a belief in the harmony and order of the universe. This use of “dance as a cosmological symbol . . . can be traced to Plato, who, in the *Timaeus*, described how the Creator fashioned the world after its eternal pattern,”<sup>54</sup> orchestrating the motions of the various components of the universe into a harmonious system: “when all things were in disorder God created in each thing in relation to itself, and in all things in relation to each other, all the measures and harmonies which they could possibly receive. For in those days nothing had any proportion except by accident.”<sup>55</sup> Earlier in the *Timaeus*, Plato elaborates on the intricacy of this celestial choreography, personifying the stars as individual dancers:

The Craftsman fashioned the stars . . . to be living creatures divine and eternal, always remaining the same and uniformly revolving in the same position relative to each other. . . . To describe the choral dances of these same gods, their juxtapositions and their retrogradations and their progressions . . . without visual models would be labor spent in vain.<sup>56</sup>

A text by Lucian of Samosata, a Greek writer living in the Roman Empire in the second

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<sup>53</sup> Langer, “Feeling and Form,” 39.

<sup>54</sup> Peter J. Schakel, “‘The Really Important Things’: Music and Dance in C. S. Lewis,” in *C.S. Lewis and the Arts: Creativity in the Shadowlands*, ed. Rod Miller (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2013), 93–113, 104.

<sup>55</sup> Plato, “*Timaeus*,” in *The Internet Classics Archive*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Daniel C. Stevenson, Web Atomics, 2009), <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Plato, *Timaeus* 40a–d, quoted in Miller, *Measures of Wisdom*, 19.

century, shows the longevity of this metaphor from antiquity to the Christian era and on: “...those who sketch the truest history of dancing would tell you that in the first generation of all things the dance grew up, appearing together with ancient Love. In fact, the circling motion of the stars and their intertwining with the fixed planets . . . are signs of the primaeval dance.”<sup>57</sup> Again, dance is symbolic of the enduring harmony of the created universe.

Raffé’s *Dictionary of the Dance* maintains that in the Western Europe-Latin Church, religious dances “have always been numerous, until comparatively recent times (17<sup>th</sup> century), but many still exist, directly or indirectly associated with Romish or earlier customs, attached to some point of church ceremonial.”<sup>58</sup> These dances served various purposes. Within the church building, they were included as a basic component of liturgy or in ceremonies of dedication, such as baptisms or marriages. Outside the church, dances might be performed on the occasion of the initial dedication of the building, or as part of a funeral or graveyard memorial service. Dances in the form of linear processions would often begin at a gathering place, such as the fields, and progress through town into the church.<sup>59</sup> The choreography of one such procession was called the *tripudium*, referred to previously as a term used in biblical commentaries by patristic writers, is an example of another form of dance practiced by early Christians. The term refers means “three step,” and would be done by taking three steps forward and one back, repeatedly. Rather than dancing this step in single file or as a circle dance, the people would dance several abreast with their arms linked in row after row. Connected in this way, the worshippers

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<sup>57</sup> Gagne, *Introducing Dance in Christian Worship*, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Raffé, “Church Dances,” 111.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.



danced through the streets, into the church, and sometimes, after the service, as a recessional out of the church. Douglas Adams writes that “this manner of dance, which has the character of a march that does not simply go in circles, is in keeping with a faith that believes in history and not cyclical ways in the world. Taking three steps forward and one back . . . leads to an optimistic spirit that sees set backs in the context of the ongoing progress.”<sup>60</sup>

The ring dance, however, was still prominent among the forms of dance adopted as part of early Christian ritual and metaphor, especially in the medieval era. The significance of the ring dance in religious rhetoric is evident in the etymology of the word “chorus”: in Latin, the word means “a dance in a ring” and is related to the Greek words, “khoreia,” meaning dance,<sup>61</sup> and “khoros,” which refers to a company of dancers or singers in Greek drama.<sup>62</sup> In the writings of certain patristic authors, however, the dancers in the eternal chorus were not simply the heavenly bodies as in Greek literature, but the angels and saints in heaven. Margaret Fisk writes that to the third century bishop Gregory Thaumaturgus, “choral dance was a natural and spontaneous way of expressing religious joy. He declares, ‘The ring dance of the angels encircles him [Jesus Christ], singing his glory in heaven and proclaiming peace on earth.’”<sup>63</sup> John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea allude to the dance of the heavenly angels in their writings.<sup>64</sup> A homily by

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<sup>60</sup> Doug Adams, *Involving the People in Dancing Worship: Historic and Contemporary Patterns* (The Sacred Dance Guild, 1975), 6. See also *Luxembourg - St. Vitus Rides Again* (British Pathé, 1963), <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/luxembourg-st-vitus-rides-again/query/process>.

<sup>61</sup> Douglas Harper, “Chorea,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Raffé, “Choros,” 109.

<sup>63</sup> Taylor, *A Time to Dance: Symbolic Movement in Worship*, 74.

<sup>64</sup> Ellis, *The Dance of Life*, 482.

Gregory of Nyssa on Psalm 52 also portrays the metaphor of this heavenly chorus, describing the creation and fall of humanity in terms of music and dance, with God as the originator of the dance:

Once there was a time when the whole of rational creation formed a single dancing chorus looking upwards to the one leader of this dance. And the harmony of that motion which was imparted to them by reason of his law found its way into their dancing.<sup>65</sup>

Sin disrupted the harmony, making “an end of the sweet sounds of this chorus,”

. . . but the spoils of victory will be these: that which was lost in [man’s] original defeat will once more be his to enjoy, and once again he will take part in the dancing of the divine chorus . . . thou shalt be found in the dancing ranks of the angelic spirits.<sup>66</sup>

Gregory’s illustration makes use of the ring dance in a manner reminiscent of the celebratory dances of the Jews, after the Lord gave them victory in battle. Those who believe in Christ, Gregory writes, will one day join the ring dance of the angels, triumphant over sin. Likewise, Sicard, the bishop of Cremona (1185–1215), wrote that though the circle dance was used by the gentiles to worship pagan gods, it may be used as a metaphor for understanding the liturgy of Easter and celebrating the “glory of the resurrection, which will be revealed in us,” the “festivity of future joy.”<sup>67</sup> Sicard explains the pagan symbolism of the circle dance, emphasizing how similar rituals may be employed by Christians in the worship of God:

. . . the gentiles established circular dances to honor idols, so that they might praise their gods by voice and serve them with their whole body, wanting to foreshadow in them in their own way something of the mystery. For through the

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<sup>65</sup> Gagne, *Introducing Dance in Christian Worship*, 49.

<sup>66</sup> Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play: or Did You Ever Practise Eutrapelia?* (London: Billing and Sons, 1965), 89–90.

<sup>67</sup> Mews, “Liturgists and Dance in the Twelfth Century,” 513. See also David L. Jeffrey, ed., “Egyptian Gold,” *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. (Grand Rapids: W B Eerdmans Pub Co, 2009), 513.

circling, they understood the revolution of the firmament; through the joining of hands, the interconnection of the elements, through the gestures of bodies, the motions of the signs or planets; through the melodies of singers, the harmonies of the planets; through the clapping of hands and the stamping of feet, the sounding of thunder; but what those people showed to their idols, the worshipers of the one God converted to his praise. For the people who crossed from the Red Sea are said to have led a circular dance, Mary is reported to have sung with the tambourine; and David danced before the ark with all his strength and composed psalms with his harp. . . .<sup>68</sup>

Though dancing might have had pagan associations, writers such as these suggest that it could readily be used as a worthy expression of Christian joy. Honorius echoes the statements of Sicard, writing that “in ancient times [the singing and dancing chorus] was used in the worship of idols,” but the “faithful have imitated these practices and transformed them into the worship of the true God.”<sup>69</sup>

In the earliest days of Christianity, the worship services of many churches would have been conducive to liturgical dancing (or congregational movement of some sort), because the room would have a large amount of open space. Until well after the medieval era, there was no concept of pews; benches along the walls would be reserved for the elderly or weak, but the rest of the worshippers would likely have been “expected to stand, move, kneel, and prostrate themselves in response to the ongoing liturgy.”<sup>70</sup> Even as the Church developed the more formal Mass, it retained the potential for religious dance in the rhythm and setting of the service, as Lynn Matluck Brooks explains:

Although the Mass is a worship-centered rather than entertainment-centered ritual, it contains the seeds of dramatic elements, e.g. the singing of the Mass, the elevation and consecration of the host, processions of clergy to the altar, antiphonal chanting resembling dialogue, the ‘plot’ or story of sacred history, the often colorful costumes of the clergy, and the church’s architecture which created

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<sup>68</sup> Mews, “Liturgists and Dance in the Twelfth Century,” 513.

<sup>69</sup> Rahner, *Man at Play*, 75.

<sup>70</sup> Adams, *Involving the People in Dancing Worship*, 3.

a stage/audience separation. These features, while not constituting drama themselves, served as focal points for dramatic developments.<sup>71</sup>

Likewise, the French philosopher Jacques Maritain compares the mass to a dance as well, saying that “Nothing is more beautiful than a High Mass – a dance before the Ark in slow motion, more majestic than the advance of the heavenly hosts.”<sup>72</sup> There is evidence that in the liturgy of certain medieval churches, even the clergy carried out choreographed motions in a circle or ring or in a procession to the altar, and some of these rituals were remnants of earlier pagan dances.<sup>73</sup> In Silesia, for example, the dance ritual called the “Pomwitzer” was an adaptation of pagan traditions for Christian purposes.<sup>74</sup> An ancient New Year Festival<sup>75</sup> Dance, it originally celebrated the birth of the New Year, but was modified to a medieval Christmas pageant held on December 24<sup>th</sup> in celebration of the birth of Jesus. A crib would be placed near the altar,<sup>76</sup> and as part of the liturgy, dating from the fourth century, young children would walk solemnly to the altar, and “then dance around it, performing the act of swinging a child to sleep.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Lynn Matluck Brooks, “The Catholic Church and Dance in the Middle Ages,” in *Focus on Dance*, ed. Dennis J. Fallon and Mary Jane Wolbers (Washington, D.C.: National Dance Association, 1982), 15–18, 16.

<sup>72</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays* ([S.I.]: Filiquarian Publishing, 2007), 71.

<sup>73</sup> Mews, “Liturgists and Dance in the Twelfth Century,” 515.

<sup>74</sup> See Augustine’s analogy of the Egyptian Gold in David L. Jeffrey, ed., “Egyptian Gold,” *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. (Grand Rapids: W B Eerdmans Pub Co, 2009), 226–228.

<sup>75</sup> “The complaints of early medieval moralists indirectly attest to the long and difficult process by which the Christian Church was obliged to come to terms with the way in which Christian liturgy had to co-exist with much older ritual practices—often involving dancing—associated with the New Year and other feasts of the agricultural calendar.” See Mews, “Liturgists and Dance in the Twelfth Century,” 547.

<sup>76</sup> *The Home and Foreign Review*, vol. II (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863), 140–41.

<sup>77</sup> Raffé, “Pomwitzer,” 393.

