

Dance in the Church

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***Have you ever wondered when Christians first danced in church? And how?
Did you know that all Christians, including priests, used to dance in church services?
Do you ever wonder why there can sometimes be strong objections to dance in the church
today?***

To find the answers, we must journey back to the days of the Roman Empire, when Christianity first exploded into the religious scene.

The dance material located in the Christian church underwent significant developments from the Roman period to the Reformation. The style of dance varied, as did the attitudes to the use of dance within the context of the Christian church.

In all ancient civilisations, the earliest forms of recorded dance have "unmistakable signs of a religious origin" (Sharp and Oppe 1972:4). There is a common tendency for humans to "relate to the supernatural through the nearly universal form of dance" (Hanna 1987:101). For the ancient Israelites, dance was a fundamental expression of religious fervour and it has become an integral part of the Judeo-Christian heritage.

In the Hebrew tradition, dance functioned as a medium of prayer and praise, as an expression of joy and reverence, and as a mediator between God and humanity (Taylor 1976:81). This understanding of dance permeated the faith of the early Christian church, and found its expression in circle and line dances.

In the early Medieval period, a distinction was made between the clergy and laity which led to the development of two different dance traditions, the first centring around the clergy, the second known as the popular sacred dances of the people. Both these traditions came under attack in the later Middle Ages, for dance was increasingly becoming theatrical and dramatic in focus. With the outbreak of Dance Manias, the church fought to control and regulate dance with little success.

By the Renaissance, the church sought to purify dance, and eliminate pagan influences. However, by the time of the Reformation all efforts to regulate ecclesiastical dance had failed and sacred dance was eliminated in the context of the Christian church.

In this five part series, Lucinda Coleman examines the relationship between dance and the church from the early Roman period to the Reformation.

Part One: *How did it all Start?* takes a look at the Jewish tradition of dance.

Part Two: *The Early Christian Church (AD 100-500)* examines the dance material located in the early church.

Part Three: *The Early Middle Ages (AD 500-1100)* analyses the changes that occurred in Christian dance during this time.

Part Four: *The Later Middle Ages (AD 1100-1400)* looks at the various dance traditions that sprang up during this period.

Part Five: *Where do we go from Here?* examines the effects of the Renaissance (1400-1700) and Reformation (1517-1529) on Christian dance.

Part One: The Jewish Tradition

Dance was an integral part of the celebrations of the ancient Israelites. It was used both in worship in ordinary life and on occasions of triumphant victory and festivity.

By subordinating will and personality to the guidance of the divine Creator ... they did not differ from certain classes of 'holy men' all the world over; where they did differ was in their development of the conception which underlay the purpose of the ecstatic dance; i.e. union with the deity (Clarke and Crisp 1981:35).

The sacred dance mediated between God and humanity, thus bringing the Israelites into a closer relationship with their God, Jehovah.

In many Old Testament biblical allusions to, and descriptions of, dance there is no disapproval, only affirmation of this medium of worship. The people are exhorted to praise God "with dancing, making melody to him with timbrel and lyre" (Psalm 149:3), and "Praise him with timbrel and dance" (Psalm 150:4). Dancing is so common that in passages alluding to rejoicing without specific mention of dancing, it can be assumed dance is implied (Gagne 1984:24).

Hebrew dance is a fusion of Semitic-Arabic and Babylonian forms. The most frequently used root for the word 'dance' in the Old Testament is *hul* which refers to the whirl of the dance and implies highly active movement. Of the 44 words in the Hebrew language for dancing, only in one is there a possible reference to secular movement as distinct from religious dancing (Clarke and Crisp 1981:35).

The types of dance used in Israelite society included the circular or ring dance, as illustrated in Exodus 32:6, 19, when the Israelites danced around the idol of the Golden Calf.

The processional dance was often used to celebrate specific events as when King David and the people of Israel danced before the Ark of the Lord, which was understood to represent the presence of God (2 Samuel 6:14).

A third type of dance included hopping and whirling movements that were exuberant with joy.

At the defeat of Pharaoh's armies following the crossing of the Red Sea, "Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances" (Exodus 15:20). When David slew Goliath, the women sang "to one another in dance" (1 Samuel 29:5).

Each of these forms of dance found an expression in daily life and at festival times. At the Feast of Tabernacles, for instance, "pious men danced with torches in their hands and sang songs of joy and praise, while the Levites played all sorts of instruments. The dance drew crowds of spectators ... It did not end until the morning at a given sign" (Gagne 1984:30). The revered tradition of community celebration found its expression through movement.

However, dance is not mentioned formally in the Mosaic code, nor was the movement free of certain prohibitions. A distinction came to be made between the early, holy dances of a sacred nature, and those that resembled pagan ceremonies. This distinction, made by the early Jews, was to be made even more sharply by the Christians in the following centuries.

