

DANCE AS WORSHIP

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The purpose of this essay is to consider the nature of worship in relation to the act of dancing. It will begin by suggesting a possible definition of worship, followed by a possible definition of dance. It will proceed by suggesting a number of ways in which the act of dance can be understood as Christian worship, as well as a number of obstacles that hinder the use of dance as Christian worship. Finally, this essay will turn to the particular context of the writer to consider some of the practical implications of worshipping God through dance as a community.

What Is Worship?

Worship begins with God. Although worship is a human act, it is first predicated on God's self-declaration in creation and redemption, and constitutes a truthful response to that self-declaration.¹ As has been stated in class lectures, God is God whether we acknowledge it or not. However, humans are capable of acknowledging God as the supreme creator who loves the creation and redeems it, and in so doing humanity fulfills its purpose in creation. In this way, worship is a declaration of truth and a fulfillment of human purpose whereby humans proclaim that God, not humanity, is the author of life. This essay begins by understanding worship as the reordering of human life to reveal the truth of God's self-revelation as creator and redeemer. Worship is the truthful, albeit difficult, admission that God is God and humans are humans.

1. I am indebted to Dr. Michael Knowles for helping me to think through a number of issues in this first section.

Another way of saying the same thing is to say that God creates and humans are created. This language is useful because it points to another characteristic of worship. There is an intrinsic relationship present in the terms creator and creature. God is creator by virtue of his creative act, and humans are creatures by virtue of that same creative act, which brings about a relationship between them. This is not the same as saying that both parties are mutually responsible for the act. Far from it. Rather, the initiative and the design belong wholly to God and worship functions to declare this. Notwithstanding that distinction, God also created humans to have two-way communication with God. Therefore when humans worship, alone or as a community, they recognize the possibility that God is present and communicating with humanity and that God listens to and receives human praise. This is a second mercy: that God sees fit to accept our worship.

If the ability to communicate with God in worship is another one of God's gracious gifts, it is no wonder that humans have tried to find appropriate ways of doing so. James F. White, in his *Introduction to Christian Worship*, defines worship by appealing to historical definitions, to key terms, and also to its various acts, structures, and services.² Although he does express a positive attitude to the use of movement in worship, he does not deal with dance as a significant act of worship.³ Yet despite its frequent omission from liturgical repertoires, dance as an act of worship is thoroughly attested both in Christian Scripture and in human experience.

Dance was a common component of ancient Jewish life, both social and liturgical. It appears and reappears throughout the biblical text. It appears in the psalms and poetry of the canon as a way of worshipping God: "praise him with tambourine and dancing" (Ps. 150:4). It appears when God's nation celebrates, as when Miriam led the women of Israel in praise, song, and dance after the crossing of the sea. (Exod. 15:20-21) It appears in the courts of rulers, as in the stories of David and Salome. (2 Sam. 6; Mt. 14) These examples do not stand alone, but remind us, as Martin Blogg does, that

dance was a normal, everyday occurrence and an intimate part of Hebrew culture which did not make distinction between religious and

2. James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 3rd edn, 1980), pp. 18-22.

3. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, p. 116.

secular as we do today. All life, including dance, was religious by nature.⁴

Indeed, the Old Testament uses eleven Hebrew verb roots to describe dancing activity, implying the developed nature of dance and choreography in Jewish culture.⁵ There are numerous explicit references to dancing in the Old and New Testaments, including the well-known story of David's dance at court. The entry on "dance" in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (which is at least as long as the entry on prayer), makes this comment about that dance:

Five descriptive terms were used in reporting the ceremony in which King David and "all the house of Israel danced before God": David not only danced in the ordinary sense of the word *sahek* but also rotated with all his might, *karker*; and jumped, *pazez*; and skipped, *rakad* (2 Sam. 6:5, 14, 16; 1 Chron. 15:29).⁶

For a language to have such nuanced ways of expressing the activity of dance implies a great familiarity with it. The English translation refers only to dancing and leaping. Clearly, for Israel dance was part of life before God. As Jews, Jesus and his followers would have been familiar with practices of physicality in worship rather than our more familiar stillness.