## *Medieval Christianity and Religious Dance*

### *Development of a Stigma Against Dance*

As the Christian Church became more established in Europe during the early medieval era, it became tradition for dances to be done at the graves of Christian martyrs. This custom began with pure and reverent motives; the dancing was intended to “recall the death of the saint and his entry into paradise,” expressing “confidence in the victory of life over death.”<sup>78</sup> In some respects, these dances were also seen as a form of intercessory prayer: as Gregory of Constantinople wrote, festivals of song and dance for martyrs involved “the suppression of devils, avoidance of disease and knowledge of the things to come.”<sup>79</sup> However, as the Roman Empire began to decline, the dancing at these festivals became increasingly immoral and secularized, at times deviating completely from the original purpose of pious remembrance, according to many accounts. Basil the Great (344–407 A.D.) condemned the immodest behavior displayed by women at such festivals:

Casting aside the yoke of service under Christ . . . they . . . shamelessly attract the attention of every man. With unkempt hair, clothed in bodices and hopping about, they dance with lustful eyes and loud laughter; as if seized by a kind of frenzy they excite the lust of the youths. They execute ring-dances in the churches of the Martyrs and at their graves, instead of in the public buildings, transforming the Holy places into the scene of their lewdness. With harlots’ songs they pollute the air and sully the degraded earth with their feet in shameful postures.<sup>80</sup>

It is important to note, though, that Basil does not condemn the practice of dancing itself. Rather, he criticizes the manner in which it was done here, where the motivation was not

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<sup>78</sup> Mews, “Liturgists and Dance in the Twelfth Century,” 525.

<sup>79</sup> Gagne, *Introducing Dance in Christian Worship*, 48.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

to be worshipful or express reverent joy, but to seduce and distract. Like Salome's dance, this was an example of using a gift, one with the potential for inspiring devotion and communal joy, for improper ends, but misuse of such a gift does not necessitate its disuse.

While the increasing tendency for religious dancing to become marred by such abuses led to the eventual condemnation of all dancing by numerous Christian leaders, some voices in the Church continued to take a more moderate, charitable approach towards dancing. For instance, according to religious dance scholar Ronald Gagne, Gregory of Nazianzus "saw great value in dance, yet he tried to be prudent when he said: ' . . . do not dance the dance of the shameless Herodias. . . . if you must dance, . . . dance the dance of David before the ark of God, for I believe that such a dance is the mystery of the sweet motion and nimble gesture of one who walks before God.'"<sup>81</sup> Even into the medieval era, there were those who saw dancing as conducive to worship, veneration of the saints, and community celebration. These Christians emphasized the potential value of dance, but warned of the tendency for it to become sinful if correct motivations were not at the forefront of the dancer's minds.

It is true that as festivals started to become the source of immoral behavior, certain Christian polemicists condemned dancing altogether as "an inappropriate expression of piety, uncomfortably close to pagan traditions like pantomime or Dionysian revelries."<sup>82</sup> Caesarius of Arles (470–572 A.D.), as representative of these critics, wrote that dancing was "most sordid and disgraceful act," arguing that a person is not a true Christian if he executes "dances and pantomimes before the very churches of the saints . .

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 48. See also Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith*, 64.

<sup>82</sup> Dilley, "Jesus as Lord of the Dance."

. because that kind of dancing has carried over from pagan practices.”<sup>83</sup> It is often these harsh criticisms from the Church that stand out in the historical study of dance and Christianity. Nonetheless, while such forceful statements against dancing do seem to have greatly influenced the Church’s perspective on dance, it is inaccurate to assume from these statements that all Christian leaders condemned dancing in general. Statements against dancing were almost always directed against popular memorial dances, which may have been “arranged and performed without clerical leave or sanction.”<sup>84</sup>

As with any statement, it is crucial to evaluate the rhetorical context in order to make a correct judgment of the speaker’s intent. For instance, Chrysostom wrote that “where there is a dance, there also is the Devil.”<sup>85</sup> Taken on its own, this isolated statement seems to condemn all dance as sinful. However, in context, the statement refers specifically to the dance of Salome as described in the Gospel of Matthew, and Chrysostom’s commentary goes on to explain that “God has not given us our feet to use in a shameful way . . . but in order to dance ring-dances with the angels.”<sup>86</sup> It is clear that Chrysostom’s “condemnation is directed only at lavicious and indecent dances.”<sup>87</sup> This is the case in many Church edicts against dance: they are intended to discourage the abuse of dancing and to exhort Christians to act with pure motives, but do not necessarily denounce dance itself.

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<sup>83</sup> Gagne, *Introducing Dance in Christian Worship*, 51.

<sup>84</sup> Raffé, “Church Dances,” 112.

<sup>85</sup> Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*, 32.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

Still, it seems that the majority of Christian leaders reacted to corruptions in the use of dance at religious feasts and festivals by condemning dance altogether. Various Church councils decided to impose strict limitations on dancing, such as the 539 Council of Toledo, which condemned dancing in church processions, and the Synod of Cahors, which in 1206 outlawed dancing within or in front of churches, with threat of excommunication as a consequence.<sup>88</sup> However, despite this general stigma against dance, dance continued to be practiced in conjunction with religious ritual, especially in the form of the carol, as discussed below.

### *The Origins of the Carol*

There is a clue to the medieval history of Christian religious dance disguised in a simple word that we use quite regularly in modern English: carol. Though today the word is rarely used outside the category of Christmas songs, in the Middle Ages the carol was a specialized lyric form with a meter specifically intended for dancing. In his book, *The Early English Lyric and Franciscan Spirituality*, David Lyle Jeffrey explains that the verse form was derived “from Provençal and perhaps ultimately Arabic verse forms,” and has ties to Italian vernacular and Franciscan poetry as well.<sup>89</sup> As a dance song, the carol was primarily associated with ring dances. In this sense, the “ultimate origins of the carol are non-Christian,” since the tradition of European ring dances was derived from pagan spring and winter festivals, often related to propitiation or fertility rituals.<sup>90</sup> However, in

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<sup>88</sup> Gagne, *Introducing Dance in Christian Worship*, 81, 83.

<sup>89</sup> David L. Jeffrey, *The Early English Lyric & Franciscan Spirituality* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 133.

<sup>90</sup> Richard Leighton Greene, *The Early English Carols*, 2d ed., rev. and enl. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), cxxxix.



England during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the carol as both dance and lyric form is “particularly associated with the service of the Christian religion,” demonstrating the intentional adaptation of formerly pagan traditions for Christian purposes.<sup>91</sup> Though this form of lyric and music itself was not necessarily religious, it became a prominent feature in medieval Christianity, and was especially important to the Franciscan communities. “It is worth remembering,” Jeffrey writes, “that in the Middle Ages the dance was still a part of the liturgy, and dancing around the altar as a liturgical exercise was not unknown.”<sup>92</sup> In the practice of this liturgical dance, however, there was of course a strict distinction made between the “sensual dance, and that of the spirit, the new dance, which was associated with biblical precedents like that of David dancing for spiritual joy around the Ark of the Covenant.”<sup>93</sup>

### *The Structure and Choreography of the Carol*

As a verse form, the carol lends itself to group ring dancing in the form of a call and response: the English carol “has been frequently associated with the ring-dance, in which cantor and followers would sing stanza and burden (*versus*).”<sup>94</sup> The poetic structure of a carol is usually composed of several different stanzas sung by a soloist and a two-line refrain called a “burden,” which would be repeated by the larger group of carolers after each stanza. The following lyrics are representative of English carols of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century:

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Jeffrey, *The Early English Lyric & Franciscan Spirituality*, 133.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

(*Stanza I*)      I shall you tell a gret mervayll:  
How an angell, for owr avayll,  
Com to a mayd, and said, ‘All hayll!’

(*Burden*)      What, hard ye not? The Kyng of Jherusalem  
Is now born in Bethelēm.<sup>95</sup>

Along with these sung lyrics, the carol would include a group dance. Thanks to illustrated manuscripts and other works of literature, it is possible to derive a rather clear description of what the steps of a carol dance might in fact look like. According to one scholar, the dance would consist of “a chain, open or closed, of male and female dancers, who moved to the accompaniment of the voice or (less frequently) of instruments.”<sup>96</sup> The specific movement was usually a combination of “three steps in measure to the left, followed by some kind of marking time in place,” and “it was usual for the dancers to join hands, but gestures seem frequently to have been introduced which would require the clasp to be broken.”<sup>97</sup> The entire carol, including the music and dance, was directed by one leader, called the “coryphée,” whose duty it was “to sing the stanzas of the song to which the carole was being danced” while the ring moved in a circle toward the left.<sup>98</sup> Then, at the end of each stanza, the whole group of dancers would respond to the verse with the burden of the song, dancing in place or marking time with an action like clapping.<sup>99</sup>

In the history of dance as a Christian ritual and practice, however, the motivation guiding the dance has always been more important than the steps or motion. As in the previously mentioned writings of the early church fathers, purity of heart was crucial in

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<sup>95</sup> Greene, *The Early English Carols*, liv.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, xlv.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, xlv–xlvi.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, xlvi.

defining the category of Christian dance as distinct from pagan or sinful dance. Just as the form of the carol could be secular or religious depending on the content and purpose, the dance associated with the carol could be worldly or spiritual. Jeffrey speculates that “if we had more actual records of performance [of medieval carols], we might in fact find the actions of the dance as easily adapted to religious use as its tunes.”<sup>100</sup> Carols were essentially dance tunes, and when these songs were adapted to promote and teach spiritual truths, it is likely that the corresponding dances were similarly adapted.

Evidence from historical documents offers support for the history of dance as a spiritual practice. Jeffrey writes that in short, “the spiritual aspect of the dance, both as metaphor and as practice, is a highlight of late medieval spirituality.”<sup>101</sup> Carols were a part of feasts and banquets during holidays, and therefore a common aspect of medieval religious practice. As Greene writes, “The mixture, completely congruous to a medieval Christian, of devotional sentiment and ‘mirth’ in its special sense of ‘cheerfulness resulting from the knowledge of one’s salvation,’ is one secret of the carol’s special nature.”<sup>102</sup> This unique quality gave the carol longevity as a form of verse and music, even after it lost its association with dance.

#### *Other Forms of Dance in Medieval Christian Ritual and Spirituality*

In addition to the specific form of the carol, there are several notable indications of spiritual or liturgical dance in the Christian church of the Middle Ages, especially in the Franciscan tradition. In the early biographies of Saint Francis, the same verb, *salire*, is

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<sup>100</sup> Jeffrey, *The Early English Lyric & Franciscan Spirituality*, 133.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>102</sup> Greene, *The Early Carols*, xxviii.

used in reference to the movement of dancing as well as to describe his actions when preaching before the cardinals and the pope: as Thomas of Celano gives in his account of the life of Francis, “the Saint was so filled with the love of God that his words turned to poetry, and as he spoke he began to dance the divine dance.”<sup>103</sup> Jeffrey’s research on this subject describes another notable example of dance in Franciscan tradition. Studies suggest that a confraternity called the *Tripudanti* were known for participating in “mass spiritual dancing through the streets,” a sort of parade that also involved music and singing lauds, similar to the practices of the *disciplinati* and other Franciscan confraternities.<sup>104</sup> In fact, the English Franciscan Roger Bacon “argued forcefully that dancing, like music and singing, was a legitimate and valuable instrument for inculcating the faith.”<sup>105</sup> In his discussion of dance and Christianity, Jeffrey refers to the lyrics of a thirteenth-century Italian dance tune, which he translates as follows:

I never thought, Jesus, to dance in the Dance; but your loving, Jesus, will make us go rejoicing. . . . the love of the blessed ravished me utterly and said that I shouldn’t hold back from dancing in the Dance. . . . with my sweet *frati* I began, I joined in . . . so happy I felt, Jesus, that I couldn’t express it. . . . And therefore I want to beg everybody for God’s sake that they will let me dance this way with my sweet lover Jesus. O you who criticize dancing in the Dance, for God’s sake, join hand in hand . . . and then you will taste how much is the loving which comes from Christ’s love. May that loving play which catches us all up as one flame set us all on fire – Jesus! . . . save and help us when we come to the point of the life beyond, where one finds the unified dance of the blessed . . . .<sup>106</sup>

These lyrics seem to demonstrate an experience of the sublime, with the speaker expressing a union between the physical and spiritual. As Jeffrey writes,

“The dance in which the *frati* participate is only the beginning of the Dance of

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<sup>103</sup> Jeffrey, *The Early English Lyric & Franciscan Spirituality*, 133.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 135–136.