Part Two: The Early Christian Church (AD 100-500)

In the first five centuries of the Christian church "dance was still acceptable because it was planted deep in the soil of the Judea-Christian tradition" (Gagne 1984:43). Christians were accustomed to celebrating, in dance, at worship and festivals because of the Hebrew tradition of dance.

Christianity was also subjected to the prevailing social and political influences of the Roman Empire. Changing circumstances in the 4th Century thus led to changes in the importance and meaning of dance as well as in the dance material used in Christian liturgy. In the course of the history of theatre and dance, Christianity shaped and proscribed new developments. Although seemingly restrictive in these early centuries, "the church actually created a context for new flowerings of social, theatrical and religious dance" (Fallon and Wolbers 1982:9).

In the New Testament there are few direct references to religious dance. "But even this points to a possible parallel of the Jewish tradition of presuming the presence of dance without the need to mention it explicitly" (Gagne 1984:35). Evidence of the use of dance as an accepted expression of joy is reflected in Jesus' comment, "We piped to you but you did not dance" (Matthew 11:17). Similarly, in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son there was dancing and rejoicing on the son's return to his home (Luke 15:25).

Paul reminds Christians that their bodies are "temples of the Holy Spirit" and that they should "glorify God with their bodies" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). He further indicates physical movement is an approved part of prayer-like expression when he exhorts Timothy to pray "lifting up holy hands" (1 Timothy 2:8).

Additionally, studies suggest there are more references to dance in the New Testament than originally thought (Daniels 1981:11). In the Aramaic language which Jews spoke, the word for 'rejoice' and 'dance' are the same. Hence, in substituting dance for rejoice there are references to dancing and leaping for joy (Luke 6:23) as well as "dancing in the Spirit" (Luke 10:21).

In the two earliest Christian liturgies recorded in detail, dance is used in the order of service. Both Justin Martyr in AD 150 and Hippolytus in AD 200 describe joyful circle dances (Daniels 1981:13). In the early church, dance was perceived as one of the "heavenly joys and part of the adoration of the divinity by the angels and by the saved" (Gagne 1984:36).

This attitude to dance contrasts sharply with Roman society in which Christianity first appeared. As Shawn comments, "Here in Imperial Rome we find the dance first completely theatricalised - then commercialised; and as the religious life of Rome became orgiastic, so the religious dances became occasions for unbridled licentiousness and sensuality (Kraus and Chapman 1981:42). In reaction to what the Christians perceived as moral decadence, they sought to purify the dance by expunging all traces of paganism from the intention and expression of the movement.

As the Roman persecutions of Christians intensified, the Christians were increasingly used in public spectacles. The persecutions took on a theatrical form and Christians were often forced to dance to the point of death (Torjesen 1993:203). As a consequence, the Roman way of life was bitterly condemned by the Christians, who rejected the pagan philosophy and moved towards a strict asceticism. This in turn was reflected in their attitude towards dance, as well as influencing the type of dance performed in the early church.

In 300 AD the Council at Elvira decided the church should refuse baptism to entertainers. Then in 398 AD the Council of Carthage released an edict to excommunicate any Christian attending theatre on a holy day (Kraus and Chapman 1981:48). Dance, however, continued within the church itself, provided the form and intent were holy and not profane. The purpose of liturgical movement was to bring glory and honour to God, and take the focus off the self.

The biblical stance for most prayers included raising arms and hands above the head (1 Timothy 2:8). In prayers of confession, kneeling or prostration was common, and in thanksgiving prayers or intercession an opened standing position with arms raised was utilised (Adams 1975:4).

During celebratory worship, the most commonly mentioned forms of dance took place in a circle or round dance, or a line dance such as a processional or recessional march. These dances stemmed from the Hebrew tradition and were appropriate for liturgical use. Both developed a sense of community which transcended the dancers by having them focus on God at the centre of a circle, or in the destination of a line (Adams 1978:10). The emphasis was not on the individual relationships but on the communal worship of the divine.

In the apocryphal *Acts of John* dating from about AD 120, there exists a remarkable example of the type of dance-song used in the early church. Entitled the "Hymn of Jesus" the song offers a

version of the Lord's Supper in which Christ introduced the custom of holy communion. However, instead of breaking the bread and sharing the wine, Jesus is described as having his disciples surround him in a circle dance (Appendix A). Although this hymn is not included in canonical Christian literature, it is significant as it illustrates this type of dance was part of the religious expression of the early church.

