

Title : Issues on Dance and Christian Worship

Note

A great part of this document was presented in the Mumbai World Congress of CID in December 2018 . This paper is just an outline to introduce the reader on this subject.

Acknowledgement to Dr Lucinda Coleman whose work “WORSHIP GOD IN DANCE” has largely inspired it. Her work is an excellent introduction to the subject and to its general bibliography

This document is just a starting point . CID hopes to continue studying this passionate issue and we are open to all contributions

Abstract

The relation between dance and the “official” monotheistic religions is complicated, conflictual and very different compared to practically all other spiritualities present and past.

In the 4th Century AC Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. From then on, all arts were introduced in the cult as we can still see in the actual oriental liturgies .

All arts but dance ?

What do the Scriptures and the early theologians relate about dance ?

Did the first Christians dance and how?

Was dancing progressively expelled from the cult and why ?

How dancing is coming back to worship since the 20th century?

Why choreographies based on christian hymns are so scarce even out of the cult ?

PRESENTATION

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a sunny Easter morning in a Greek village. Liturgy is over. In the central square the orchestra is ready. People get out of the church and traditional Greek ring dances start . In general, the leader of the first dance will be the village priest !



PIC1 A Greek Orthodox priest, reported to be 72 years old, dancing a traditional Tsamiko dance in a village near Ioannina

Did he also dance inside the church or during the liturgy. Don't even think about it !
No dance is allowed in oriental liturgies except few ritual ring dances in wedding and baptism ceremonies



PIC2 Ritual Ring Dance during the office of Wedding in a Greek Orthodox Church

Well, there is at least one exception, the Ethiopian Church!

Among the liturgical chanting of the Ethiopian Church a specific genre, called 'aq^waq^wam , includes the liturgical chants accompanied by sistrums, drums and dance. This “**music and dance of heaven**” has been revealed to St Yared (6th century) in a vision of heaven and has not changed since then due to the isolation of Ethiopia in the Christian world



P3 Ethiopian priests' religious ceremony and dance at the rock-hewn church Bet Maryam, Lalibela. Ceremony on the day of the Holy Cross.



P4 Ethiopian orthodox church: old silver **Sistrum-tsenasil** liturgic musical instrument (and a representation of Nefertiti holding sistrum)

V1 Here is a short sample of Ethiopian dancing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iwq2alytAFM> (22" video)

credit : [Delta Cavner](#)

Before proceeding to a brief historic review on dance in Christian worship let's see what we can find in the Bible (written sources of Hebrew and Christian religion):

The Song of Moses and Miriam (Exodus 15)

²⁰ Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a **timbrel** in her hand, and all the women followed her, **with timbrels and dancing**.²¹ Miriam sang to them:
"Sing to the LORD,
for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea."



P5 The **timbrel** or tabret (also known as the tof of the ancient Hebrews, the deff of Islam, the adufe of the Moors of Spain) was the principal percussion instrument of the ancient Israelites. It resembles the modern tambourine.

"Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing" (Exodus 15:20).

David 's crazy dance when he recuperated the Ark of the Covenant(Samuel 6:12-23)

Wearing a linen ephod, **David was dancing before the LORD with all his might**,¹⁵ while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the LORD **with shouts and the sound of trumpets**.

¹⁶ As the ark of the LORD was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And.... **she saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD**

²⁰ When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!"

²¹ David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the LORD's people Israel—I **will celebrate before the LORD**.²² **I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes.**



PIC 6 Stained glass of Notre Dame of the Ark of Alliance, church of Paris 15th,(cardboard is of Martial Raysse)

Psalm 150

Praise Him with **timbrel** and **dancing**; Praise Him with stringed instruments and pipe. Praise the LORD! Praise God in His sanctuary; Praise Him in His mighty expanse. Praise Him for His mighty deeds; Praise Him according to His excellent greatness.

Glossary

When dance is mentioned in the Old Testament it is distinguished by its joyousness. Words such as leaping and whirling describe its energy and vitality and it is most often connected with ritualistic activity (The most frequently used root for the word 'dance' in the Old Testament is **hul** which refers to the whirl of the dance and implies highly active movement)

As regards the New Testament, recent studies suggest that in the Aramaic language which Jews spoke when Jesus preached, **the word for 'rejoice' and 'dance' are the same**. So, there are references to **dancing and leaping** for joy

In conclusion, several passages of the scriptures commend dance for worship and there is practically no passage where dance is explicitly forbidden as it happens with visual arts

A BRIEF HISTORY

Our informations on the evolution of Christian cult, particularly on the 3 first centuries, are not sufficient to give as a precise idea of if and how dance was included and more generally of how the cult was celebrated.

The essential point is that all started by simple prayer gatherings accompanied by a certain conviviality and impressive phenomena of glossolalia and of prophesying by the faithful being seized by the Holy Spirit. The choice of readings was quite free and the local culture had some influence.