Dances, which reaches its climax in the Dance of the Blessed around the Throne in the New Jerusalem. . . . to be invited to enter upon the new dance is to be invited to the new spiritual life which is eternal: the dance is the Dance of Life. Jacopone da Todi writes that . . . ‘[He who wants to join this dance will find love beyond measure].’<sup>107</sup>

Other medieval literary sources involve references to dancing, both metaphorical and literal. The lyrics of a song by the thirteenth century friar Jacopone da Todi use dance as a metaphor for spiritual joy and a testament to the transformative power of Christ:

“He who I hold in my arms is Christ. In order to look at him I am urged to dance – to dance, I am all inflamed, as I want to show in this song. So I dance, sing, and laugh with great weeping, completely transformed in my feelings; as the delight overflows so much that the song is renewed by love, my heart is so plunged in eternal love that it is not able to doubt hell fire (either).”<sup>108</sup>

Another text from a similar time period, an Anglo-Norman poem known as “The Dance of the Cross,” illustrates a dance performed by the members of a female religious community. The song exhorts the women to follow after Jesus on the path of righteousness, illustrating his suffering and death on the cross, which ultimately allows for the “transformation of a dance of death . . . to a triumphant dance of life eternal, the Way of the Cross becoming the way to salvation,”<sup>109</sup> quoted at length below:

Come, ladies, come along;  
Step out on the path of righteousness:  
Arise, arise singing:  
Arise without delay!  
The cross is now raised on high,  
And there lies our path:  
Let us go in rain or shine,  
For Love leads the way.

Jesus goes this way to die for us,

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>109</sup> David L. Jeffrey and B. J. Levy, eds., *The Anglo-Norman Lyric: An Anthology*, Studies and texts 93 (Toronto, Ont., Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 87.

To reveal to us great joy:  
Let us go to Him with great desire,  
For Love leads the way.  
True love cannot lie sleeping,  
Whether it be in sorrow or joy:  
Let us go to Him with all our will,  
For Love leads the way.

...

“Alas! Jesus suffered so,  
that we might come to bliss:  
let us go, let us go, let us go on,  
for Love leads the way.

...

Now let us pray and sing  
For it is right and joyous:  
Come, come, come on ahead,  
For Love leads the way.

That at our death He may give to us  
Life, rest, and joy,  
Let us go to Him with all our will,  
For Love leads the way....

As demonstrated by the tone of these poems and the lyrics of medieval carols, dance was often seen as a positive, joyful response to Christian faith.

### *The Dance of Death*

One cannot discuss the relationship between dance and Christian faith without addressing the infamous Dance of Death often associated with the medieval era, primarily during the time of the bubonic plague. The Dance of Death or “Danse Macabre” was a “medieval allegorical dramatic performance,” which was also portrayed in paintings, wood-engravings” and other art forms.<sup>110</sup> It presented the theme of the

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<sup>110</sup> Raffé, “Death, Dance of,” 142.

“universal triumph of Death over all manner and condition of men.”<sup>111</sup> This dance was a form of the practice of *memento mori* and is perhaps one of the most famous instances of religious dance in the history of the Christian church.

As has been discussed previously, however, the Dance of Death is certainly not the only case of dance in Christian ritual. For example, in the small town of Moosburg, Germany, as recorded in a dance-song, a 14<sup>th</sup> century church dance led by the bishop involved a procession through town and to the church as well as ring dances, with boys and girls holding hands.<sup>112</sup> Similarly, in the year 1400, a Viennese Franciscan writer named Johann Bischoff gave an account describing the popularity of dancing among all classes of people during the celebration of Easter; Birschoff hints at the performance of a Dance of Death, but this reference is included among a list of twenty different dances.<sup>113</sup> Beginning the list of these dances, Birschoff writes: “The first is that in which Christ leads his elect to eternal life, who have kept the Ten Commandments. The second dance is that of the Devil, who leads his own to eternal suffering . . . .”<sup>114</sup> This source offers evidence for the use of dance to teach and illustrate a variety of spiritual concepts, beyond simply the awareness of one’s mortality.

As proof of these other uses of dance, there are still vestiges of medieval church dances practiced today. Each year on Whitsun Tuesday at Echternach in Luxemburg, as many as 10,000 people participate in a grand procession honoring St. Willibrordus, the patron saint of Luxemburg, and celebrating the end of the plague epidemic known as St.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Raffé, “Moosburg,” 331.

<sup>113</sup> John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>114</sup> Jeffrey, *The Early English Lyric & Franciscan Spirituality*, 140.

Vitus' Dance. Clergymembers lead the people in a parade through town, to the Abbey of Echternach, where the people would in the past circle the altar three times before proceeding to the grave of the saint.<sup>115</sup> The dance involves low kicks and jumping steps from side to side, with rows of dancers connected by white handkerchiefs held in their hands.<sup>116</sup> "Los Seises"<sup>117</sup> is another example of a medieval liturgical dance still practiced today. It is danced in Seville, Spain, and dates back to 1264 in its present form. The solemn dance is performed by ten boys, who dance before the bishop and clergy with chanting and playing of castanets, accompanied by a string orchestra and organ. The dance is performed before the high altar in the Seville Cathedral at Candlemas, Easter, the feasts of Corpus Christi, and the "Conception." Even today, then, there is evidence of the role dance once played in various Christian rituals.

### *The Legacy of Christian Dance*

A study of the historical connections between Christianity and dance shows that there has been a "wealth of both positive and negative attitudes to the arts in general, and to dance in particular."<sup>118</sup> After the medieval era, however, evidence of positive views toward Christian dance declines significantly. Though I have not attempted to trace the entire history of dance in Christian faith in this project, the roots of this later change in perspective are evident in the research discussed already: negative attitudes toward

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<sup>115</sup> Raffé, "Jumping Saints," 250.

<sup>116</sup> *Luxembourg - St. Vitus Rides Again*. British Pathé,

<sup>117</sup> Raffé, "Seises, Los," 452.

<sup>118</sup> Judith Rock, "Facing the Issue: It's Against My Religion," in *Focus on Dance*, ed. Dennis J. Fallon and Mary Jane Wolbers (American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 1982), 54–55, 54.



embodiment, association of dance with sexual sin, concern that dance was a detrimental practice left over from paganism, and, with the Reformation, an emphasis on Scripture alone and a tendency to reject ritual in general. For the most part, it is these concerns that seem to have prevailed into modernity, leading to the conviction of some religious groups that dancing is sinful. When this concept was perpetuated, sacred dance seems to have gradually died out, for the most part, and has only recently been revived in certain congregations and Christian dance companies.

As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, having a broad understanding of the historical context of dance is crucial to the discussion of religious dance. First, it demonstrates that there was not always a tension between Christianity and dance in general. Even in the more recent history of Western Christianity, for example, while many American Protestant groups did not allow dancing, “earlier Christian groups (both Protestant and Catholic) did dance, such as the Puritans, who objected to couples’ dancing but did not forbid dancing by groups of men or groups of women.”<sup>119</sup> The Puritans modeled their use of dance on the biblical examples, such as the account of Miriam’s dance with the women of Israel.<sup>120</sup> When Christians consider whether or not they approve of dancing, Rock maintains, they should take into account the various distinctions between dance as an art form, dance as a communal celebration, and the “couple dancing which has historically been rejected by many religious groups.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. As Judith Rock explains, this, “of course, reflects the dancing of Middle Eastern people who almost always segregate men and women in the dance.”

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. Related to this point, Rock also addresses the limitations of the opinion, held by some, that using the body in an expressive way through dance is automatically using it sexually, and therefore in a way that should not be permitted in church or by Christians: “to make this assumption is to ignore God’s other gifts of spirit, intellect, feelings, and sense, all of which are experienced through the physical body

Furthermore, what certain opponents of dance today may not realize is that when they condemn dance as sin, they may indirectly be basing their opinion not on Scripture itself or even on the views of modern theologians, but on classical or medieval ideas stemming from rituals that are no longer practiced. Studying history helps us avoid these kinds of assumptions and make careful, informed decisions.

Ultimately, however, knowledge of the historical context of this subject imparts not only an understanding of the nuance of various interpretations of the significance of dance, but it also offers a foundation for our approach to dance today. Understanding how dance has been abused or carried out sinful motives will help us avoid making the same errors. Likewise, knowing how dance has been seen as spiritually fruitful in the past – whether in the form of the community celebrations of Hebrew culture or the ring dances of medieval carols – can give us a better understanding of the ways dance may be used for good in our own culture today. When we recognize the long history of dance within the Christian faith, we should be able to approach the idea of Christian dance, and Christian art as a whole, with a fresh perspective. My hope is that in bringing to light some of the historical foundation of dancing, I may inspire others to come to a better appreciation of this art form’s beauty and spiritual significance.

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and shaped by artistic expression into dance and other art forms.” Though there are some forms of partner dance, of course, in which the primary focus is sexuality, this is not at all the case in every form of partner dance. I can think of many instances in which a beautifully executed partner dance could illustrate Christian truths, just like a dance done by a soloist or a group of dancers. There is nothing inherently sinful in men and women dancing together, and as with many other things, the distinction between what is right and wrong is a matter of setting and occasion. However, the distinction between communal, celebratory dance and partner dance (presumably of the sensual kind) mentioned above is still significant to this discussion, in terms of what is appropriate in a specifically religious setting.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Dance as Christian Art

In previous chapters, I have discussed the value of dance as sacred in terms of its ability to communicate spiritual truths, drawing people together in communion with each other and with God. I have offered a look at the historical context of dance within Christianity in order to demonstrate how dance has been valued and used in the past, which was primarily in terms of liturgical dance or spontaneous social dance. In doing so, I have focused mainly on the characteristics of dancing that may apply regardless of the setting or the training of the dancers. In other words, if the purpose of the dance is to celebrate an event with the community – a wedding or baptism, for example – it makes no difference whether or not the participants have had technical training in dance. The dancing is an expression of love and joy, and because of this, is beautiful in and of itself.

Still, while these communal functions of dance should, of course, be celebrated today, there is another function of dance that Christians should appreciate and examine, and that is the use of Christian dance as a high art. This chapter will discuss dance under the overall category of theology and the arts, exploring the qualities that make dance, as Christian art, both aesthetically beautiful and glorifying to God.

#### *The Artistic Spirit of God*

In a work entitled *Art and Scholasticism*, Jacques Maritain discusses what he sees as the defining characteristics of Christian art. Rather than attempting to create a system of strict criteria to eliminate or qualify certain subjects or forms of art, Maritain asserts

that Christian art is, simply, the art of those who have experienced Christ's salvation:

By the words 'Christian Art' I do not mean Church art, art specified by an object, an end, and determined rules, and which is but a particular – and eminent – point of application of art. I mean Christian art in the sense of art which bears within it the character of Christianity. In this sense Christian art is not one species of the genus art: one does not say 'Christian art' as one says . . . 'Byzantine' art. . . . Christian art is defined by the one in whom it exists and by the spirit from which it issues. . . . It is the art of redeemed humanity. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Christian art is less about the subject matter or medium, and more about the artist herself – and, ultimately, the God who inspires her art. For this reason, the true vocation of the Christian artist is to be a witness to the glory and truth of God. In this sense, God has uniquely gifted artists with the gift of prophecy. The vision of an artist sometimes equips him to see and communicate revelations of truth in ways that theologians or scholars cannot.