The theologian Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-216) also refers to the joyful entrance into the church through the sacraments. To the accompaniment of torches and song he says, "then shalt thou dance in a ring, together with the angels, around him who is without beginning nor end, the only true God, and God's word is part of our song" (Clarke and Crisp 1981:37). The ring dance is perceived to enable the earthly participation of Christians in the divine mysteries of God.

By the third century there is detailed evidence of dance integrated into the ritual and worship of the church in the writings of Hippolytus (215 AD) and Gregory the Wonder-Worker (213-270 AD) (Gagne 1984:40). At the same time, there is an increasing emphasis on spiritual thanksgiving in Christian worship. Christian intellectuals sought to overcome the passion of the flesh by reason of mind, the greatest evidence of this being demonstrated through martyrdom. "The very possibility of this degree of control over passions was proof of the presence of the divine" (Torjesen 1993:207).

This tendency was then reflected in the dance, as Christians sought to oppose the body and spiritualise the movement as an expression of the soul. However, as Lucian of Samosatar stated in the second century, the dance is the "moment's attempt to express harmony between body and soul" (Davies 1984:39), and the church had not yet come to the point of completely separating body and soul.

During the fourth century, significant changes in and outside the church influenced attitudes towards the type of dance used in Christian worship. The major cause of change stemmed from the reign of Constantine I (AD 306-337). Constantine converted to Christianity in AD 312 and was instrumental in accepting and supporting the Christian Church. The Roman Empire officially adopted Christianity in AD 378, thus ushering in a new relationship between church and state (Keen 1987:35).

Many references to dance as part of worship in the fourth and fifth centuries are tempered by warnings about forms of dance which were considered sinful, dissolute and which smacked of Roman degeneracy. As membership in the Christian Church became popular, licentiousness began to characterise the sacred festivals. As men and women danced in circle or line dances, the emphasis was on coupling movements, instead of having a divine focus.

In the writings of the Church Fathers of these early centuries, there is evident concern with the changing focus of Christian dances. Epiphanius (AD 315-403) sought to emphasise the spiritual element in the dance. In a sermon on Palm Sunday AD 367, he describes the festival's

celebration in the following way:

Rejoice in the highest, Daughter of Zion! Rejoice, be glad and leap boisterously thou all-embracing Church. For behold, once again the King approaches... once again perform the choral dances... leap wildly, ye Heavens; sing Hymns, ye Angels; ye who dwell in Zion, dance ring dances (Kraus and Chapman 1981:49).

In an analysis of this text, it seems evident it describes both the literal dance and the spiritual emphasis of the ceremony, while favouring the latter as the focus of the celebration.

This was the tendency of other church leaders, who "attempted to turn their eyes away from the actual physical movement intrinsic to dance and regard dance from a singularly spiritualized perspective, as symbolic of spiritual motions of the soul" (Gagne 1984:47). Basil the Great (AD 344-407), Bishop of Caesarea is an example of one who approved of church dance, seeing it as an imitation of "the ring-dances of the angels" (ibid:47). However, he was still shocked by the base sensuality of the dancers and the apparently frivolous and indecent movement that accompanied the lewd songs of some of the women. As he stated,

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 (ibid:47).

In the late fourth century, Ambrose (AD 340-397) Bishop of Milan, tried to clarify the values and dangers of sacred dance also by emphasising the spiritual. "The Lord bids us dance, not merely with the circling movements of the body, but with the pious faith in Him" (Adams 1990:18). He saw dance as spiritual applause and did not rule it out of the Church. Similarly, Gregory of Nyssa (AD 335-394) described Jesus as the one and only choreographer and leader of dancers on earth and in the Church.

However, other leaders in the Church began to voice their opposition to the use of dance. John Chrysostom (AD 345-407), in speaking of Herodias' daughter, commented that "where dancing is, there is the evil one" (Gagne 1984:50). Augustine (AD 354-430) Bishop of Hippo, warned against "frivolous or unseemly" dances (Adams 1990:20) and insisted on prayer, not dance. Caesarius of Arles (AD 470-542) condemned dance at the vigils of saints, calling them a "most sordid and disgraceful act" (Gagne 1984:51).

This conflict reflects the difficulties the Church Fathers were experiencing as the Church grew in popularity. The increasing number of converts made attempts to retain the dances of their own pagan cults, so that by the beginning of the sixth century, dance came under severe condemnation in the Church. Gregory of Nazianzus (AD 330-390) wrote a stern exhortation to the Emperor Julian circa AD 369 which reflects the distinction that was being made between

pagan and Christian dance. He writes,

... if you give yourself up to the dance; if your taste drags you into these feasts that you seem to love so furiously, dance; I consent to it. ... But why revive the licentious dances of the barbarous Herodias, who spilt the blood of a Saint? Why do you not rather imitate those laudable dances that King David performed with so much zeal before the Ark of the Covenant? Those exercises of piety and peace are worthy of an emperor, and are the glory of a Christian (Clarke and Crisp 1981:50).

