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Prayer in flesh and blood

In Sacred Dance God takes on a body

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Kairos, the 'Moment Now', as the root of the Tree of Life as past and future, dances in adoration of Uranos his ancestor who symbolizes unlimited space and time. Greek plate from the Ionian Islands, Louvre, 5th c. B.C.

In almost all religions there is a tradition of sacred dance. It is the eternal quest to get close to the divine essence of the cosmos through movement of the body. Maria-Gabriele Wosien, dance teacher and author of numerous books about sacred dance, elucidates here just how the presence of God is able to be experienced through dance.

By virtue of being alive, by the soul's power of experience, and by the working of the Spirit in us, we are children of God. Perceived in times past from the outside, the symbols of mythology live on in our dreams, desires and memories as a timeless substratum of images in our soul.

Out of paradise we have fallen into time. "Paradise, however is barred and the Cherub is posted behind us to keep us out. Now we have to make the journey around the world to see whether, somewhere, there might perhaps be an entry open at the back", Kleist wrote in his "Marionettentheater" (puppet theatre). For the dancer the key to paradise lies in experiencing time as space, while being led by music and song, by the images in his/her soul, by the reality of the physical aspect of the body in his/her longing to come face to face with God.

When, for moments, the soul has the power to transport the body so that it becomes the vessel of the Spirit, then dance becomes prayer in the Christian sense of the practice of the Presence of God, recalling the words of Isaiah: *"Arise (Jerusalem), rise clothed in light; your light has come, and the the glory of the Lord shines above you"* (60:1).

Everything that moves does so by the power of light, so that the central theme of dance-meditation is the movement of light in space, the journey of light in space being at the root of every genuine creative impulse.

According to the apostle Thomas (*Apocrypha of St. Thomas, Logion 50*), Christ admonished his disciples: *"If people ask you 'From whence do you come', then answer them: 'we come from the Light, whenceforth the Light itself comes.' And if someone asks you: 'Who are you?', then answer him: 'We are His children, and the chosen ones of the living God'. And if people ask you: 'Which is the sign your Father has given you?', then say unto them: 'His sign is movement and rest (peace)'".*

To approach the unimaginable God, we are in need for this human-divine partnership of external images and symbols that bear witness to the dual origin of life. They help us to be connected to the transcendent realm of the Spirit which guides our everyday reality.

As human consciousness changed with evolution, so too, changed the face of God. And yet, God has always remained the same behind all forms and masks. All images, created as forms of sacred art – carved from stone, formed out of clay, painted or built with tiny pieces of mosaic onto large surfaces – are in every case time-bound perceptions of the divine in their endeavour to connect to the symbolic dimension of the Spirit.

Dance dedicated to the manifold appearance of divinity is an attempt at an 'imitatio Dei' – the faithful trying to reach the adored divinity by emulation. Theme and aim of any religious dance is, therefore, to introduce archetypal forms and movements into human body language, thereby facilitating the experience that all the changing shapes, forms and gestures may be vehicles for the transcendent Spirit.

Divinity takes on form in everything created, and even though Christianity has a long history of denial of the body, dating back as far as apostolic times, it too has given physical expression to the Spirit in its sacred art, propagating even the 'resurrection of the body': God took on human form, Christ offered his flesh and blood in the Eucharist and rose 'with his body' as we proclaim in the Christian creed.

Christ also showed himself to be the way. Our church buildings show pathways, stations and journeys of purification, that ultimately lead to the union with God. Sacred architecture unites motifs of natural growth with visions of cosmic movement, carved in stone, celestial sound being made audible through the spatial proportions of vaults. Recurrent symbols of sacred architecture are circle, cross, spiral, crescent and meander, as movement archetypes they are the basic forms of all traditional dances.

Feel the energy of the earth

Dance as a graceful expression of movement in form begins in a state of poised calm. The dancer stands upright and opens him/herself in silence to all space. Since the body's energy flow ends in the feet, all 'naturefolk' both walk and dance barefoot, so as to be able to feel the rhythms and pulses of the earth. This finds an echo in the traditional saying: 'Whoever does not touch the earth will not reach the sky (heaven).

The dancer standing upright - both arms extended sideways, legs straight - touches with his extremities a circle, the central point, or pivot being, where the spinal column comes to rest on the sacrum. The secret of graceful dancing is to balance the body in the cross and circle thus linking it to the macrocosmic structure of the universe.

Dance, as a living tradition within a religious community, involves the whole person in prayer. Christian themes, based on prayers or hymns, may be dramatically enacted, while dance may be woven into religious service, just as a sermon can be set to movement, or mass may be celebrated as a worshipful dance. The whole richness and diversity of Christian culture in a widespread ecumenical context offers unlimited possibilities for faith finding expression in ritual movement and dance.