In his book, *Making Good*, Trevor Hart discusses the biblical precedent for valuing the artist in society. In Exodus 31:3, God instructs Moses concerning the building of his tabernacle. Notably, however, it is not Moses himself who will do the work of building, but the craftsmen, Bezalel and Oholiab, as well as numerous other artists, including women who create the tapestries and sculptors who fashion the golden decorations of the inside of the tabernacle. Bezalel, God tells Moses, has been filled with the Spirit of God through God's own blessing. This Spirit, Hart explains, is described in the Hebrew text "in terms of a precise threefold formula: wisdom (*chokmah*), understanding (*tebunah*), and knowledge (*daath*)," qualities that are "explicitly linked to a bestowal of the *ruah elohim* ('divine spirit')." <sup>2</sup> The mention of this divine spirit echoes "Genesis 1:2, pointing already to a link between the work of the human craftsman and the

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<sup>1</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays*, 67.

<sup>2</sup> Hart, *Making Good*, 42.

primordial fashioning of a world by the divine Creator.”<sup>3</sup> This same threefold description is given in Proverbs 3:19–20 to describe God’s creative work in establishing heaven and earth. The suggestion, then, as Hart writes, is that “the divine master craftsman . . . passes on the benefit of his own skill and experience, inculcating in those who work alongside him and under his close supervision precisely the same qualities he himself possesses in full measure. . . . It is in a proper sense his work (undertaken in his name), even though their [human craftsman] hands are on this occasion the ones getting dirty in the work.”<sup>4</sup>

Humanity is therefore graced by the Creator with the quality of creativity; God, as the ultimate Creator, allows us to contribute to his creative work in the world.<sup>5</sup> We act as “sub-creators”<sup>6</sup> beneath the ultimate, omnipotent Creator. “We make,” Tolkien writes, “in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”<sup>7</sup> According to Dorothy Sayers, creativity is the definitive characteristic of our being made in God’s image. Beginning with the words of the Apostles’ Creed, she writes: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of all things. That is the thundering assertion with which we start; that the great fundamental quality that makes God, and us with him, what we are is creative activity. . . . by implication, man is most god-like and most himself when he is occupied in

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>5</sup> This concept is central to *tikkun olam*, the Jewish notion of the mending or perfecting of the world. For more on this topic, see Hart, *Making Good*, 324–29.

<sup>6</sup> See “Mythopoeia” in J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf: The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth : Beorhthelm’s Son* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2001), 87.

<sup>7</sup> See “On Fairy-Stories” in Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 56.

creation.”<sup>8</sup> While some would debate this view of the primacy of creativity, there is no doubt that God has given us the gift of creativity as a sign of his goodness and as a reflection of the divine in humankind. As I heard the pianist Helge Antoni say once, “One must never forget that we are vessels of the creative force.”<sup>9</sup>

### *What is Christian Art?*

Creativity is not limited to those individuals whom we would think of as “artists,” but as with the building of the tabernacle, God has gifted certain people with a special ability to create. Through their work, artists often seem to have an ability to circumvent our usual approach to coming to an understanding of things. Music, paintings, ballets – truly powerful art of every kind moves us, almost halting the usual progression of time and events and help us see, for a moment, a glimpse of something otherworldly. Art provides a link between this world and the next; it “empowers the soul to supplement one world with the other and thereby to experience itself as the point of union.”<sup>10</sup> The communicative power of excellent art comes not simply from an ability to present an argument but from an ability to evoke the sublime, to involve the emotions and to inspire contemplation.

Dance, as an art and a language of the sublime, has similar qualities as the elevated language as described by Longinus: “The effect of elevated language upon an

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<sup>8</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: W Pub. Group, 2004), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Helge Antoni, “Follow Your (He)arts!” (Baylor University, November 8, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Georg Simmel, *Essays on Religion*, Monograph series / Society for the Scientific Study of Religion v. 10 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 77.

audience is not persuasion but transport.”<sup>11</sup> Rather than inspiring a mere rational engagement with the message, it inspires an emotional and spiritual response: “For, as if instinctively, our soul is uplifted by the true sublime; it takes a proud flight, and is filled with joy and vaunting, as though it had itself produced what it has heard.”<sup>12</sup>

For this reason, dance need not be labeled “Christian” to have vast spiritual significance. As Maritain writes, “wherever art – Egyptian, Greek or Chinese – has known a certain degree of grandeur and purity, it is already Christian, Christian in hope, because every spiritual radiance is a promise and a symbol of the divine harmonies of the Gospel.”<sup>13</sup> Maritain’s statement is reminiscent of Augustine’s discussion of the principle of the Egyptian gold,<sup>14</sup> that since God is the ultimate source of all truth and beauty, the Christian can recognize the value of certain “pagan” means of art and expression and may righteously employ these things for Christian purposes. In this way, a dance may have spiritual qualities regardless of the intention of the artist who created the dance. The artist’s inspiration is a very real thing, coming from the living God – not a “mere mythological accessory,” as it appears in the form of the Muses of classical literature.<sup>15</sup>

Christian dance, then, is the dance of the Christian; it is also, somewhat paradoxically, the dance as *interpreted* by the Christian. It need not be specifically biblical in subject matter to have Christian spiritual significance. The realm of Christian

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<sup>11</sup> Longinus, *Longinus on the sublime: the Greek text edited after the Paris manuscript*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 43.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>13</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays*, 68.

<sup>14</sup> See David L. Jeffrey, ed., “Egyptian Gold,” *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. (Grand Rapids: W B Eerdmans Pub Co, 2009), 227.

<sup>15</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays*, 68.

art encompasses everything, “the sacred as well as the profane. It is at home wherever the ingenuity and the joy of man extend. Symphony or ballet, film or novel, landscape or still-life . . . it can just as well appear in any of these as in the stained-glass windows and statues of churches.”<sup>16</sup> There is a great variety in what may be called religious art, as discussed by the theologian Paul Tillich, who maintains that there is a difference between religious subject matter and religious style. In his discussion of art and religion, Tillich “distinguished between religion in the larger sense (‘being ultimately concerned about one’s own being, about one’s self and one’s world, about its meaning and its estrangement and its finitude’) and religion in the narrower sense (‘having a set of symbols, . . . divine beings, ritual actions and doctrinal formulations about their relationship to us.’”<sup>17</sup> The first, broader definition of religion may be communicated through style, whereas the narrower definition is communicated through subject matter.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, according to Tillich, art may be religious in style even if it does not pertain directly to religious subject matter, and art that incorporates religious subject matter may not actually be religious in style. One can imagine this distinction in a similar way in terms of sermons which may “cite many Biblical passages but are essentially unexpressive of Biblical faiths (for such sermons uphold the status quo without justice for many individuals)” versus “other sermons and writings [which] cite few if any Biblical passages but express Biblical faiths (for such sermons call into question the status quo

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>17</sup> Douglas Adams and Judith Rock, “Biblical Criteria in Modern Dance: Modern Dance as a Prophetic Form,” in *Focus on Dance*, ed. Dennis J. Fallon and Mary Jane Wolbers (Washington, D.C: National Dance Association, 1982), 68–71, 83.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



and seek justice for each human life).”<sup>19</sup> A dance may express Christian truths even if it is not a depiction of a biblical narrative like the story of the Fall or the parable of the prodigal son. To reduce the potential content of a dance to simple narrative illustration is to underestimate the expressive qualities of a medium that may communicate biblical, religious themes in a subtler manner.<sup>20</sup> Douglas Adams and Judith Rock maintain that any dance “may reflect Biblically-routed affirmations and values, whether or not its subject matter is specifically Biblical, and whether or not the choreographer had a direct intention of affirming Biblical values.”<sup>21</sup> God can choose to speak through art, even if the artist is not a Christian; God can speak to us through even the things we consider secular. There is no limit on how God makes himself known to us, and the art of dance is one of many ways God may choose to do so.

### *Excellent Christian Art*

Though all forms of art may have Christian significance, simply having Christian intent or subject matter does not automatically create excellent art. Most of us have seen “Christian art” handled poorly – films with trite moralizing messages and amateur acting, paintings that rely on literalism or oversimplified illustration of biblical passages. It is the same with dance. Christian dance doesn’t have to be – and often shouldn’t be – overtly Christian in subject matter. If the dance is excellent and stems from a belief in Christ, it will be spiritually powerful. Maritain writes about this in terms of the artist’s identity as both an artist and as a Christian. He says that artists shouldn’t attempt to separate the two

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 84

identities; they “are one, if you are truly Christian.”<sup>22</sup> However, while he says artists should not try to separate their art from their faith, he warns against “[blending] by force what life unites so well. If you were to make of your aesthetic an article of faith, you would spoil your faith. If you were to make of your devotion a rule of artistic activity, or if you were to turn desire to edify into a method of your art, you would spoil your art.”<sup>23</sup> It is often the artistic attempts that rely on sermonizing that give Christian art the reputation for poor quality which, in many respects, it has today. Maritain continues: “art will be Christian, and will reveal in its beauty the interior reflection of the radiance of grace, only if it overflows from a heart suffused by grace.”<sup>24</sup> The focus of Christian dance should be glorifying Christ through excellent work, not necessarily preaching any certain message. In other words, “We do not have to set out to convince and convert” through choreography.<sup>25</sup>

This is true even in situations where dance is used inside the church, as in liturgical dance. Art should not be pursued or created as a means to the end of convincing the audience to do or believe any one thing. Rock explains that the “danger of [this] point of view, especially where amateur performers are concerned, is that fervor, sincerity, and emotion can quickly become more important than the dance, and that congregations can be easily manipulated by the sentiment,” degenerating dance from an “artistic-theological

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<sup>22</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 69.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Judith Rock, *Theology in the Shape of Dance: Using Dance in Worship and in Theological Process* (Sharing Co., 1978), 12.

image . . . into a sort of commercial.”<sup>26</sup> Rock continues:

In my opinion, the arts in worship should not be used to sell a product, however righteous the product may be! Our business is to dance Evangelism, Good News, news of God, out of the unutterable fullness and joy God gives us. When we craft our dance-images as finely as we can, and dance them to the limits of our ability, we can trust to their ability to evoke response from those who see them.<sup>27</sup>