The fall of Rome in AD 476 left Europe without a centralised power. The Christian Church stepped in as the arbitrator of morality, law, education and social structure. The conflicts between the tradition of ecclesiastical dancing and the moral reprobation of the Church itself, led to conflict over the use and value of dance, which continued throughout the Middle Ages.

Part Three: The Early Middle Ages (AD 500-1100)

The first four centuries following the fall of Rome were characterised by warfare, invasions of Christian lands by Barbarians, or vice versa, and intense missionary activities. 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.

As the conscious use of authority widened and deepened within the church and state systems, there were an increasing number of edicts and considerable legislation which reformed church liturgy. 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 and praise to God (Fallon and Wolbers 1982:42).

Gradually a distinction between the clergy and laity was developing as a consequence of the church authorities' regulations on the Mass. Latin was no longer the language of the people, therefore knowledge of the Mass was restricted to the educated and clergy. Choirs took over all sung parts of the Mass, thus leaving the laity to engage in private devotions during the service. Liturgically, participation in the Mass was more restricted for the lay person and spectatorship became the hallmark of this period (Taylor 1976:83). Inevitably as the liturgy became the reserve of the clergy, two different sacred dance traditions emerged.

The first tradition centred around dance performed by the clergy as part of the Mass. This movement became ritualised and symbolic of the theology of the church (Adams 1990:30). The Mass itself was a disciplined and prescribed sacred dance with definite movements and postures proscribed by church authorities (Taylor 1976:10). For those active in moving ritual articles such as candles, books, and censers, the movement was worship-centred and not designed for entertainment.

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. The usual forms for dance

were the processional or round dances.

The second dance tradition that developed, with the approval and guidance of the church, was known as popular sacred dances. These developed in connection with church ceremonies and festivals. It was customary to celebrate these with a processional dance although round or ring dances were popular. They were performed in the church, church yard, or surrounding countryside during religious festivals, saints' days, weddings or funerals.

It was difficult for the church to regulate these popular dances because the very nature of the dance and its occasion often entailed spontaneous movement. The rhythmic stomping and hopping steps sometimes caused uncontrollable ecstasy. When accompanied by feasting and drinking, these excesses were frowned on by the church (Adams 1990:20).

The dances were usually performed to hymns or carols. 'To carol' means 'to dance' (Adams 1975:6). 'Carol' is derived from the Latin *corolla* for 'ring', and 'caroller' is derived from the Latin *choraula* meaning 'flute-player for chorus-dancing' (Oxford Dictionary). Most carols were divided into the stanza, meaning to 'stand' or 'halt', and the chorus, which means 'dance'. Thus, during the chorus, the people danced and unless a solo dancer performed for the stanza, there was little movement as the stanza was sung.

The most common step performed during the chorus was the 'tripudium', which means 'three step'. This was danced by taking three steps forward and one backwards; then it was repeated. The timing was usually 4/4 or 2/4 and the step was popular for processional dances. Often five or ten people would link arms and then join with others to process through the streets, and around the church, symbolising the unity and equality of the church community.

As the centuries passed during the Middle Ages, however, the "rising hierarchy eschewed dancing with the people - for dancing symbolises and effected a sense of equality" (Adams 1975:5). Thus, the church authorities designated days of worship when priests would dance with other priests, deacons with deacons, and then the common people with other commoners. Generally the bishops abstained from dancing, although some joined the people dancing, a practice which threatened the developing hierarchy and so it "hastened church legislation against all dancing" (ibid: 5).

Part Four: Later Middle Ages (AD 1100-1400)

As the church consolidated its authority in the medieval period, the censorship of dance continued. Dance was still an accepted liturgical form and various references attest to the rise of dance in the ring and processional form (Adams 1970:22). However, gradually the sacred dance form began to shift and instead of devotional dance, the movement became more theatrical and dramatic.

As public interest in the Mass waned, the Christian authorities made a definite effort to arouse

the congregations by including more choral songs, picturesque processions and even ceremonial dances performed in the choir area. John Beleth, a 12th century rector at the University of Paris mentioned four kinds of choral dances, with tripudiam, which were customarily used at church festivals (Adams 1990:22).

The worship dance did persist in the exclusive realm of the clergy. Bonaventure (c. 1260) wrote that in the joys of paradise there will be endless circling, "rhythmic revolutions with the spheres" (Adams 1990:21). 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. In this dance, the Archbishop is assisted by the clergy who first moved round two by two, followed in the same manner by prominent citizens, all singing songs of the resurrection. The carol moved from the cloister into the church, around the choir and into the nave, all the while singing 'Salvation Mundi' (Taylor 1976:22).