Particularly by the 4th Century and over time the cult(s) evolved to well structured offices with the role of clergy and laity increasingly distinguished, local culture increasingly marked and the role of each art more and more fixed, the phenomena of glossolalia and of prophesying quickly disappearing.

Important works on the **evolution of the cult** started by catholic researchers in the 19th century. As regards **dance**, by 20th century many protestant worship dancers or intellectuals tried to reconstruct its evolution in history and recently academic researchers are working on the phenomenon.

The early Christian church (first five Centuries)

Hebrew dances were performed by both men and women, though usually the sexes were separated. Victory dances were performed by groups of women; men participated in ecstatic whirling dances designed to evoke prophecy. Festival dances were performed by both groups—one of the most important was the water-drawing festival on the first night of [Sukkoth](#), which was celebrated by a torchlit procession dance that lasted through the night.

The first Christians were Jews from Palestine or diaspora and jewish friendly pagans ,but progressively pagans became the majority
So we can think that they were impregnated of Hebrew tradition
Some testimonies of the second and third centuries implied that Christians danced even during the cult

But the influence of pagan dances opposed the spiritual vs licentious dimension of dance to early Christian theologians (called “Fathers of the Church”)

Example of two fathers who studied in the same Philosophical School of Athens

John Chrysostom (AD 345-407), in speaking of Herodias' daughter, commented that 'where dancing is, there is the evil one'

St. Basil of Caesarea in 350 called dancing “the most noble activity of the angels” and thus he has inspired many painters.

In conclusion, the attitude of the Church toward dance was not unanimous. On the one side there was the ascetic rejection of all manifestations of lust and ecstasy, and dance was seen as one of the strongest persuasions to sexual permissiveness. On the other side, some early

Church Fathers tried to find functions for pagan dances in Christian worship as the increasing number of converts made attempts to retain the dances of their own pagan cults,



PIC 7 The Last Judgment (detail: "Paradise") by Fra Angelico,

The Middle Ages (500-1500)

The church was becoming more authoritarian in its activities and the concept of the church as a judicial institution began to outweigh the concept of church as community.

The use of dance was restricted, and continually monitored as the emphasis on the **mysterious ritual of the worship** service superseded the emphasis on **spontaneous celebration**

Gradually a distinction between the clergy and laity was developing

Charlemagne, the Holy Roman emperor at the beginning of the 9th century, officially prohibited all kinds of dancing, but the ban was not observed

On special occasions such as Saints' days, Christmas and Easter, the clergy performed sacred dances for the congregation who were spectators of these ritual acts.

-Several liturgists mention in their writings the practices of the dance and the game of balloon in the large churches in France like Auxerre during important religious celebrations (15th Century).

Even as late as the 16th century a manuscript describes an Easter carol or ring dance which took place on Easter eve at the church in Sens.

- One of the possible functions of the labyrinth, especially those found in the cathedrals of Reims and Auxerre, was to mark out the area which would be used in an Easter ritual where local monks and clergymen jumped, danced, and tossed a leather ball, called a *pelota*, to each other

Catherine Ingrassia CID Member presented in the World Congress of Nassau a study and a representation of a Dance to the honor of Mary as well as the Pelota dance

(https://www.facebook.com/catherine.morescarole/videos/2321310007889295/UzpfSTewNTiONTg5Nzc4MjM0NjoxMjY1MDc3MTU2NTYxNjQ/?modal=admin_todo_tour)



- **PIC 8**
- West Portal of the Cathedral of Auxerre



PIC 9 Medieval clergy played ball in labyrinths, such as the one at Chartres Cathedral.

A tradition was also developed, with the approval and guidance of the church, known as popular sacred dances. They were performed in the church, churchyard, or surrounding countryside during religious festivals, saints' days, weddings or funerals.

In the 14th and 15th centuries two widely known ecstatic dances appeared

1« danse macabre », The dancing movement of the characters was a somewhat later development, as at first Death and his victims moved at a slow and dignified gait. But Death, acting the part of a messenger, naturally took the attitude and movement of the day, namely the fiddlers and other musicians, and the dance of death was the result.



P10a : The famous Danse Macabre in [Hrastovlje](#) (Slovenia) in the [Holy Trinity Church](#)



P10b A German painting of the Danse Macabre from the 18th century. Nine women of different social rank from empress to fool dance with the dead. The entire economy of salvation is depicted, from the Fall, through the crucifixion, to Heaven and Hell. Twelve more traditional Dance Macabre figures, from pope and emperor down to fool, surround the central image. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons.)

2“dancing mania” known as St. Vitus’ dance (a kind of mass hysteria, a wild leaping dance in which the people screamed and foamed with fury, with the appearance of persons possessed.)