Because of this, in her article, “Theology in the Shape of Dance,” Rock warns against choreography that relies on overworked Christian content: when choosing an idea to present, the choreographer should choose a “danceable idea” that “can be best communicated through dance,” which “should do away with many dances which only imitate or interpret song lyrics.”<sup>28</sup> If something is better communicated through poetry, film, or music alone, Rock argues, it should not be choreographed into a dance. When creating Christian dance, whether it is for the purpose of incorporating art into worship services or for viewing in another venue, the choreographer and dancers should strive for excellence in all areas: in technical and performance skills, in musical accompaniment and interpretation, and sensitivity to the audience.<sup>29</sup> Rock quotes the choreographer Dennis Nahat, who has said, “there is no dumb audience.”<sup>30</sup> Too often religious dance lacks technical excellence, theological accuracy, and choreographic originality, and while an audience or congregation may not be familiar with dance, “they will know when dance or music or drama is powerful and compelling – and when it is not. They will know the difference between watching out of charity, and being drawn involuntarily out of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 15

themselves by the truth and skill of the presentation.”<sup>31</sup>

Consequently, dance cannot rely simply on the Christian label or context to carry it. Christian dance must be founded on strong Christian theology and faith, presenting these elements in a genuine way. Rather than simply illustrating the Bible, the goal of religious dance “is for the dance to embody the theology (not to deliver it like a package, so that at the dance becomes a vehicle carrying a message, but to incarnate in the dance itself something of the truth about being a human being in relationship with God and other human beings.”<sup>32</sup> To accomplish this goal, technical skill, discipline, and practice are necessary for dance to be effective as a religious performing art. If dancers want to reclaim and develop their art within the Christian sphere, “we must become our own toughest critics,” being committed to achieving excellence in our craft.<sup>33</sup> Christian dance should be as professional as any other form of dance, in that it is a quality performance carried out with good technique, musicality, and authenticity. In his book on incorporating dance and the practice of the Christian faith, Martin Blogg writes that though some may have qualms about seeing any aspect of a religious service as a performance, sacred dance *should* be a performance. This does not mean that it is carried out for the sake of entertainment or that it is idolatrous; rather it is a performance in that it has a professional objective, discipline, skill, understanding of the art form and of the context of the performance.<sup>34</sup> He writes, “All too often many of the Christian performing arts groups are not professional in this sense of the term: they are frequently enthusiastic

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 15–16.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 7. See Appendices B and C for examples of my own attempts at achieving this goal of “embodied theology” through dance.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>34</sup> Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith*, 141.

amateurs who have little or no disciplined knowledge and understanding of either the performing arts or stage skill,” and this untrained attempt can be as harmful as focusing on entertainment aspects of performance.<sup>35</sup> In some ways, less than quality art is very distracting, and the audience is more likely to focus on the performers or the faults in the performance more than the message being communicated through the performance.

In contrast, when a performance of a dance is excellent, whether in a secular or religious setting, Blogg writes, the viewer “will not see [the dancer] *per se*, but rather the message, the expression or the word.”<sup>36</sup> Langer writes that “Free dance movement produces, above all (for the performer as well as the spectator) the illusion of a conquest of gravity, i.e. freedom from the actual forces that are normally known and felt to control the dancer’s body.”<sup>37</sup> Then, quoting Frank Thiess, she asks us to “Consider the triumph of sculpture over the stone, of painting over the flat surface, of poetry over language, etc. It is, then, precisely the material with which any particular art has to work that is to be overcome, and to a certain degree is rendered no longer apparent.”<sup>38</sup> We see this quite clearly in the form of ballet known as *pointe*, where the body appears to be supported only by the tips of the toes in a graceful flouting of the normal constraints of gravity. Many of the most recognizable poses of dance come from such apparent contradictions. In poses such as the *attitude croisée*, *soubresaut*, and *arabesque allongée*, for example, the “vertical leg is made to seem as if it were carrying a weightless mass,” creating an

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Langer, “Feeling and Form,” 39–40.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 40.

“optical paradox.”<sup>39</sup> Foundational to dance technique is an awareness of and ability to leverage these paradoxes: it is the weight, the groundedness, that gives a sense of weightlessness. The classical ballerina Sara Leland once remarked in an interview that “In the Balanchine plié, you are perched for flight.”<sup>40</sup> As an embodied art, the medium from which dance is made is our very selves, with all their humbling limitations but also their remarkable strengths.

While there are usually differences between dance as performed by a Christian dance company and congregational liturgical dance as has been incorporated into church worship services by dance choirs, effective, powerful religious dance should meet many of the same criteria held by any professional dance company. Rock phrases some of these criteria in the form of questions: i.e., “does the choreographer have something to say, beyond movements strung together for the length of the music? . . . Is the dance an attempt at communication through movement rather than a personal therapy session for the choreographer? Does it tell me something about my own experience as well as telling me something about the choreographer’s experience?”<sup>41</sup> Rock’s last question is perhaps the most important in terms of achieving the greatest potential of religious dance to communicate spiritual themes. Christian dance should aim to communicate fresh revelations of truth, and one way in which art does this is by inspiring the audience to identify with the art in some way they may not have otherwise expected. Sayers discusses this in her essay “Toward a Christian Esthetic.” While Sayers is referring to the art of poetry, the principles she describes apply to dance as well:

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<sup>39</sup> Levin, “Balanchine’s Formalism,” 137.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>41</sup> Rock, “Theology in the Shape of Dance,” 17.

In the image of [the poet's] experience, we can recognize the image of some experience of our own – something that had happened to us, but which we had never understood, never formulated or expressed to ourselves, and therefore never known as a real experience. When we read the poem . . . it is as though a light were turned on inside us. . . . 'now that the artist has made its image . . . I can possess it and take hold of it and make it my own and turn it into a source of knowledge and strength.' This is the communication of the image in power, by which the third person of the poet's trinity brings us, through the incarnate image, into direct knowledge of the, in itself, unknowable and unimaginable reality."<sup>42</sup>

Art engages the intellect, of course, but it also has an arresting way of eluding it – in a spiritual sense, art can have a mystical quality. Rock writes that experiencing God in this way is an important feature of our faith:

We need to remind ourselves in worship and in our theological study that although there are intellectual problems to be solved and moral decisions to be made in relation to our faith, God is not ultimately a problem to be solved but an experience to which we respond. The arts in worship and theology can bring all of us a little closer to the perceptions of the great mystics – the Baal Shem Tov, Teresa of Avila, Brother Lawrence, George Fox. At the point of deepest communion with the Holy, human beings seem not to be involved in solving problems and making decisions but rather in simply perceiving and responding to the Other, to God. The religious artistic image offers a perception of God and human life to us; and if it is a powerful lucid image, we respond; and nothing is ever quite the same.<sup>43</sup>

When we view a Christian dance, we should be held captive for a moment, compelled to experience something that may be foreign to ourselves and yet strangely familiar. In this way, the more specific and individual the message of the dance is to the dancers or to the choreographer, the more universal the truth it can communicate. By allowing us to see something of our own experience in a new form, we may come to a deeper understanding of our own relationship to God and others.

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<sup>42</sup> Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 164.

<sup>43</sup> Rock, "Theology in the Shape of Dance," 14.

*The Joy of Christian Art: Hope in Salvation*

Perhaps the most significant difference that sets Christian dance apart is its joy. There is a tendency for contemporary modern dance, “especially amateur modern dance,” to rely heavily on angst for its emotional power and content, exploiting an emotional response in the audience through the display of “lostness, despair, and personal unrelatedness.”<sup>44</sup> Christian art cannot ignore the very real presence of these darker aspects of the human condition if it hopes to reach people with a revelation of Christian truth. Good Christian art requires good theology, and good theology must engage unpleasant topics, like the issue of theodicy. However, Christian art must also emanate from Christian hope.<sup>45</sup> Because of this, all Christian art is ultimately distinctive, because it is founded on the Christian hope of salvation.

Judith Rock asks Christian choreographers this question: “Is your ‘angst’ level compatible with your theology?”<sup>46</sup> As Rock asserts, “Scholars have commented that it is impossible to have great Christian tragedy because Christian theology rejects any belief in fate and also because Christians are warned against taking themselves too seriously. There is, of course, struggle, pain, and passion in Christian dance; but it springs from a different source and has a different outcome: ‘*Toward the dawn of the first day of the week.*’ (Matthew 28:1).”<sup>47</sup> Likewise, Christian dance should not ignore the sometimes grotesque reality of the sin and darkness we face as humans living in a fallen world, but it should call us even now to look up to where the angelic beings call out to each other

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>45</sup> See also Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith*, 160.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>47</sup> Rock, “Theology in the Shape of Dance,” 18.



throughout eternity: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory!”<sup>48</sup>

Christian dance is challenging to create. As Maritain writes, “Christianity does not make art easy. It deprives it of many facile means, it bars its course at many places, but in order to raise its level.”<sup>49</sup> To be a Christian artist is an admittedly difficult calling, but one worth pursuing wholeheartedly – it is a call to create a work of beauty and truth which emanates from an eternal spring of inspiration: the Living God.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Isaiah 6:3.

<sup>49</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 72.

<sup>50</sup> See Psalm 87:7, “Singers and dancers alike say, ‘All my springs are in you.’”

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Sacred Dance, C. S. Lewis, and the Life of the Spirit

This project has been an exploration of Christian dance in a variety of forms – liturgical dance, social dance, dance as an individual form of worship, dance as high art. In my study of dance, I have examined its meaning as a sacred ritual and spiritual language, its place in the history of the Christian church, its value in encouraging communion, and its potential for both aesthetic excellence and powerful spiritual significance. This final chapter will use the work of C. S. Lewis – an author whom I truly consider to be a spiritual mentor in my own Christian faith – in order to illuminate a synthesis of these ideas. Lewis’ writing, I believe, is beautifully illustrative of the theological significance of dance as an image of the Christian’s hope: a perfect relationship with God, for eternity.

#### *Dance in the Work and Worldview of C. S. Lewis*

If we take the speaker in Lewis’ *Letters to Malcolm* to be himself, Lewis admittedly could “dance no better than a centipede with wooden legs.”<sup>1</sup> And yet throughout his work, his fiction and popular theology and poetry, he has the “tendency to use images like play and dance for the highest things.”<sup>2</sup> Games, music, and dance play an important role in the work of Lewis, occurring in a variety of forms both metaphorical and literal. Lewis himself wrote that “the really important things [are] literature, science,

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 92.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

music & art,” and this is certainly apparent in even his works of popular theology.<sup>3</sup> For instance, in a footnote of Appendix B of his book, *Miracles*, Lewis illustrates the concept of human free will within God’s omnipotence as a “perfect blending of order and freedom,” similar to the improvisation that occurs in partner dancing<sup>4</sup>: “A [subtle] image of creation and freedom (or rather, creation of the free and the unfree in a single timeless act) would be the almost simultaneous mutual adaptation in the movement of two expert dancing partners.”<sup>5</sup> Lewis sees the communication and interpretation that occurs between a lead and follow as an image of God’s interaction with us as beings with free will.

Numerous similar references to dancing occur in his other works, such as the *Chronicles of Narnia*, where dancing “as a social activity occurs or is mentioned at least thirty times.”<sup>6</sup> According to Schakel, the appeal of dance and music for Lewis began with his “appreciation of their aesthetic beauty,” but their deeper appeal stemmed from their “aesthetic and imaginative impact as an image, or archetype, for the meaning they had collected over hundreds of years as authors Lewis loved dearly used them to depict a physical and metaphysical universe that Lewis emotionally longed for and spiritually lived in.”<sup>7</sup> Lewis was both a classicist and a medievalist, and his use of dance imagery is due, in part, to his awareness of the importance of the metaphor in the metaphysical and theological literary works of the past, where the heavenly bodies and everything else in the universe were seen as participating in a great, harmonious dance. In this sense, dance

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<sup>3</sup> Schakel, “‘The Really Important Things’: Music and Dance in C. S. Lewis,” 94.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>5</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 459.

<sup>6</sup> Schakel, “‘The Really Important Things,’” 104.

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

symbolized order and hierarchy, with every individual actor acting in perfect relation to everything else in a defined rhythm and unified, ordered motion. God, then, as the Creator of this ordered universe, was also the leader of the dance.