However, evidence of worship-centred dances such as these declined in favour of dramatic dance to be used in the church as an allegorical explanation of the Mass. Short plays were introduced into the liturgy to improve its appeal to the laity. Before the end of the early Middle Ages (1100), playlets made their way into eucharistic liturgy and became the precursor to mystery plays.

The earliest recorded playlet was *Queen Queritis*, written for an Easter Mass. Another example, *Planctus* appears as part of a Mass early in the 12th century. This religious play was concerned with the sorrows of the three Marys of Jesus' time. The actions that were to accompany the musical score are specified by interlinear indications in rubrics (Taylor 1976:88) (Appendix B).

The dance used in the playlets differed from the sacred worship dances of the Mass. The focus was on the religious drama; the dancing was theatrical, not devotional.

The mystery and miracle plays of the medieval period had their origin in these playlets. There was a thriving interest in these dramas, which included, besides the dramatic action, the dancing of the Follies, a troupe of dancing devils and the acrobatic dance of figures like Salome (Gagne 1980:23). Initially these mystery plays were performed in the *ballatoria* or dancing pavement in front of the church or at a west door where awnings were hung. Later, they were transported and presented on wagon stages in France, Germany and England (Davies 1984:39).

In the late 14th century the morality plays were developed. This was a theatrical genre outside church jurisdiction, although the plays told the story of the Christian life in terms of the conflict between good and evil. The dancing devils contributed "humour, slapstick and satire, with the church itself often the butt of their mimicry" (Fallon and Wolbers 1982:11). Official doctrine condemned these dramas in the Middle Ages, although by the time of the Reformation conflicting religious factions used the morality plays as a means of propaganda (ibid: 15).

Aside from the dramatic dances, the attitude of the church authorities to the sacred dance, as

well as the popular dances, was restrictive. In struggling to unify and control Christian dance, the church hierarchy issued a number of edicts against the use of dance.

The Festival of Fools, for instance, was celebrated at the turn of the year and included much dancing, singing and public festivals. Documented evidence indicates they were often bawdy and undisciplined occasions in which the church sought to maintain control (Taylor 1976:85). The history of the church's attitude to this dance demonstrates its struggle to exert control over such dances.

The Council of Toledo had long struggled with the unholy excesses of the festival. Even as early as AD 589 it tried to curtail excesses in dancing and in AD 633 specifically forbade the Festival of Fools. However, the conflict, which persisted in the attitude towards dance, is reflected in the Council's edict in AD 678. They suggested the Archbishop Isidore of Seville compose and prepare a dance ritual "rich in sacred choreography" (Daniels 1981:10).

This ritual became part of the Mass known as the Mozarabe, and it was used in the seven churches in Toledo and in the cathedral of Seville. The dance involved became known as *los seises* and first accounts of the dance describe a wooden arc of the Testaments being carried through the cathedral in a procession accompanied by choirboys and priests. They were preceded by eight boys dancing and singing and dressed as angels with garlands of flowers in their hair (ibid:13).

By 1439, Don Jayme de Palafax, the Archbishop of Seville, forbade the performance of this dance. Amazed at this ruling, the people of Seville collected enough money to send the dancers to Rome where they performed before the Pope, singing, dancing and clicking their castanets. The Pope responded by saying, "I see nothing in this children's dance which is offensive to God. Let them continue to dance before the high altar" (Fallon and Wolbers 1982:14).

The dance was discontinued by six of the churches during the 15th century, but it is still celebrated three times a year in the cathedral of Seville on Shrove Tuesday, the Feast of Corpus Christi and on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (Clarke and Crisp 1981:23). Today, ten boys dance and play castanets for about 15 minutes in an open space just below the high altar. The pattern of their dance has lost any obvious significance. However, as the one authentic survival of dance from the Middle Ages it offers a glimpse of what church dance may have been like.

Other dances, which persisted throughout the Middle Ages, were usually celebrated at festivals. In the 13th century a religious mystery play was carried out at the cathedral of Auxerres. The clergy and deacons made use of a ball game (*pelota*) as part of the dance. The Dean led his canons in a dance, holding a large ball and tracing his steps along the labyrinthine pattern inlaid in the floor of the nave. During the dance he threw the ball to various canons, all the while accompanied by the hymn which sang of Christ's resurrection (Adams 1990:42).

A similar symbolic enactment of the resurrection was the line or ring dance called the *bergerette*. It was performed by the priests on the first day of Easter, and seems typical of the type of dancing permitted at festivals. Although councils such as Avignon in the 12th century forbade "leaping, obscene movements and dances" (Clarke and Crisp 1981:24) in church, dance was referred to as a usual activity in recorded documents of this age. The key factor seems to have been whether the church controlled the dance or not. A liturgy used in Paris in the Middle Ages, for example, gives clear directions on when to dance, noting "The canon shall dance at the first Psalm" (Kraus and Chapman 1981:50).

