

## Dance

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Dance and religion began together; dance was an early expression of man's relationship to the earth, to the establishment of community, and to the cosmos. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, however, dance and the body became separated from the soul and the spirit. In contemporary postmodern cultures, many people who have been feeling a sense of alienation and unease from this separation are searching to bring back embodied practices to religion and spirituality. As this shift takes place, dance therapy, as a practice that brings back the body into expressions of the sacred, has an important role to play to restore the balance between mind and body, harmonizing the connections among the individual, the community, and the cycles and forces of nature.

### Sacred Dance

Dance, expressing the human relationship to creation and to the gods, had sacred roots. By imitating the motions of the celestial order, primitive humans understood patterns of the divine. The body, its movement, food, drink, breath, and sexuality were all understood as sacred channels through which power could enter.

The mysteries of creation were celebrated through the patterns of the dance. The earliest religious experiences were experienced physically, as the deity was felt to enter and transform participants. The early Greek writer Lucien noted in his book *On Dances* that all mystery inductions were associated with dance, and that Orpheus's prescription for those being introduced to the mysteries was to receive them with dancing.

The floor plan of ancient churches reflected the movements of procession around an altar, while the repetition of pillar and arch induce an altered state of consciousness. Plato was reported to have said that the circle connected the human to cosmic patterns.

Basic to all mystery celebrations in the Mediterranean was the ring dance. The celebration of the Eleusian mysteries "was combined with a ring dance which appears to have begun when the spirit emerged from its symbolic underworld journey and reached the splendid fields of the blessed" (Backman 1972, p. 3).

A group of itinerant healers in fifth-century B.C. Greece known as the orpheotelestae danced around the sick, usually in the form of a ring. In the Middle Ages, ring dances were used to protect newborn children against evil spirits. Midsummer festivals, still performed in Scandinavia, originated with pagan dances in which dancers would go to the streams, dance in a circle around a fire, heap flowers, and leap through the flames, purging themselves with smoke and fire.

Line dances also had sacred origins. In the first century B.C., a Jewish sect called the Therapeutae would eat a sacred meal, have a night watch, then perform a dance in which one line of males and one line of females would stand facing each other. Alternating singing and stillness, moving forward and backward, they would imitate and celebrate Moses' crossing of the Red Sea.

### Dance as an Altered State

Dance induced a form of knowing that was ecstatic, intuitive, and revelatory, and that involved cyclical time.

As a heightened form of life that had its origins in its original relation to the gods, its connection to the sacred through form, patterns, and transformative consciousness, dance was the original form of devotion:

*The dance is the mother of the arts. Music and poetry exist in time; painting and architecture in space. But the dance lives at once in time and space. The creator and the thing created, the artist and the work are still one and the same thing [Sacks, p. 5].*

### Religion and the Body

As the matriarchial earth-based religions were replaced by patriarchial conceptual systems, the body and bodily arts were lost. Some attribute the shift particularly to the fourth-century saint Augustine of Hippo, who ". . . placed virginity, celibacy and continence as the highest good in Christian life" (E. G. Cowan

unpublished manuscript, p. 41). Hierarchies of intermediaries between the individual and God and dogma replaced direct revelatory knowing. Although sacred dance survived, it existed as performance rather than as communal participation.

Religious practices have changed dramatically during the past forty years, however. Affected by the social and political revolutions of the 1960s, the women's movement, Vatican II, and AIDS, individuals have been searching for new forms of practice. Gays and lesbians have challenged ordination practices, and women have challenged the church's ban on abortion and contraception. Single parents and interfaith couples have challenged traditional religion, while the abstraction and rigidity of some religions have sent members to seek a more direct and participatory experience with the divine. Buddhism, with its emphasis on direct experience and contemplative practices, has attracted many disaffected seekers. Neopagan rituals and Goddess celebrations have become popular for some, while others search for their roots in the wilderness or in born-again fundamentalism. Many take up Yoga or t'ai chi, going to Eastern religions to bring back embodied practices. The result has been an enormous American melting pot, or spiritual smorgasbord. The advantages of this movement include the freedom to explore a spirituality tailored to one's own lifestyle; the disadvantages include too much individualism, gullibility, and the potential for the rise of cult messianic figures. For many who attempt to cobble together an eclectic mix of practices in a postmodern society, difficult decisions about how to raise children and combine practices remain.

Symptoms of the dark or "shadow" sides of religious practices today include not only such phenomena as clergy sexual abuse scandals and massacres like that at Jonestown but also the institutional churches' reactions to attempted innovations. For example, in his "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation," Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly the Office of the Holy Inquisition) warned that meditation could become a "cult of the body" and could "lead to psychic disturbance and, at times, to moral deviations" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, December 16, 1989).

#### **Dance Therapy: Bridge Between Spirit and Body**

Dance therapy was founded in 1966, as ". . . the psychotherapeutic use of movement as a process which furthers the emotional and physical integration of the individual" (American Dance Therapy Association 1973-1974). Dance therapists use movement for diagnosis and treatment; movement reflects patterns of coping, defenses, memories, inner states, and relational patterns that are concretized as qualities in relation to space, time, weight, and flow. Dance therapy in a group setting has powerful precedents as a healing art, particularly during times of social breakdown. For example, after World War II, community dance or *Bewegungschor* (movement choirs) became popular across Europe. Started by the Hungarian architect and dancer Rudolf von Laban, these movement choirs were performed by young and old alike and, like other Utopian movements, expressed hope for an ideal and better society: "It is at this point where the healing force of the arts and particularly dance are seen as vital. Increasingly I feel that part of the struggle for ordering our lives in thought, feeling, and action can be facilitated through the crystallization of such movements of revelation and discovery into group ritual dance" (Bartenieff 1974, p. 122).

Dance therapy sessions often show elements of ancient sacred dance practices. For example, group members often spontaneously repeat archetypal motions of scattering and gathering, of rising and falling, of stomping and clapping, in a process of psychological and physical regeneration. The circle and its center, essential to sacred dance, are still used in dance therapy to start sessions and to provide a sense of boundary, inclusion, and closure. In many modes of dance therapy, particularly those derived from the Chace method, reintegrating the patient back into the group circle through the use of rituals is central to healing. Dance therapists often involve the whole group, or the whole clinic center staff and patients, choreographing rituals to celebrate new members, old members leaving, changes in community, and in season. Finally, the predominance of women dance therapists echoes the prominence of women as early religious and ritual leaders.

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