According to Schakel, Lewis' "most meaningful figurative use of dance is as a metaphor for community, including the divine nature as a community."<sup>8</sup> This concept of the divine nature as community is present in *Mere Christianity*, where Lewis uses the metaphor of dance in his attempt to clarify the doctrine of the Trinity. Lewis writes that "the words "God is love" have no real meaning unless God contains as least two Persons,' since love is an activity between different individuals." This reciprocity, Lewis continues, means that "in Christianity God is not a static thing . . . but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance."<sup>9</sup> Schakel explains that in attempting to "express the inexpressible," Lewis has employed the metaphor of a dance because of its divine associations, which unite "his understanding of God with the Western cultural myth" stemming from antiquity.<sup>10</sup> Schakel writes that "in the western cultural tradition dance, like music, has been used since classical times as an image of order and harmony in the universe" and as "part of an ancient creation myth"; "such use of dance as a cosmological symbol . . . can be traced to Plato, who, in the *Timaeus*, described how the Creator fashioned the world after its eternal pattern."<sup>11</sup> In the *Chronicles of Narnia* and other works, Lewis incorporates dance imagery not simply as an activity that human

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>9</sup> See *Mere Christianity*, "Good Infection" in Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, 143.

<sup>10</sup> Schakel, "The Really Important Things," 103.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 104.

beings use for enjoyment, but as an allusion to a world view in which a divine Creator orchestrates even the most intricate details of each life and event of the universe.<sup>12</sup> Hugo

Rahner discusses this in his book, *Man at Play*:

The people of antiquity were quite familiar with the idea of the dance of the stars and used this expression to convey their sense of the loveliness of the sparkling firmament. “The fixed stars,” says Philo, “dance a truly divine dance because they never depart from the order which the all-begetting Father has directed them to observe in the cosmos.”<sup>13</sup>

Schakel explains further in his article:

That it should even occur to [Lewis] to compare God to a dance can be understood from Plato, [who] emphasizes that the act of creation involves correspondences between the world and its pattern, and the creation and the Creator. If creation can be viewed as a dance, so too, by correspondence, can the Creator: Lewis simply follows through and concretizes what is implicit in the *Timaeus*.<sup>14</sup> And in doing so he relates the nature of God to the attributes of the world view dance has traditionally imaged: dance is active, orderly, and hierarchical.<sup>15</sup>

An underlying familiarity with this concept of the cosmic dance pervades Lewis’ work.

According to Schakel’s analysis of Lewis’ writings, the appeal in this image of a cosmic dance, for Lewis, is the world view it assumes: that the universe is “a harmonious system, and that human life, as an integral part of that whole, also has order, unity, and meaning. The universe is not . . . unpatterned and individualistic; rather, it echoes the stately movement of the chorus in a Greek tragedy or the stylized formality of the country dance in an Austen novel.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Rahner, *Man at Play*, 72.

<sup>14</sup> See chapter two, page 49–50 for more discussion of Plato’s *Timaeus* and the concept of the “cosmic dance.”

<sup>15</sup> Schakel, ““The Really Important Things,”” 103–104.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 105.

The use of dance as metaphor is especially apparent in Lewis' space trilogy, in which he elaborates on this classical concept in a powerful scene in *Perelandra*, the second book in the series. In this novel, Lewis illustrates the Platonic notion of the dance of the universe. In chapter seventeen, Ransom, the protagonist, is about to leave the planet Perelandra, he has a sort of crisis of faith. He is discouraged by doubt and confusion, but becomes witness to the coherent nature of the universe expressed in the form of a litany "[celebrating] the Dance and the Lord of the Dance. Christ [called Maledil in the world of Perelandra] is the center of the Dance, but is constantly moving so that the center is everywhere and everywhere is the center."<sup>17</sup> Ransom hears a voice which calls out,

"Each grain is at the centre. The Dust is at the centre . . . Where Maledil is, there is the centre. He is in every place. Not some of Him in one place and some in another, but in each place the whole Maleldil. . . . Each thing was made for Him. He is the centre. Because we are with Him, each of us is at the centre. . . . In the plan of the Great Dance plans without number interlock, and each movement becomes in its season the breaking into flower of the whole design to which all else had been directed. Thus each is equally at the centre and none are there by being equals, but some by giving place and some by receiving it, the small things by their smallness and the great by their greatness, and all the patterns linked and looped together by the unions of a kneeling with a sceptered love. Blessed is He!"<sup>18</sup>

In this description of the eternal cosmic dance, Lewis illustrates a theology of intentionality and contingency. Everything, Lewis maintains, is part of a vast pattern carefully held in balance by a loving Creator. Each individual actor – including, of course, each human being, fashioned in Genesis from the very dust of the earth – is at once free to act and therefore influence the whole, yet is still integrated into the greater pattern established, defined, and maintained by God. The individual exists only in

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>18</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra: A Novel* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), 216–17.

community, and the whole is, collectively, made in the image of both the Dance and the Lord of the Dance. God takes into account the purpose and call of each, and makes everything beautiful in its own time. He loves all of us as if there were only one of us, in the words some have attributed to Augustine. And it is for this eternal dance – this perfect relationship between Creator and creation – that all things were made.<sup>19</sup>

Lewis may not have been a dancer, but he speaks about dance in his writings with an authenticity any Christian dancer could identify with. Building on a philosophical and theological tradition that elevates dance to a metaphor of the divine, Lewis' descriptions of dance align with those of the most passionate dancers, like Carla DeSola's below:

The dance began in the beginning, in silence and stillness, as the world lay worshipping under the hand of God, for the 'Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.' The dance began with God! Movement abounded, for life was bursting forth everywhere. There were the rotation of the planets around the sun, the changing of seasons and of day to night, the creepings of cells and plants and animals, but as yet the dance was incomplete, for it required the human soul, the soul of persons moving in relationship to God, to give this dance its deepest purpose, that of praise and gratitude.<sup>20</sup>

Like Lewis and so many others from the time of Plato on, DeSola sees dance as a suitable illustration of the harmony and order of the created universe, the creative activity of God, and the hope of humanity's participation and reconciliation with the divine.

### *Christian Dance in My Own Experience*

I have come to believe that dancing is one of the most personal expressions of my

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis, *Perelandra*, 214.

<sup>20</sup> De Sola, "Reflections on Dance and Prayer," 61.

being, and especially of my faith.<sup>21</sup> It is hard to imagine the person I would be, if not a dancer; I began studying dance at the age of three and never stopped. But for me, dance is not merely a performance art. It's not just about being on stage in front of a crowd; it isn't only about applause or impressing an audience with technique or flexibility or the number of turns in a sequence. Without something soulful at the heart of a dance, it's just physics, a mechanism that burns out fast. Though I've taken thousands of hours of dance lessons and performed in more recitals and shows than I could count, my favorite moments are not when I execute a flawless pirouette, but when I somehow manage to convey a piece of my soul to another – when I inspire an echo of something I feel, and it comes to resonate in someone else's heart.

I believe that dancing with or in the presence of others can be an offering – an invitation to witness and share the essence of who we are, without pretense. The heart of dance, then, truly is communion. It is both a celebration of our common experiences and a form of language, revealing hidden facets of ourselves that nothing else expresses in quite the same way. Dance is motion, stillness, contact, variation, rhythm, change – a celebration of life in all its different elements and seasons. For centuries upon centuries, cultures worldwide have seen dance as a metaphor for the harmony and beauty of a universe created by an Artist. And because of this, dance has also been seen as fitting for celebrations of human life here on earth – one part of an intricately orchestrated whole. Dance is earthly and heavenly, human and divine. It is grounded and ethereal – leaping up, leaving shadows where you once stood, pressing weight into the floor, leaving footprints. We dance at christenings, weddings, and sometimes even funerals. We dance

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<sup>21</sup> See Appendices B and C for links to videos of my own interpretations of sacred dance. Appendix C discusses a lyrical solo choreographed to “C. S. Lewis Song” by Brooke Fraser, which was inspired by Lewis’ writing.



to pray. At the altar, we dance to commemorate sacrifice. Together, we dance to illustrate future splendor.

I chose to begin my thesis with the words of Lewis by including a quotation from *Letters to Malcolm* as an epigraph for my introduction. Dance, Lewis suggests, like other joyful activities that may seem “frivolous” to some, is perhaps a true reflection of the life of that eternal, “better country” – for “joy is the serious business of Heaven.”<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the process of researching for this project, this quotation has been representative of my own approach to the subject of dance and Christian faith.

### *Sacred Art: Renewed by the Spirit of Christ*

Though I have often used the term “Christian dance” in this project, I want to emphasize again that there is no rigid set of criteria for what makes dance “Christian.” In other words, while there is dance that is Christian and dance that is clearly not, there is no checklist of elements a dance must contain in order to be definitively Christian. As I have mentioned before, a dance need not even be performed or choreographed by Christians to have Christian significance. This is one of the great powers of art as a spiritual language.

One of the most spiritually moving pieces I have seen is a ballet duet titled “Pleiades,”<sup>23</sup> inspired by the constellation of the same name, which of course is based on pagan mythology. The dance incorporates interactive lighting technology to transform each dancer into a sort of living constellation. The backdrop is dark blue, but moving points of light are aligned with each of the dancers’ bodies throughout the choreography.

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<sup>22</sup> Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 92–93.

<sup>23</sup> See Nobuyuki Hanabusa, *Pleiades* (Enra, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0813gcZ1Uw8>.

In this way, the lighting technology is fully synchronized with the choreography, giving the illusion that the light is coming from the dancers themselves.

This dance is not “Christian.” It does not interpret Christian lyrics; it doesn’t have lyrics at all. There is nothing in the title or choreography to suggest any given biblical story. I do not know whether the dancers or the choreographer or the producers are Christian. But when I see this dance, I see something like otherworldly beauty, and I can’t help feeling strangely wistful. I first saw this piece after having read Lewis’ essay, “The Weight of Glory,” and immediately identified my feelings after watching the dance with these words from C. S. Lewis:

We do not want merely to see beauty . . . We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it . . . if we take the imagery of Scripture seriously, if we believe that God will one day give us the Morning Star and cause us to put on the splendour of the sun, then we may surmise that both the ancient myths and the modern poetry, so false as history, may be very near the truth as prophecy.<sup>24</sup>

“Pleiades” illustrates all of this. In the dance, the dancers portray an almost playful interaction with the stars – things that in reality (at least how we experience it here on earth) we find ourselves mesmerized by, and yet cannot even come close to touching. The content of the dance is mythological, unrealistic, and not technically Christian. But it speaks to a truth that has motivated people throughout the history of humankind, from the poets and philosophers of antiquity to the astrophysicists at the most prestigious scientific institutions today. We long to know the secrets of the beauty we see, to understand it fully, to find the source of where all the beauty comes from. Essentially, it speaks to the Christian truth that we are created with this longing, which only God himself can fill. The

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<sup>24</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, 1st HarperCollins ed., [rev.]. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 43.

Holy Spirit of truth can communicate through any medium – and thus all art has the potential to be Christian art.

For the Christian artist, then, perhaps the most important thing is to simply be a Christian, and to pursue excellence in your craft, whatever it may be. Rather than striving to make Christian art, we should commit to being Christian, trusting that the art that comes to fruition as a result of our faith will be inhabited by the same spirit of truth which inspired it. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes that Christianity was never intended to “replace or supercede the ordinary human arts,” but rather it is “a director” and “a source of energy which will give them all new life, if only they will put themselves at its disposal.”<sup>25</sup> If we devote our art to Christ, allowing it to serve as worship and to point others towards him, it will be faithful and beautiful whether or not we dance to Christian music or identify it with Scripture references. It will communicate Christian truth not necessarily through content but by the work of Spirit in and through us.