The most widely known of all religious dances in the later Middle Ages was the Dance of Death or *danse macabre*. Originally, this dance was represented only in poems and church murals where Death was shown as a participant in dancing.

The dance sprung from France, then moved to Germany, Italy, Spain and England, reaching its peak in the 14th and 15th centuries. The obsession with this dance reveals the medieval people's preoccupation with death. Although initially a spontaneous movement, eventually a set pattern evolved in a processional format.

The whole of medieval society was represented in these dances. People processed in rank order, from the Pope to the commoner, following the Death figure that moved in grotesque and mocking dance patterns. One by one, Death leads the members of society to their grave. This concept of Death as the leveller and destroyer of social and economic imbalances was very popular in the Middle Ages (Taylor 1976:38).

The church sought to prohibit such dances stating; "Whoever buries the dead should do so with fear and trembling and decency. No one shall be permitted to sing devil songs and perform games and dances which are inspired by the devil and have been invented by the heathen" (Kraus and Chapman 1981:59).

However there was an upsurge in the popularity of the Dance of Death with its grotesque parodies of funerals and frenzied dance outbursts during the period of the Black Plague (1347-1373). The plague was a combination of the bubonic plague and pneumonia and it raged throughout Europe killing half the population of Europe by AD 1450 (Brooke 1971:14).

Simultaneously, there were outbreaks of dance epidemics known as *Danseomania*. John Martin comments that people were so affected by a succession of calamities that they sought an outlet for emotional stress through the dancing. Other sources have maintained these epidemics were traceable to a poisoning caused by the consumption of diseased grain in rural communities. This sort of ergotism can result in "hallucinations, frantic and uncontrollable and permanent physical shaking" (Clarke and Crisp 1981:39). The result was that "whole communities of people ... were stricken with a kind of madness that sent them dancing and gyrating through the streets and from village to village for days at a time until they died in agonised exhaustion" (Kraus and Chapman 1981:55).

The dance epidemics reached an intensity that rendered ecclesiastical councils helpless in opposition to them. Despite the church's command to cease the dance manias, the people either wouldn't or couldn't. Consequently, the dancers were often accused of being possessed by the devil and, it seemed, "none were immune from this infection of the mind" (Sachs 1963:256).

In 1237 a party of German children danced their way from Erfurt to Arnstadt, with the result of many perishing along the way. In 1278 a bridge at Marburg collapsed beneath a company of dancers who subsequently drowned. Then in 1347 several hundred men and women danced from Aix-la-Chapelle to Metz, despite the efforts of priests to break the spell.

Those possessed were sometimes called *choreomaniacs* and in general their frenzied dance took place in churchyards and from there, in and out of the church and down the public streets until they were exhausted. According to Adams (1990:23) the dancers were absorbed in the vision of wading through blood and would leap wildly about to jump out of the bloodied stream.

Songs, the music of drums and all the outward frenzy of old ecstatic rites (Appendix C) accompanied the dance.

In the middle of the 14th century a version of the dance mania broke out in the Rhine Valley in Germany. Known to physicians as *chorea major* and to lay people as St Vitus' Dance, it was characterised by circular, jumping movements in versions of distorted choral dances. For hours at a time men, women and children performed leaps and turns, writhing as if suffering from epileptic seizures until finally collapsing, foaming at the mouth. Priests and physicians seemed powerless to counteract these dances (Sachs 1963:25).

The Italian version of St Vitus' Dance was a form of seizure-like dance that was thought at first to be the result of the bite of the tarantula spider, and was thus called *tarantism*. Later, it was performed to avert the effects of the spider's poison and the wild dancing was thought to bring temporary relief.

In the light of these dance manias, the sacred dance liturgies of the church receded into oblivion. The undisciplined masses with their uncontrollable devilish movement were difficult to control and consecrate to the church.

Thus, several edicts sought to restrict dance and control its excesses, both outside the church, and within. The Council of Narbonne, for instance, attacked church dance:

Since to the dishonour of the Christian name, and in contempt of holy things, there are performed ring-dances and hop-dances and other three-step dances, as well as other improprieties, the Council desires to root them out entirely, so that henceforth nobody will dare to dance in a holy temple or a churchyard during service (Fallon & Wolbers 1982:15).

Yet the numerous proscriptions against church dance only served to push it outside to the

streets. While sacred dance by the clergy was beginning to cease, the popular church dances persisted. For a time, the church remained unsuccessful in suppressing these popular dances.