With the rise of papal control of all aspects of Christian life, along with the excesses of the Dance of Death and dance manias, the liturgical dance forms declined definitely

Byzantium (Eastern Roman Empire)

Byzantine dance has its origin from greek Antiquity. The Byzantine Empire was a large pluralistic nation where different types of music and dance could be found in various regions. Furthermore, the society evolved to allow some dancing in Christian sacred places, such as the church. Ex

- moirolgia (=laments), which were eventually allowed to be chanted and danced in a circular movement in the narthex (entrance or lobby area, located at the west part of the church)
- the Dance of Isaiah, in matrimony still existing in our days (see PIC 2)
- There are also instances recorded of people dancing inside the church, on Easter and Christmas, after Patriarch Theophylactos (10th Century) had granted his permission. Historians do not agree on his precise influence to reconcile pleasure with piety by introducing some lines of pantomime in the services.(till 13th century)

However, the information on dancing at this period is very scarce as Byzantine art is mainly ecclesiastical, However, some images from the Byzantine and meta-Byzantine dances have been saved on sculptures, miniatures, and manuscripts - but mainly in church frescos amongst religious subjects.



P12a Virgins, older men and younger, with drums and dances... 1600 approx. Painting, mural. Greece, Mount Athos, Monastery of Dochiarion.



P12B Four young women in a vigorous dance. Scene from "Praise ye the Lord." 1715. Painting, mural, fresco. Greece, Mount Athos, Greatest Lavra Monastery, Koukouzelissa Chapel .

The Renaissance (1400-1700) and The Reformation(1517-1529)

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

Ultimately, however, it was the Reformation, which tended, in its extreme forms to do away with Christian dance. All dances and processions, except funeral processions were abolished. The leaders of the Protestant Reformation were highly critical of traditional church customs. They sought to suppress the use of icons, the worship of saints, and pilgrimages. **The connection between the body, dance and eroticism was openly acknowledged, and Christians were taught not to glorify the body.**

Similarly, in the Catholic Church, statues of the synod of Lyons for example, **threatened priests and other persons with excommunication if they led dances in churches or cemeteries.**

In general, the church insisted on liturgical unity without the use of dance in worship. Consequently, religious dance disappeared, or survived in only a few isolated places, a situation still prevailing actually in the eastern churches.

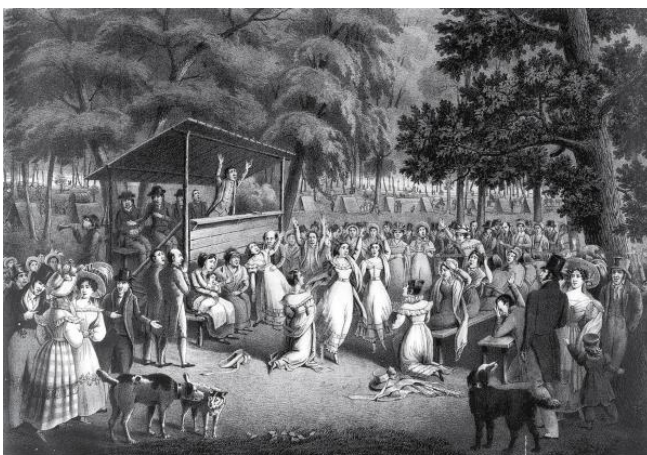
From the revivals to our days

The **Great Awakening** refers to a number **Revivals** -events led by evangelical Protestant ministers -seen as the restoration of the church itself to a vital and fervent relationship with God . The term 'dance' is hard to define at times but a personal account describing the Cane Ridge Revival depicts

"Shouting was praising or rejoicing in God. It was accompanied with clapping of the hands. Shouting became a revivalist phenomenon; added to it was the shuffling of the feet, followed by running around and an occasional leap. Some shouters would "run the aisle."

The actions and extreme celebration found in these revivals were similar to the descriptions of the celebrations of the Hebrews thousands of years prior.

After the great awakenings, slowly in the twentieth century, dance began to find its way back into some Protestant Churches and After The Council Vatican II in the Catholic Church



P13 : 1801 Cane Ridge Revival

ACTUAL SITUATION

Protestant Churches

Dance in the cult is thoroughly or partially accepted in some protestant churches particularly the evangelical ones. More conservative churches like Lutherans do not permit it. Churches in America are more permissive. But progressively more and more churches are not rejecting the idea.

Virginie Nfa ,evangelical Minister in France, told me that during a recent gathering of the “French Protestant Federation” all participants admitted that dance in the cult is not evil and some of them presented their apologies for their previous opinions on the subject.

As leaders in the re-introduction of dance in the cult , protestants face different issues :
Some are fundamental :

- Should a particular Ministry of Dance be defined?
- Should the choreographies be composed in detail and strictly danced or should the dancers be leaded by the “Spirit” and dance as they feel it?
- Should the dance dresses be designed as to cover the curves of the female body?
- Should the gestures concern principally the upper part of the body and the hands, so avoiding any sensual/sexual movements ?