In an essay called “Dances for Life,” internationally renowned artist Makoto Fujimura advocates for dance, calling it a form of “physical calligraphy,” a language that is uniquely adapted to portray the truth of Christ.<sup>26</sup> Fujimura writes that

Dancers embody the very ideal of the arts and fuse the spirit with the body. In other words, dance *incarnates* . . . . God appeared in flesh via the babe in a manger, bridging eternal gaps in the incarnation: Flesh, therefore, is given the *weight of glory*. God came, supped as a man, and bled to bring *our* bodies and spirits to merge into heaven. He defined humanity within his own body. . . . Our Lord humbled himself to have a body, to make himself vulnerable, to be lifted up in ignominy, and to find resurrection in that glorious body. A dancer, in a single leap, seems to hover in between the indescribable gap between time and space,

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<sup>25</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 74.

<sup>26</sup> Makoto Fujimura, “Dances for Life,” in *Refractions: A Journey of Faith, Art, and Culture* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2009), 79–82, 81.

taking us with him or her. By doing so, the dancer embodies our souls in the public arena, and perhaps that is the dancer's grand adventure.<sup>27</sup>

Because dance is an embodied art, it can act as a powerful illustration of the truth of Christ's incarnation, offering us another language and vocabulary with which to communicate and experience God. Through Christ's incarnation, even our earthly bodies – though not yet existing in the form they will have in heaven – are given a measure of glory. The art of dance gives us another way of celebrating this mysterious truth. In the same essay, Fujimura continues:

Christians should be the first in line to see and applaud this fusion of body and soul. Christ is not an ideology, a sentiment, or a mental image, but a fusion of body and Spirit. Scripture speaks of how God turns our "wailing into dancing" (Psalm 30:11). Our bodies are not empty shells to be filled with souls but are mysterious and inexplicably tied to our redemption. Our Lord will dance with us in the coming age, and we should begin to prepare for that day.

If I have accomplished anything in this project, I hope that I have inspired Christians to see dance in the way I see it – as an art form that brings glory to God and inspires communion with each other. I hope that my readers will reconsider their perspective on dance and its theological significance, knowing that there is actually a long history of connection between dance and the Christian faith. And I would hope that my readers might even be inspired to dance themselves. Like Fujimura, I believe that God is delighted when His children dance.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Easter Procession

The following photos were taken in 2011 during the Easter service at Heights Church in Prescott, Arizona, as part of a reenactment of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The group of dancers formed a procession that moved toward the sanctuary, dancing with tambourines. The dance was choreographed by Lauren Shephard and Courtney Wagner, and was set to original music by Justin and Falon Unger.



*Photography by Elaine Vang, Prescott, AZ.*

## APPENDIX B

### “Divine Romance”

**Dance:** Mariah Franklin

**Choreography:** Mariah Franklin

**Music:** Phil Wickham

**Date:** April 2012

**Location:** Jones Theatre; Baylor University; Waco, Texas

**Link:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_\\_8wPE1IUZU#t=69](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=__8wPE1IUZU#t=69)

This dance, an interpretation of music by Phil Wickham, is representative of my early experience with creating sacred dance. I originally choreographed this piece for a dance showcase during my freshman year in college. The next year, it was selected for the program of a student variety show during Parents and Family Weekend at Baylor. All choreography is my own.



*“Divine Romance,” photography by Jennifer McGraw.*

## APPENDIX C

### “C. S. Lewis Song”

**Dancer:** Mariah Franklin

**Choreography:** Todd Shanks

**Music:** Brooke Fraser

**Filming:** Zachary Korpi

**Date:** January 2015

**Location:** Waco Hall; Baylor University; Waco, Texas

**Link:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEr9VcDVnIo&feature=youtu.be>

This dance is an interpretation of Brooke Fraser’s song, “C. S. Lewis Song,” inspired by the work of C. S. Lewis. I performed this dance at the {254} Dance Festival in Waco, and it was later selected for the program of a student variety show during Parents and Family Weekend at Baylor.

Lewis’ writing has been particularly influential in my own spiritual journey. From childhood, when my mom read the Chronicles of Narnia to my brother and me, to college, when I studied abroad in Oxford to study the literature of Lewis and the Inklings, I know that my own views on things like the mystery of Christ, his incarnation and sacrifice, redemption, and heaven have been greatly informed by Lewis’ imaginative vision. Because of this, when I set out to create and perform my own sacred dance, I chose to interpret a song inspired by his writing. The lyrics of the song are an arrangement of various quotations and ideas from the writings of Lewis. The song was written by New Zealand artist Brooke Fraser, whose music I have long loved for its artistry in composition and its depth of meaning. The lyrics I chose to include in my cut



version of the song are given below:

“C.S. Lewis Song”

*If I find in myself desires nothing in this world can satisfy,  
I can only conclude that I was not made for here.  
If the flesh that I fight is at best only light and momentary,  
then of course I'll feel nude when to where I'm destined I'm compared.*

*Speak to me in the light of the dawn –  
Mercy comes with the morning.  
I will sigh, and with all creation groan as I wait for hope to come for me.*

*For we, we are not long here,  
Our time is but a breath, so we'd better breathe it.  
And I – I was made to live, I was made to love, I was made to know you.  
Hope is coming for me.*

While I will not attempt here to give a full explanation of the various interpretive choices made in the choreography, I will explain how I've interpreted the meaning of some of the lyrics. The dance was choreographed by Todd Shanks, a professional dancer and instructor who has taught at Steps on Broadway, and one of my former dance instructors. Together, Todd and I created a dance that I believe expresses, through music and movement, many of the ideas that have shaped my spiritual being over the last five years.

The first two lines of the song are a paraphrase of a quotation from *Mere Christianity*. This is part of one of the logical proofs Lewis gives for his conclusion that, essentially, we do not belong on earth. Stated simply, the desire is a desire for heaven – for perfection, love, health; freedom from evil, pain, and hatred. If we truly belonged here on earth, Lewis argues, we would not complain about our natural environment or wish for a better one: “do fish complain of the sea for being wet?”<sup>1</sup> This concept of longing, which Lewis often refers to by the German word *sehnsucht*, is a recurring motif in Lewis' work.

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation is from a letter Lewis sent to Sheldon Vanauken, who, at the time, was not a Christian but was seeking answers about Lewis' faith. See Vanauken, Sheldon, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 93.

We long for perfection and can conceive of what perfection would be, and yet we know it does not exist here on earth. But if we can imagine perfection, Lewis concludes, it must exist somewhere, and the concept of perfection must have been imparted to us by a being much greater than ourselves. Fraser summarizes this, ending the first two lines with the statement, “I was not made for here.”

The next section, I believe, alludes to Lewis’ novel, *The Great Divorce*.<sup>2</sup> Fraser writes that compared to the eternal, perfect place we *are* made for, our earthly bodies of flesh will feel nude by comparison. In *The Great Divorce*, as the main character travels away from the grey town of shadows and toward heaven, what used to feel “real” is shown to be just a flimsy, ghostlike image of reality. Lewis writes that this man and the others on the bus from the grey town appear translucent, a strange form of nakedness and vulnerability when compared even to the *grass* of heaven, which they find is too sharp for them to walk on at first.

The rest of these lyrics seem to be a more general summary of ideas from Scripture and Lewis’ interpretation of biblical concepts. The phrase, “Mercy comes with the morning” could be a reference to *The Great Divorce* as well, in that sunrise is seen as the end of time in that novel. However, it likely also refers to the biblical verse which states that God’s “mercies are new every morning.”<sup>3</sup> The idea of creation groaning as it waits for redemption comes from the book of Romans, which states that all of creation groans as it waits for the “revealing of the sons of God and the coming of the Lord.”<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> See *The Great Divorce*, included in this collection: C. S. Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Lamentations 3:22–23.

<sup>4</sup> See Romans 8:18–25.

stanza beginning with “we are not long here” evokes the comparison of human life to withering grass or fading flowers in Isaiah 40:6–8. It also reminds me of the book of Ecclesiastes and the concept that life is ephemeral, so we must enjoy the time we do have – “life is but a breath, so we’d better breathe it.” The last few lines express hope in future glory. There is a recognition that our ultimate purpose is to know and love God – it is for this perfect relationship that God created us. As the Westminster Confession has put it, “the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” God is the answer we’re all looking for when we recognize that our world somehow lacks something essential – when we desire something we don’t find here, even though we can’t quite put our finger on it. His is the “other world” that we were made for.



*“C. S. Lewis Song,” photography by Vanessa Goodwyn.*

## APPENDIX D

### Interview with Sheila Kogan

Last year I had the opportunity to speak about liturgical dance with Sheila Kogan, movement education and language development specialist, author, choreographer, and longtime dance educator. This interview would come to be an inspiration for much of my later research. Though Kogan's focus is on liturgical dance specifically, much of the insight she offers is relevant to the subject of Christian dance as high art as well. I have included this section as an appendix because it illustrates a practical application of many of the concepts I have discussed in my thesis.

For more than twenty years, Kogan has served as the director of a dance ministry at the church of Our Lady of Lourdes in Oakland, California. This ministry, which is carried out entirely by members of the congregation, is still very active in the church. Though I had initially contacted Kogan with questions about the subject via email, I ended up speaking with her on the phone. During our conversation, I asked Kogan to share her experience leading a dance ministry within the worship service. I loved having the opportunity to hear from someone with such a long history of viewing the art of dance from a Christian perspective. Kogan gave me a lot of insight on the ways dance can serve as a means of worship, and spoke at length on the importance of right motivations and the careful consideration that must be applied in situations of religious dance.

Before I had spoken with Kogan, I remember having been surprised to learn that her ministry was part of a Catholic church, because although I knew of the more

historical connections of dance to medieval Catholic liturgy, I did not expect to find dance associated with Catholicism today, since the most recently established dance ministries seem to have come from Protestantism, often Charismatic, Pentecostal, or non-denominational churches specifically. However, I learned that Kogan's ministry has been under her guidance for more than twenty years – though you would never guess it from the way she writes or speaks, Kogan is in her seventies.

As I have researched the subject of dance and Christianity, one of my original motivations was to uncover the reasons for the stigma against dance that exists within many Christian circles and denominations. I asked Kogan to offer her insight related to this subject, since she has been so successful in implementing a dance related ministry into the congregational worship service of her parish. I also asked how she would refute such a stigma, which is often connected to the belief that dance is inherently sinful. One of Kogan's first explanations for this stigma was related to a fear of the body itself. Dance, as embodied expression, "has a sensual quality that could maybe frighten church officials and parishioners into thinking it's a sexual activity, or too avant-garde, in the sense of being progressive," Kogan said.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps, as Van Der Leeuw suggests that, the "deeper reason lies in the close connection between dance and eroticism. Almost always the dance partially involves exhibitionism . . . . The dance, even the simplest and the most proper, brings out the glory of the body; and even in its most innocent form it serves for the mutual attraction of the sexes. . . . But almost from the very beginning, Christianity has been the outspoken enemy of the body and all sensual pleasures, which it never considers innocent. . . . a view of life which shrinks from the body cannot stand for beautiful movement . . . that a religion which exalts virginity above all must hate the enticements of the moving body, that the hope for release from the body of this death expects no benefits from any expression of feeling,

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<sup>5</sup> Sheila Kogan, "Personal Interview," September 15, 2014. All further quotations are Kogan's words unless cited otherwise.

and certainly not from any expression of the holy, through dance."<sup>6</sup>

This seems to be the primary reason for the way some Christians have distanced themselves from dance, especially in relation to dance within the church. Not wanting to risk encouraging impurity of thought or motives by allowing the church to be a venue for performances of or participation in dance, many churches have taken a stand against dance in general.