In fact, the Old Testament notion of personhood so emphasizes the wholeness of the person that one may be tempted to label it (albeit anachronistically), holistic anthropology. The Old Testament calls its readers to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength, which words represent not discreet categories, but the totality of human existence. Kallistos Ware writes,

The Old Testament envisages the human person, not as a combination of two separate entities, body and soul, but as a single, undivided unity. The Hebrew conception of personhood is embodied and physical: I do not *have* a body, I *am* a body—I am 'flesh-animated-by soul'. When the later strata of the Old Testament begin to refer (somewhat hesitantly) to

4. Martin Blogg, *Dance and the Christian Faith—Dance: A Form of Knowing* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), p. 5.

5. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, "Dance," p. 1262.

6. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, "Dance," p. 1262.

life after death, it is understood in terms, not of the immortality of the soul, but of the resurrection of the body (Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2).⁷

Moreover, the phenomenon of religious dance is not unique to ancient Israel, as J.G. Davies argues in *A New Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*:

Dance, as a form of religious worship, would seem to be universal both in time and space. Depicted in Stone Age cave paintings, it is still a feature of the observances of most of the world's major religions. The Jewish *Hasidim* dance with scrolls of the law; the Whirling Dervishes have a rotating step as their principal spiritual exercise; Hindu temple dancing has an unbroken history of centuries; it can be witnessed at Buddhist and Shinto shrines and within Christianity it is becoming a feature of many services, not only among the Pentecostals but also within the historic churches. It is not surprising in view of this intimate link between dance and devotion that according to many religions dance was both instituted by the gods and is an activity in which they themselves engage.⁸

Even Christian theology has posited a similar link between the divine and the dance, but here in Trinitarian terms. "The eternal perichoresis of the Trinity," is the internal dance of the Triune God, a way of moving and communicating between the persons of the Trinity.⁹

Clearly, White does not neglect liturgical dance either because there is a scriptural warrant to do so or because of an incongruity with human experience or Christian symbolism. Rather he acts out of a cultural practice of overlooking dance as Christian worship which is the norm in the West. This essay will continue by considering the ways in which dance could be understood as Christian worship, which will necessitate a definition of both dance and liturgical dance. Following this definition it will consider a number of possible interpretations of dance as a means of worshipping the Christian God.

7. Timothy Kallistos Ware, "'My Helper and My Enemy': The Body in Greek Christianity," in Sarah Coakley (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 91.

8. J.G. Davies (ed.), *A New Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (London: SCM Press, 1986), p. 206.

9. Sara Savage, "Fully Human, Fully Alive," in Jeremy Begbie (ed.), *Beholding the Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), pp. 64-82 (76).

What Is (Liturgical) Dance?

Martha Graham, one of dance's most celebrated practitioners and theorists, described dance as "an Animate Composition in Space—Dancing is movement made significant."¹⁰ Following Graham, we define liturgical dance as movement made significant by God's people for God's adoration. As art in the service of worship, dance has much in common with sacred music, melody made significant by God's people for God's adoration. Like sacred music, liturgical dance can be enacted by members of the congregation akin to a choir, who present a prepared composition in front of the congregation, or by the whole congregation, who move together to common music or with common gestures akin to congregational singing. Moreover, like sacred music, liturgical dance permits involvement by people with diverse skills. Some liturgical dance might require extensive dance training and technique; other liturgical dance could be the natural swaying of the body to the rhythm of the music. Just as the average church member is invited to sing regardless of musical skill, the average church member could likewise participate in some form of liturgical dance, regardless that he or she flunked or never even attended primary ballet class.

Yet what marks liturgical dance, liturgical music, or any other liturgical art as specifically worship? Our former description of liturgical dance should make clear that it is not its form which makes it distinct; rather, what distinguishes dance as worship is its rearticulation of God's self-declaration, as well as the very real possibility that the Spirit of God is partner in the dance. As White argues, "liturgical art does not make God present, but it does bring God's presence to our consciousness," by allowing us to remember who God is and who we are in God's light.¹¹

What makes dance an appropriate metaphor for declaring the truth about the created order according to God's self-declaration? Dance points towards God's act of creation by revealing God's image in human beings and affirming that God has created human beings to live and communicate in a material world. In White's words, "it should not surprise us that a religion whose fundamental doctrine is the incarnation should take space seriously in its worship... A religion of the

10. Merle Armitage, *Martha Graham* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1968), p. i.

11. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, p. 104.

incarnation has to have its feet planted firmly on the ground.”¹² That is where dance begins, on the ground, with which it must be constantly connected. Dance is bound by time and space and by the parameters of creation. Dance affirms that humans are created by God, that they bear God’s image in creativity and communication, and that they are located in a finite material world. To a more thorough investigation of these assertions we now turn.