With the rise of papal control of all aspects of Christian life, along with excesses of the Dance of Death and dance manias, the liturgical dance forms began to suffer. What remained of the Christian dance forms were shadows of the former worship-centred celebrations of the earlier centuries. As the focus in church dance shifted to the liturgy, the movement within the church became proscriptive and functional. As the forms in popular dance shifted to the movement of the body, rather from the divine, it too lost the essence of the original meaning of Christian dance.

Part Five: Where do we go from here?

The Renaissance (1400-1700)

The Renaissance heralded the beginning of great change for Christian dance. Historically, it was a period of great upheaval. In 1455 books began being printed and this encouraged an emphasis on intellect, so that the mind was perceived of greater importance than the body in religious growth. The Protestant Reformation (1517-1529) and the Roman Catholic Counter Reformation as evidenced by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) wrought enormous changes to the perceived use and value of dance in the Christian context (Adams 1990:23).

What flourished in the dance realm were processional celebrations, theatrical moral ballets and some interpretations of hymns and psalms in worship. Theatre and spectacles were on the rise, and with the emergence of the dancing master, the church's liturgical dance faded in significance. "The time is past when everybody could dance from natural inclination and learned the unwritten rules from observation and participation. The spontaneity is gone" (Sachs 1963:300).

Prior to the Renaissance, religious dance had become severely ritualised 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 ritualise 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 (Adams 1990:25).

The Reformation (1517-1529)

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 and

processions. Concerned with social reform, equality, tolerance and freedom, they attempted to revive a democratic outlook on Christianity. They preached the renunciation of the world and intensified the struggle between soul and body by placing greater emphasis on the mind. The connection between the body, dance and eroticism was openly acknowledged, and Christians were taught not to glorify the body.

These ideas spread rapidly as the church utilised the printing press, spreading tracts that were highly critical of dance. The following excerpt is from a booklet printed at Utrecht:

The heathen are the inventors of dance. Those who cultivate it are generally idolaters, epicureans, good for nothings, despicable or dishonourable comedians or actors, as well as souteneurs, gigolos, and other dissolute, worthless, wanton persons. Its defenders and followers are Lucian, Caligula, Herod, and similar epicureans and athiests. With it belong gluttony, drunkenness, plays, feast days, and heathen saints' days (Fallon & Wolbers 1982:15).

Yet the early leaders of the Protestant Reformation were not anti-dance. Martin Luther (c. 1525) wrote a carol for children entitled "From Heaven High" in which two stanzas support the role of song and dance in worship. (Appendix D)

Additionally, the English Church leader, William Tyndale, in a prologue to the New Testament wrote of the roles of joyous song and dance, and was happy to use the words, *daunce* and *leepe* when he considered the joyous good news of Christianity (Adams 1990:26). It was as the teachings of the leaders were interpreted by the people that ban on sacred dance increased dramatically.

Similarly, during the meetings of the Council of Trent, the intention was less on the abolition of sacred dance, than on seeking unity in liturgical and theological matters. "We may assume then, that the removal of literary and dramatic interpolations from the Roman service books legalised by the Council of Trent (1545-63), and the gradual disappearance of such intrusions from local uses, were inspired less by hostility to religious drama than by a fundamental determination to return all things to the purer and simpler liturgical tradition of the early Middle Ages" (Gagne 1984:56).

However altruistic, the Council's decrees stifled creativity and growth within the church drama scene. In 1566, statues of the synod of Lyons for example, threatened priests and other persons with excommunication if they led dances in churches or cemeteries.

By 1570, Pope Pius V had completed the final edition of the Breviary and Missal, which ultimately systematised liturgical rites into manuals and well ordered texts. A simple, consistent form could be printed and distributed easily. The use of dance as sacred worship was being eliminated.

There is some evidence of a countering effect, but it was minimal, such as when St Teresa of Alvira (c. 1555) "danced with holy joy" (Adams 1990:27). Furthermore, some rituals, such as the

los seises and the *bergerette* were retained.

However, in general, the Church insisted on liturgical unity without the use of dance in worship. As increasing pressure to cease all religious dances mounted, there seemed no avenue for a possible creative revival in dance.

Consequently, religious dance disappeared, or survived in only a few isolated places. Some religious denominations cultivated specific liturgical movements, which harked back to the early church dance. Other Christian dance movements were changed into folk expressions, to be seen at weddings or funerals, or else remained buried in the structured movement of the Catholic Mass.

The events of the period eventually led to the eradication of liturgical dance, processions, and most visual arts, leaving only the arts of painting, preaching and music unscathed.