P14 : Total Praise Dance (Centre of christian Revival). Directed par

- Virginie NFA, ...

Others are more “practical” or theological

- How to convince the Minister of a Parish to introduce Dance if he/she is hesitating from the viewpoint of theology
- How to smooth objections of parishioners
- Once the principal objections raised how to progressively introduce dance
- Which dancing gestures?
- How to teach liturgical dance to adults or to children

- Which dancing clothes?



P15 Dance Fashion (Praise dance wear, Liturgical dance wear, worship dance attire)

Catholic Church

The **Vatican II Council** (1962-1965) addressed relations between the Catholic Church and the modern world. New liturgy and offices were established in which some possibilities were granted to laity to compose or choose prayers and songs

The ***General Instruction of the Roman Missal*** (GIRM) states that it is important to be conscious of the need to take “due regard for the nature and the particular circumstances of each liturgical assembly, [so that] the entire celebration is planned in such a way that it leads to a conscious, active, and full participation of the faithful both in body and in mind.” (GIRM, no. 18)

The gestures and movements at the Mass, “ought to contribute to making the entire celebration resplendent with beauty and noble simplicity, so that the true and full meaning of the different parts of the celebration is evident and that the participation of all is fostered.” (GIRM, no. 42)

The place of dance in the liturgy, however, must always be examined in the light of the 1975 “qualified and authoritative sketch” published by the Holy See in the journal ***Notitiae***. This article prescribes that in **western cultures**, dance “**cannot be introduced into liturgical celebrations of any kind**”

In short , dance may be introduced in cultures when traditionally it has a role different than that in occident!!

A window has thus been opened ! And dance “rushes” through it.

In various countries catholic nuns dance and are teaching dances!

In some cases catholic priests accepted dance during the two more “festive” offices : baptism and marriage

And, of course , many African and Caribbean churches praise the Lord with Dance!

V2b Catholic Archbishops in Africa Dance to Kanda bongoman 'Song

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2fSLJ_uupI



P16 :Before the final Mass of World Youth Day 2016 in Krakow, Poland; these Polish sisters filled with the Joy of the Gospel are enjoying their time by dancing to the music.



P17a Catholic Archbishops in Africa Dance to Kanda bongoman'Song



P17b The pews and the centre aisle are filled at Our Lady of Good Counsel, the Archdiocese of Toronto's Caribbean parish. Bodies moving, hands clapping and voices rising in worship is the norm at the parish.

Oriental Churches

No significant evolution. Most of them show mistrust or hostility even concerning the possibility of *dancing on sacred music outside the churches*

But there is hope!

The Ethiopian church always includes dance in the cult.

The following video concerns an extra-liturgical celebration of its sister Egyptian Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnXJ7IWH3PU>

We can see that the celebration takes place inside the church and priests actively participate

CHOREOGRAPHIES INSPIRED BY SACRED MUSIC

The great French-born dancer, choreographer and opera director “Maurice Béjart” (and a few others) put into practice a simple but revolutionary idea. Choreographies can be created based on musical masterpieces which were not composed to be danced.

I had the happiness to assist in his choreography accompanying Beethoven's 9th Symphony. The beauty of the combination of orchestral and choral music, poetry and dance was beyond any description!

Christianity has inspired the creation of a rich heritage of **multi centenary religious** poetry and music . This music is scarcely danced !

One of the goals of CID's contribution in "Dance and Spirituality" is to encourage our artists to occupy this huge and unexploited field

PERSPECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

Christianity has taken up the long road of reconciliation with this divine art that is dance !

A similar evolution concerns Judaism.

As regards Islam , apart from the Sufis, the situation may be compared to that of the conservative orthodox churches with the "aggravating circumstance" of an extreme sensibility as regards an artistic approach of the Holy Quran which is also a poetical masterpiece.

In view of the Christian experience , great questions raise :

- What is the role of the body and particularly the female body in spiritual elevation ?
- Why is so hard to differentiate the sensual from the spiritual aspect of dance?
- What factors make monotheistic cultures so different from practically all other spiritualities concerning dance?

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Last but not least! Humanity seems to lack wisdom facing its actual existential challenges
We all believe – in the frame of the ideals of UNESCO – that Art is a "weapon" of peace
Spirituality may be another one. How to use them in the right way?

Anyway , Christians should remember that St Francis of Assisi (13 century) frequently danced while preaching LOVE PEACE and POVERTY

HIS MESSAGE TO HUMANITY AND HIS WAY TO DELIVER IT IS MORE ACTUAL THAN EVER!



P18 Bronze statue of St. Francis with wings instead of arms, and dancing in a waterbasin. All over the body are prayers written.