Dance that Worships the Creator

As with the other artistic disciplines, dance points to God’s creative action in a variety of ways. First, it depends on a created body. Dance is the inescapably physical art, for its tool is foremost the human body. Second, dancing testifies that God created human beings in his image, both in their creative impulse and in their communicative ability. These traits initiate in God’s character but exist in humans albeit in a limited way. As a dancer attempts to compose movement that is meaningful, ordered, beautiful, or expressive, he or she mimics God’s creative impulse.

Of course, the human creative impulse is enormously more limited than God’s and dance testifies to this in a painfully tangible way. Much as a dancer might like to fly through the air, or glide at the speed of light, or spin eternally, or create the perfect composition, he or she is quite concretely bound by the laws of physics and the limitations of his or her finite body. Not only is a dancer bound by space and matter, but he or she is also bound by time. Dance is an ephemeral art. It cannot be held or kept or bought or sold. It is a “brief incarnation”, here at once and gone again, reminding us further of our limitations as God’s creatures.¹³ A dancer’s creativity is not the same as God’s creativity, for God can dance from heaven to earth and back again in the person of Jesus in a way that relativizes anything a human dancer could ever perform. Nevertheless, a dancer’s creativity comes from God’s creativity and testifies to God’s creativity.

Dancing also testifies that God is a communicative being, who created humans as communicative beings, and who is in a communica-

12. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, pp. 81-82.

13. Judith Rock and Norman Mealy, *Performer as Priest and Prophet: Restoring the Intuitive in Worship through Music and Dance* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 1.

tive relationship with them. Again, dance imitates God's self-giving acts of communication, albeit in a more limited form. Seventy years ago, Martha Graham made this declaration: "Throughout time dance has not changed in one essential function. The function of the dance is communication."¹⁴ Dance is the body and the imagination working together to communicate something, whether literal or intuitive. More specifically, dance is a way of communicating that is markedly holistic. It calls upon physical, emotional, and aesthetic resources in order to communicate something which words alone cannot. In other terms:

Because dance communicates kinetically, muscle to muscle and bone to bone, it has a way of ducking under our intellectual and rational guard to surprise us with deep and unexpected feelings.¹⁵

As worship, dance allows expression that is beyond words, logic, and propositions. If there is one reason that dance appears across religious experience it is precisely because it is capable of expressing sentiments that the mind alone, that emotions alone, that words alone cannot, something ineffable, spiritual, intuitive, or mysterious. This is why Miriam led her people in celebratory dancing after the Lord rescued them from Egypt; this is why the psalmist seeks to praise God with dancing, this is why dancing appears in our religious symbolism as a sign of final freedom and joy. If one accepts the Christian message then surely one has much to celebrate and dance is an able communicator of that joy.

Indeed dance communicates celebration and joy, but dance is also acutely adept at communicating self-abandonment. When David danced before the Lord with all his might, he also realized that he was sacrificing his dignity (2 Sam. 6:14, 22). In dance, the body flops, falls, releases, trusts, and reveals its flaws. This is its especially intimate way of reminding us that we are indeed only the creature, and in recognizing that we too are compelled to sacrifice our dearly beloved dignity. Just as Jesus was humiliated into the form of a man, so we bear our own humiliation in our limited flesh as we attempt to move it in graceful and meaningful ways. Dance imitates God's self-giving and God's humiliation by inhabiting a body, however imperfect and incomplete. In Savage's lucid words:

14. Armitage, *Martha Graham*, p. 83.

15. Rock and Mealy, *Performer as Priest and Prophet*, p. 29.

Dance as a 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 we reject: 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.¹⁶

Further still, dance affirms creation and incarnation by involving the whole person: emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical. As such, it repudiates the dualistic notions that have marked the Church in the West. Referring to that dualism, Savage explains:

Dance is a carrier of our paradoxical nature: body/mind, male/female, individual/social. As an embodied art form, dancers' bodies are the very presence of the person, the conveyor of personhood, rather than the 'tomb' that hides the inner nature.¹⁷

Dance bears witness to a God who made us whole, including a body; who redeems us whole, including our bodies; who cares for us whole, including our bodies; and who in fact loved us enough to squeeze himself into one of those bodies. For a Church and a culture that has forgotten that message, dance as worship makes it glaringly obvious.