In the post Renaissance period both the Protestant and Catholic Church "firmly attempted to close the door on creative expression of dance in the liturgy" (Gagne 1984:59). The Catholics' increasing proscriptions against dance, coupled with an increasing sense of mistrust of dance on the part of Protestants, forced dance back into the secular realm. "Dance was given back totally to society, with few exceptions remaining of church related Christian dance" (Gagne 1984: 59).

Conclusion

Dance within the Christian context, having sprung from the Jewish tradition, was embraced by the early church as an integral part of celebrations and of worship. During the Middle Ages various influences affected the development of Christian dance and despite increasing proscriptions concerning its value and use, it survived as a sacred dance form. However, with the commencement of the Reformation, the dance was forced out of its place in the liturgical celebrations of the Christian church, and with few exceptions flourished instead in the secular realm.

In successive decades, Christians across the globe have struggled with understanding the role and place of dance as a form of worship, celebration, outreach and ministry. There seems little doubt members of the early church incorporated dance into the expression of their faith. A natural expression of joy; to dance was to worship with body, soul, mind and spirit.

The Dance, in my opinion, is much more than an exercise, an entertainment, an ornament, a society pastime; it is a serious thing and, in some aspects, even a holy thing. Every age which has understood the human body, or which has, at least sensed something of the mystery of this structure, of its resources, of its limitations, of the combinations of energy and sensibility which it contains, has cultivated, venerated, the Dance (Reyna 1965:7).

So what of *this* age? Where are we today? What will posterity have to say of this generation? As God continues to challenge individuals to dance, sing, paint, act - to give expression to their

divine gifts, how will the church respond?

Appendix A

The Hymn of Jesus

Now before he was taken up 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 about in a ring, answered him: *Amen.*

"Glory be to thee, Word: Glory be to thee, Grace. *Amen.*

I would be saved, and I would save. *Amen.*

Grace danceth. I would pipe; dance ye all. *Amen.*

I would mourn: lament ye all. *Amen.*

The number Eight singeth praise with us. *Amen.*

The number Twelve danceth on high. *Amen.*

The whole on high hath part in our dancing. *Amen.*

Who so danceth not, knoweth not what cometh to pass.

I would be united, and I would unite. *Amen.*

A door am I to thee that knockest at me. *Amen.*

Now answer thou unto my dancing.

Behold thyself in me who speak, and seeing what

I do, keep silence about my mysteries.

thou that dancest, perceive what I do, for there

is this passion of the manhood, which I am about to suffer. For thou couldst not at all have understood what thou sufferest, if I had not been sent unto thee, as the Word of the Father. Thou that sawest what I suffer sawest me as suffering, and seeing it thou didst not abide but wert wholly moved.

Who I am, thou shalt know when I depart.

Learn thou to suffer, and thou shalt be able

not to suffer. I would keep tune with holy

souls. Do thou understand the whole, and having

understood it, say: Glory be to the Father. *Amen.*"

Thus having danced with us the Lord went forth. (Taylor 1976:71)

Appendix B

Planctus

12th century religious play

Magdalene: O brothers!
(Turns to the people with arms held out)
Where is my hope?
(Beats her breast)
Where is my consolation?
(Raises her hands)
Where is my salvation?
(Inclines her head, casts herself as Christ's feet)
O Master mine?

Mother: O Sorrow!
Deep sorrow!
Why, why indeed,
(Points to Christ with open hands)
Dear Son, hangedst thou thus,
Thou who art life
(Beat her breast)
And has forever been?

The third Mary follows with similar lines and actions.
Then Mary the Mother and Magdalene speak together.

(Taylor1976:88)

Appendix C

Giraldus Cambrensis, a 12th century writer, left a description of the Danseomanias in his *Hirerarium Cambriae*:

You may see men or girls, now in the churchyard, now in the dance, which is led round the churchyard with a song, on a sudden falling on the ground as in a trance, then jumping up as in a frenzy and representing their hands and feet, before the people, whatever work they have unlawfully done on feast days; you see one man put his hand to the plough, another, as it were, goad on the oxen, mitigating their sense of labour, by one usual rude song: one man imitating the profession of a shoemaker; another that of a tanner. Now you may see a girl with a distaff drawing out the thread, and winding it agin on the spindle; another walking, and arranging the threads for the web; another as it were, moving the shuttle, and seeming to weave. On being brought into the church, and led up to the altar with their oblations, you will be astonished to see them suddenly awakened and coming to themselves (Sachs 1963:252-3).

Appendix D

**Excerpt from Martin Luther's Carol
"From Heaven High"**

A little child for you this morn
Has from a chosen maid been born,
A little child so tender, sweet,
That you should skip upon your feet.

I can play the whole day long.
I'll dance and sing for you a song,
A soft and soothing lullaby
So sweet that you will never cry.

(Taylor 1976:107)

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