The ways of traditional dances are pathways to freedom. In dance-meditation any given symbolic image can light up our souls and offer the body, our natural instrument, the chance of being linked with its divine origin.

The cyclical nature of life, as mirrored by the planetary journeys in the sky, together with the continuum of seasonal changes on our planet, places the dancer in constant relationship to phases of transition, as he/she dances the themes of birth, death and new birth. The dance models which mirror these themes are the journey of the sun, the orbits of planets and cycles of the moon, together with the growth rhythms of life on earth. The heavenly prototypes, projected onto the earth, become the models for all ritual behaviour.

The basic symbol for all forms of movement in traditional sacred dance is the circle, which at the same time incorporates in its structure the dancer as its central focus. Insofar as the dancer encircles the centre, as he/she dances towards or away from it, he finds himself in constant dialogue with the eternal present, symbolised by the circle's centre. Encircling empty space, the dancer, by analogy, becomes an empty vessel and co-creator with God. In that the simple forms of traditional dance patterns are constantly repeated, the dancer may gradually open himself to their spiritual content, while the chain of dancers, taking part in the journey, becomes the symbol for a common destiny.

All situations may be given expression in dance as symbolic of life's journey: dancing forward, as actively relating in the present to the future; turning back - relating to the past - so as to gain objectivity or new insights; or leaving an old and finding a new standpoint, in this way discovering a new field of experience. By serving himself of continuously changing movement-patterns within a given symbolic structural framework, the dancer is both on an inner and outward journey, testing out his soul, spirit and body balance alongside other fellow dancers. Self-assuredness is playfully rehearsed, as the dancer executes the prescribed steps and dance patterns of traditional dances in all variations and possible interpretations.

Wholeness in the moment

Although each dancer is actively on his/her dancing journey, with the body as instrument of experience, the soul is only passively involved and, with some luck, the discerning intellect stops being critical: gradually, by virtue of the constant repetition of steps and forms, an awareness may grow which allows no space for thoughts of projection, analysis or judgement, while the individual, by habit a solitary entity, is reconnected to other fellow humans, may slowly discover a sense of community and closeness, which does not need to feel threatening.

Therapists confirm that our inherent powers of self-healing are activated in circle dances. Our sensitivities and longings need no longer be only verbalised, for music, sung prayers and the companionship in dance can encompass and integrate all individual experience.

In traditional European dances west of the Rhine, the dance direction is generally anti-clock-wise moving into the direction where, symbolically speaking, the sun rises. The important practice is to be present in the moment as the dancer moves towards the light. By following the traces of God on earth, the dancer becomes co-creator to the divinity. As he/she walks the earth in prayer, from his/her footsteps may grow new life.

Everything that cannot be put into words may find expression in ritual dance, sacred music and gestures of prayer. Sacred dance, as the art of mirroring the divine, can put the dancer in touch with the life source itself: *"Behold, I make all things new..."*

In Sufism, for instance, the practice of the prayer of the heart is part of a century old tradition of dance. Based on the repetition of the name of God, either silently or out loud, the group of worshippers rhythmically sways to the prayer with the accompaniment of music. Music here has the task to open the soul of the faithful and to lead into a state of heightened sensitivity and inner balance. In a ritual of the Mevlevi order of dervishes the prayer of the heart is danced as a prayerful journey to God, symbolically incorporating the dancer in the planetary orbit of the stars.

God dances the dancer

In his essay *"Homo ludens"* (Man at play) the German theologian Hugo Rahner defines the dancer as someone who needs to be 'truly humane, a sage', then only is he able to dance beautifully and 'correctly'. He must know something of what needs 'to be brought into being'. Further he quotes Aristotle who, in his 'Politics' (8, 5-7) gives the reader advice of how to relate to the art forms, dedicated to the gods: *'no citizen'*, he says, *'should acquire the art of the muses so perfectly so as to be professional'*. Seen in relation to dance-meditation, the dancer should avoid concentrating on expressions of dexterity, or overrating technical skill, remembering always that sacred dance is a form of service to God, and that the dancer, who is in harmonious accord with the divine source of movement and the movement of the Spirit, is danced by God.

The more deeply we are able to follow the movement of sacred symbols, which all religious dance cultures have evolved, the more intensely the original archetypes for all sacred dance are evoked in an experience of stillness in motion. To this is helpful an initial attunement and an attitude of devotion, which we might call the pre-condition for prayer. In this state of heightened awareness, profane preoccupations appear no longer relevant and we begin to open to the hidden, symbolic essence of sacred dance forms.

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