Finally, dance emphasizes that when God created human beings, he created them male and female, who together bore God's image far better than they could apart. Dance harkens back to this act of God in a subtle way. First, it can demonstrate that men and women are created differently. As a general rule, male dancers amaze with their high jumps, their powerful movements, their tireless spinning, and their ability to lift another dancer overhead. Female dancers display greater flexibility and balance, and their movements are more graceful and more nuanced. Both can create an impressive physical display and in this way dance affirms that bodies, be they male or female, are beautiful creations that can communicate God's image. However, while some forms of dance and some cultures encourage both men and women to express themselves through dance, traditional North American culture is accustomed to viewing dance as a primarily feminine activity. Whatever the merits of that particular understanding, it does create an intriguing theological possibility. Judith Rock and Norman Mealy write,

16. Savage, "Fully Human, Fully Alive," p. 76.

17. Savage, "Fully Human, Fully Alive," p. 74.

Most often performed by women, dance in church—when it is well crafted and technically grounded—becomes an arena where women are affirmed as God-bearers: knowers of the Holy and doers of theology.¹⁸

When women are affirmed in their role as liturgical dancers, the Church once again remembers that creation in God's image came in two genders, which together form a more complete picture of God than they do apart. This too is a message that many churches desperately need to hear.

In summary, dance worships the Creator by acknowledging that God creates humans in God's creative and communicative image, that humans are subordinate to God in that creation and limited in their creative and communicative powers, that to be a whole human being is to be an embodied inhabiting time and space, and that both men and women bear God's image. In these ways dance reflects the true order of the universe and offers a response to God's acts of creation and redemption.

Impediments to Worship through Dance

Yet despite all of these rich images, dance, and liturgical dance in particular, has the potential to call forth dread and embarrassment in a community of worshippers. Carolyn Deitering begins her book, *The Liturgy as Dance and the Liturgical Dancer*, by acknowledging this fear: "It is with no small amount of trembling that I title this book as I do. There is a danger. It may appear to be something it is not: a plea for 'dancing at Mass'."¹⁹ Why this reticence? In our North American context, our inheritance of ideals makes dance a suspicious notion. North Americans are the inheritors or a legacy of divided selfhood, which Savage calls, "the cultural dread of embodiment."²⁰ It is an inheritance of shame, anxiety, and confusion, bequeathed by centuries of dualism in philosophy and religion.

Moreover, the forms of liturgical dance that have been invited back into the Mass have often subverted their own symbolic potential. Savage includes this disclaimer in her work:

18. Rock and Mealy, *Performer as Priest and Prophet*, p. 4.

19. Carolyn Deitering, *The Liturgy as Dance and the Liturgical Dancer* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), p. xi.

20. Savage, "Fully Human, Fully Alive," p. 70.

I make no claim that dance is an automatic good in the life of the Church. Dance can be badly done, the theology that informs it trite, the expression inappropriate to the shared meanings and values of the audience. Given the cultural background to our dread of embodiment, dance can bellyflop more hideously than other well-meaning, but mediocre, artistic contributions. Christian dance can be guilty of the very “psychological docetism” that it should be subverting: dancers waving chiffon scarves, arms wafting about, eyes rolled heavenwards.²¹

Her fear along with Deitering’s begs the question: is an inauthentic coercion of physicality any more useful than paralysis?

Finally, there are very practical barriers to including dance in corporate celebration and worship. The most obvious one, as White points out, is the immovable structures of most churches, namely the pews.²² Clearly, it is difficult to move when you are flanked on two sides by solid beech or oak, as is the case in church buildings designed with a seated congregation in mind. Together, these factors—cultural apprehension stemming from inherited values, the mediocrity of past expressions, and certain architectural constraints—work against the possibility of making dance a mainstay of the liturgical toolbox.

While these obstacles exist, the contemporary cultural landscape also indicates shifting values that coincide with the presence of dance in worship. The influence of other cultures with more holistic notions of personhood is beginning to shape the way Canadians understand their own bodies. Those who have abandoned physicality in worship would be wise to consider the migration in droves of common North Americans to the moving meditations. Moving meditations, such as the practices of Yoga and Tai Chi, are gaining popularity in the urban West. Several factors have converged to create this popularity, among them the increasing influence of Asian cultures, renewed interest in a variety of spiritualities, and cultural ardour for health, beauty, and fitness. Moving meditation is a physical stretching towards the spiritual. As such, it allows people to engage their whole selves in the search for the divine. For some, these practices lead to the specific theological beliefs of Eastern religions; for many others, they are dogmatically content-less ways of longing for connectedness. One need not believe a particular dogma in order to practice moving meditation in the West; one need only a moving body and access to instruction.