How can we counteract this negative association with dance? Kogan replied, "I'd go right to the Old Testament," and then referred to the often cited example of David's ecstatic dance of praise before the ark to refute the idea that there is anything inherently sinful about dance. But "why [dance is] not *accepted*" in the church involves more than this general stigma, she explained. "We've done it to ourselves," Kogan admitted, referring to dancers and choreographers themselves. "The liturgical dance I've seen has erred on two fronts: one, I've seen people emote their spirituality, flying around drunken-like . . . I don't think that works. It's someone emoting for the public. It has to be more structured into an art form," she explained. In this, Kogan introduced a view on what Christian dance should and should not be which revealed part of how her perspective on the place of dance in worship, coming from a Catholic background, might differ from Christians of other denominations, such as Pentecostalism. As a trained dancer and dance educator, Kogan highly values the use of structured and harmonic choreography in situations involving dance in the church. Without the decorum and structure of choreography, dance may become merely an outlet for excessive emotionality and potentially distract from the worship of other members of the congregation, rather than

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<sup>6</sup> G. van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art*, New ed., American Academy of Religion texts and translations series (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 54–55.

promote an environment in which heartfelt worship can occur.

The second front on which Kogan felt she had seen Christian dancers err in their approach involved a failure to be conscious of the way certain aspects of choreography and dress would be interpreted by those members of the congregation who did not necessarily have a familiarity with dance already. “There are sometimes very good reasons why people haven’t liked liturgical dance and don’t want it in their parish,” because it can, if done without intention, be more distracting than helpful, Kogan said. She then shared an anecdote about a time when dancers from outside her congregation performed a liturgical dance in her parish that utilized choreographic elements which, to a dancer, might not seem out of place, but were offensive to other members of the church. Kogan described the dance, which was about the story of the woman at the well, as being “quite avant-garde,” and “there was one point when the woman jumped on [the man portraying Christ]” for a partnered lift, just as one might see in the choreography of any pas de deux in classical ballet. “At a studio you wouldn’t bat an eyelash,” Kogan said. But in this setting, what might be considered appropriate, aesthetically beautiful, or even inspiring to someone who recognized the athleticism and technique involved with the choreography was easily (and understandably) misinterpreted by others. Kogan further illustrated this concept with the example of sculpture or painting: “Very much like a nude, we might think that’s just gorgeous, and others would [not].” The way art is interpreted can as much about the venue and audience as it is about the artist’s intent or execution.

Another reason this particular dance had been inappropriate for the context was that the woman’s costume was made of a very thin, sheer material – nothing out of the

ordinary in the dance world, since dancewear naturally needs to allow for freedom of movement, and lightweight, breathable materials are best for this. However, just as one would be unlikely to wear workout clothes to a formal event, those who participate in dance ministries should be mindful of the accepted dress code of the church, and adjust their usual attire accordingly. “We have to be so careful about what we wear,” Kogan said, “We have to be so discreet, [because] sometimes people don’t understand. [My dancers wear a] leotard and leggings *and* a dress over it, so you don’t see anything, except,” Kogan allowed, wanting to be perfectly accurate, “maybe a tiny bit of cleavage.” Just as Kogan makes modesty in apparel a priority for her dancers, she also emphasizes the importance of modesty in choreography: “[In my choreography,] I use little up in the air. I use none the ground, [except perhaps] I kneel – I limit the expression to things that are very discreet.” Kogan admits that limiting her choreography to such movements creates unique challenges, because “it’s very hard to get that meaningful, artistic, hopefully beautiful dance expression without ‘stepping on anyone’s toes.’” In this, I think Kogan is more conservative than I am, but I fully understand her point. While I don’t necessarily see anything inappropriate with incorporating athletic leaps or floorwork, it does require more creativity, sometimes, to choreograph a dance that expresses emotion, but while maintaining enough restraint so as not to detract from a worshipful attitude. Regardless of the specific choreography, another thing that must be considered is that dance can detract from a worship service if the general congregation is unfamiliar with the practice, or if they misinterpret the motivation or purpose of the dance. For a dance ministry to be successful, the congregation must be given some sort of education or introduction to the use of dance before they witness it in the worship service itself.



Kogan and I also discussed the importance of maintaining artistic integrity, and what implications this has on dance in religious settings. One challenging aspect of Christian dance ministries is determining who can and should participate, and there are many different approaches to this, as Kogan explained. Carla DeSola, for instance, is a Juilliard graduate and a well-known dance expert who leads the Omega West Dance Company in San Francisco. During our conversation, Kogan often referred to DeSola's approach to her liturgical dance ministry, which Kogan describes as being a "professional group." Kogan said that once, DeSola was asked if she accepts everyone in the parish for participation in the dance ministry, and DeSola replied, "no, I bring in beauty!" Kogan shared this anecdote not to present DeSola in a negative light, but simply to demonstrate a difference in approach; DeSola places a lot of value on technique and professionalism, emphasizing the aesthetic excellence. "Carla and I have very contradictory views. . . She has really well trained, beautiful dancers, and she brings in beautiful choreography," Kogan explained. However, Kogan doesn't restrict her own dance ministry to classically trained dancers: "In my group I have some soloists – trained dancers – [but] we are a parish group. We are a motley group. My job becomes to use all levels [of dancers]." Rather than placing the utmost importance on what the dance looks like, Kogan values inclusiveness, and allows anyone who would like to participate to be involved with her dance ministry. Kogan considers it her responsibility as a choreographer "to have layers of difficulty," and she shared an example of how she incorporates dancers of a variety of backgrounds and gifts: "I had a nun with us who had [multiple sclerosis]. She was tall and quite stately looking. I would have her doing solo moves, but she couldn't spin . . . so I configured her part separately [with arm movements, etc.]" Though this woman was

physically unable to carry out certain kinds of movement, she was no less of a dancer, and Kogan realized that this woman could still offer a beautiful contribution to the ministry of the group. “It’s my job to use everyone’s talents,” Kogan said, telling me that she accepts congregation members regardless of age or expertise. “I’m seventy, and I have plenty of dancers in their sixties and seventies; the youngest are in their forties. It would be lovely to have younger people. . . [but their lives are too busy to be involved].”

Kogan’s concept of inclusivity brings up the question of the merit of artistic excellence in worship settings. Should liturgical dance – both as an art form that is intended to have religious meaning for the dancers and viewers, and as an offering to God in the worship service – be held to the highest standards of artistic excellence? In other words, when dance is part of a worship service, is the aesthetic quality of the dance as important as the ritual itself? Kogan’s response to these questions focuses primarily on the responsibility of the choreographer and dancers to the good of the congregation. It is of the utmost importance, when choreographing and performing a liturgical dance, that it contributes to the worship and does not distract. Because dance, with its synthesis of the aural, visual, and corporal elements, has such power to captivate attention, it must be used carefully.

Speaking from her knowledge of early education, Kogan discussed how, of all the arts, dance is uniquely adapted to inspire individuals in the expression of their own faith and worship, whether they are themselves dancing or only experiencing the dance as viewers. Kogan continued, the enthusiasm in her voice expressing her deep conviction of the power of dance to communicate spiritual experiences: “[dance] enhances [the worship service] the way music enhances words. How would the service be without music? –

music goes through you! Dance has the potential to do that even more.” However, this great potential means that dance must be incorporated with care; its power as a spiritual language can be used for good or ill.

Dance *can* detract from the worship “if it’s done carelessly or not prayerfully, [and] if it’s done without rehearsal,” Kogan warned, sharing her view that while liturgical dance can be beautiful and good even without the benefit of expert dancers, this does not mean it should be done without adequate planning and preparation. Kogan’s model of Christian dance requires that choreography be thoughtfully planned and well-rehearsed before the worship service. The fact that it is a spiritual experience does not, according to Kogan, mean that it should be left up to the spontaneous interpretation of individual dancers. Aesthetics, then, do play a part in Kogan’s vision for dance ministries. Liturgical dance certainly does not have to use complex or classical dance choreography to be meaningful, but it should still be carried out with intentionality. Speaking on this, Kogan said, “[People say], ‘trust the Holy Spirit to do it! No, the Holy Spirit tells us to roll up our sleeves and practice.’” While Kogan maintains that her should dance group be open to anyone who would like to participate, she explained that this doesn’t necessarily mean “they’ll dance in front of the congregation at any time or right away – they have to be ready.” In many ways, Kogan said, you have to be even more careful with the use of dance in a worship service than you do with music; a soloist singing off key is probably less distracting than a dancer who has not adequately prepared for a performance. Most importantly, however, Kogan reiterated that the single most important aspect of Christian dance is purity of heart. Dance does not have to be perfect to bring glory to God. Christian dancers do not need to showcase flawless technique to express the truth and

beauty of their faith. Dances that are performed in the church will not fail in their purpose, even if there are missteps. As Kogan says: “I don’t think mistakes wreck a dance, [but] timidity or lack of intent wrecks a dance, and it certainly wrecks prayer.” When dance is done with pure motives and a desire to worship, however, it has the potential to be a true language of the heart and soul. And, though Kogan and DeSola may have different approaches to liturgical dance, I think that both ministries share this essential motivation, which DeSola writes in the form of a prayer:

Let me begin with prayer: I pray that everyone, sitting cramped inside a pew, body lifeless, spine sagging and suffering, weary with weight and deadness, will be given space in which to breathe and move, will be wooed to worship with beauty and stillness, song and dance – dance charged with life, dance that lifts up both body and spirit, as we will be a holy, dancing, loving, praying, and praising people.<sup>7</sup>

Incorporating dance into the worship service can make a beautiful but sometimes exclusive art form accessible to church members, either as dancers themselves or as viewers of dance, inspiring connection between believers and providing another way for members of a community of faith to creatively express praise and worship.

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<sup>7</sup> Carla DeSola, “Reflections on Dance and Prayer,” in *Focus on Dance*, ed. Dennis J. Fallon and Mary Jane Wolbers (Washington, D.C: National Dance Association, 1982), 61–63, 61.

## APPENDIX E

### Christian Dance and Arts Organizations

The following is a list (noncomprehensive, of course) of arts organizations that advocate for sacred dance. Many of these organizations, especially the Fujimura Institute, were helpful to me in my research for this project.

- **Fujimura Institute** (*New York, New York*)  
<http://fujimurainstitute.org>
- **International Arts Movement** (*New York, New York*)  
<http://iamculturecare.com>
- **Springs Dance Company and Elevate Apprenticeship Program** (*London, England*)  
<http://www.springsdancecompany.org.uk>
- **Ad Deum Dance Company** (*Houston, Texas*)  
<http://www.danceaddeum.com>
- **Refined Undignified** (*Caronport, Saskatchewan, Canada*)  
<http://www.refinedundignified.com>
- **Omega West Dance Company** (*Berkely, California*)  
<http://www.omegawest.org>
- **Ballet Magnificat!** (*Jackson, Mississippi*)  
<http://www.balletmagnificat.com>
- **Project Dance** (*Houston, Texas*)  
<http://www.projectdance.com>
- **Spark and Echo Arts** (*Online Community*)  
<http://www.sparkandecho.org>

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