21. Savage, “Fully Human, Fully Alive,” pp. 73-74.

22. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, p. 116.

This cultural condition could be understood to create fertile ground for the renewal of liturgical dance: not dance for the sake of dance, but meaningful movement in the service of worship. Movement is a cultural medium that is increasingly relevant as a means of communication. Were the Church to respond by using this language in its worship, it might succeed in integrating its beliefs with its symbols in a way that is, in White's terms, both addressable and authentic.²³ However, the practical reality is that this new wave of possibility has only partly reached shore. There are many for whom it is neither authentic nor addressable, and their voices continue to matter. This is the practical reality that I face in my context and to which I finally turn.

Contextual Relevance

One of the particular struggles that my context presents me with is the difference in attitude between the young people who are the substance of my intimate community, and the older people who make up the rest of my church community. Though their relationships are filled with grace and harmony, the divergence in their values is palpable. The older generation values order, respect, formality, proposition, reason, and reverence in worship. The younger generation, myself included, values participation, community, emotion, and concrete, sensory engagement in worship. How does this affect the possibility of using dance in corporate worship? The older members who are not accustomed to think of dance as having a place in the Church are the ones who dictate most of the culture of corporate worship, and so worship in my context is very still. The young people endure this until some concessions are made at which point the tables are turned and the older generation is the one that must endure.

Then, during the course of the year, the young people are trooped off to retreats that are designed with their aforementioned values in mind. Their senses, emotions, and communal orientation are all embraced and emphasized in their corporate worship at events like *Blizzard*, with which I am very involved.²⁴ There is dancing at *Blizzard*, both on stage by trained and prepared dancers and also among the congregants in spontaneous and unchoreographed ways. There are

23. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, p. 24.

24. "Blizzard" is an annual retreat for high school students, organized by the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec.

no pews at Blizzard and movement is architecturally possible. It is one place where I have seen liturgical dance that makes sense to the community. The dancers on stage are young women, dancing prepared hip-hop and lyrical choreography to music that is relevant and familiar to the audience. The more dance is allowed to be a part of worship in a structured way, the more the congregation is encouraged to praise God with their whole bodies. They respond with a variety of movements that are meaningful to their situations, from the rhythmic gestures of the inner city to the mosh pit of the suburban culture. I have seen this have an especially noticeable impact on the young women in my group, who have begun to discover the freedom to worship God with their whole selves, bodies included.

The real problem in my context is what to do the other fifty one weekends of the year, when worship is still and happens in a building made “when we had not yet come to accept the reality of change in worship,” as White describes it.²⁵ For our young people, embodied worship is something that primarily happens outside the local church community. The leadership staff of Blizzard makes a concerted effort to help teens and local churches sustain the spiritual impact of the retreat by emphasizing the integrity of the local church ministry and by providing follow up material for students and leaders. However, it is much harder to affect the way that worship happens in fixed-pew, fixed-mind churches, except very slowly. Moreover, this kind of change cannot be coerced but must arise from the people in a way that is authentic.

In my situation, change is happening slowly but infectiously. There are spontaneous outbreaks—a flit here, a gesture there—as young people attempt to praise God in a way that engages their whole created bodies. Perhaps our North American churches will never regain dance as a tool of worship. More likely though, as the so-called emerging church becomes the emerged-church, and as Canada continues to be shaped by immigrant and multicultural populations, we will see movement return to our worship.

Ultimately, we end where we began by asserting that worship begins with God. At different times and in different places, one form of worship or another will seem more authentic, more integral, and more appropriate to the community that gathers to worship. The purpose of

25. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, p. 101.

this essay is not to argue that dance must be included in worship; rather the point of this essay is to suggest that dance can be a useful metaphor of worship, one that is rooted in, responds to, and reflects God's acts of creation and redemption. Christian hope waits for a time when human activity will be completed, relativized, or even obviated at the foot of God's throne. Before God's throne, we will either dance or be stilled according to God's will, but until that time we may dance in expectation of the fullness of God's presence. We dance because God is dancing; we dance because God made our bodies and we are thankful; we dance because God gave us the image of creativity; we dance because God communicates with us; we dance because God made us male and female; and we dance, nay, leap into the air because of our faith that God will catch us in his merciful embrace.