

I DANCED IN THE MORNING WHEN THE WORLD WAS BEGUN

Notes on Dance and Worship

Certain human gestures and acts are considered acceptable or indeed right within the context of worship; dance is not normally one of those. The use of certain symbolic gestures, eg the hand raised in benediction or the body bent in prayer, is thought perfectly reasonable; dance, however, is envisaged by many as sheer novelty, as the importation into the arena of the sacred of something clearly profane. There is with dance a more pronounced and general condemnation than with other uses of the body in worship, and it underlines a feeling, perhaps, that some things in this world are more of God than are others, a dualism that the Church has officially condemned whilst allowing the sense of a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, between the things of the body and the things of the spirit.

Augustine, in condemning dance, asked the question 'is it proper ... where psalms have been sung that there should be dancing?' He ignores the fact that the psalms on so many occasions speak of glorifying the Lord, or of giving thanks to him, by the very means of dance. If it is accepted that, for any properly christian understanding of a situation or act, scripture must take its place with tradition and reflection on the present to provide the guidelines within which discussions may occur, then on the level of scripture it must be admitted that in neither Old nor New Testament is there any proscription of dancing, and indeed there are many examples of dance being performed by the people of God as expressions of their worship - Miriam, David and the Psalmist would all fall under the censure of Augustine and of those who deplore the use of this very human activity in the worship of the Creator of all things, who spoke of all that he had made as being good.

Why then the tradition, almost universal in the Fathers of the Church, that dancing is an inappropriate activity for christians, whether in worship or in secular life so-called? Indeed, the Apostolic Constitutions tell us that one who is a dancing-master must, on conversion, give up that mode of existence; it is interesting to note, though, that in the same work soldiers too must give up their way of life, a position that did not embody itself as definitive in the christian tradition. Perhaps the motif in condemnation that stands out most clearly in the writings of the early christian centuries is that of the pagan aspect of dance; both Ambrose of Milan and his protege Augustine (who is, of course, against

almost every pursuit of the flesh!) regard dancing as a pagan activity. Since dance had its place in the worship of the pagan gods, it was considered wrong to allow it in the worship of the true God, a stance not taken up in the case of many traditions which were simply 'baptised' or christianised rather than deleted from the Lamb's Book of Life. But there is another factor which deserves mention, namely that of the place of dance in christian aberrations; denouncement of the dance was not simply on the grounds of its pagan association, but also because of its heretical taint. (It is possibly worth mentioning here that Carter's hymn on the Lord of the Dance, from which the title of this essay is taken, finds its origin in a gnostic account of the Last Supper in which Christ leads his disciples in dance.) The condemnation of heresy was in part symbolised by the suppression within orthodoxy of those practices which were indulged in by the heretics. Thus perhaps, it is not dance per se that finds its condemnation in the Fathers, but rather dance as symbol of wrong thinking and therefore wrong worship. This in part explains that when christianity in its orthodox manifestation is the dominant strain, as during the middle ages, dance reappears as something that people and clerics may indulge in, even within the context of the sacred and, indeed, even within the very building of the church.

Another factor, touched on above, that has had its effect on the christian understanding and experience of dance, was the strong dualist strain within orthodoxy, in fact if not in theory. The dominance of platonism in christian thinking, with its opposition of body and soul, the latter being good and the former to be denigrated, suggests a rejection of the things of the flesh, amongst which dance; this strain appears again in the intellectualism of the Enlightenment period. The use of the body in dance is a casualty of this stress on dichotomy over and against unity in the person, a spiritualising that simply denigrates the body.

And yet, when one regards the Puritans, not overly noted for their broadmindedness, they actually recognised the fact of sacred dance within the pages of scripture; and it is within the protestant tradition that dance reappears with the 19th century Shaking Quakers. That reawakening of dance within christianity, albeit in a strange manifestation of the faith, was originally spontaneous but later became embodied within designed and formal dance movements (perhaps, too, it may be interesting to remember that in the Roman Church, pre-Vatican II, the performance of a High Mass with the three sacred ministers and their attendants had much of the appearance of a formal dance, and was often referred to, somewhat sacrilegiously, as the 'sacred ballet'). The 20th century has seen a cautious reassertion of interest in dance as an expression of worship, taking its part with all those other cultural expressions being allowed into the liturgical arena.

What, though, is there about dance that might commend itself to those involved in planning for worship? Perhaps the most important contribution that dance can

make to our worship is the very strenuous assertion, long overdue, that our bodies and the things of the flesh are actually good; dance can be a weapon against that subchristian view which would make flesh subservient to spirit, and regard the body as a prison for 'the divine spark' trapped within. Thus the adage 'God likes matter, he made it' is one of the assertions that may be made by the use of the very human and natural act of dance. We dance when we are joyful, we dance with the one we love; why, then, not dance in the presence of the great Lover whose very being engenders the greatest of joys? Dance is a celebration of the fact of our embodiment, and of the reality of the doctrine that God took flesh of the Virgin and really was seen among us. Christian history exhibits an uneasiness about this flesh-stuff that makes the doctrine of the incarnation an unhappy one, and the two-nature talk of Chalcedon, and the great pains often taken to show that it was the human and not the divine nature that did much in the life of the man Jesus (especially regarding death and suffering) are perhaps a reflection of Christian unease with matter. Dance may therefore be a useful corrective.

Furthermore, dance is a mirror of the creative power of God, a creative power in which we have a share. All dance has its ceremonial aspect, and formalisation of movements whether conscious or not shows something of the planning and organising ability of people, and of the willingness to be community rather than isolated - a reflection of God's plan for humankind in creation. Creativity and unity are thus important balances to the picture of the world and of human nature/destiny presented in the Eden story and its escalation through Babel and the separation consequent upon the Flood. And it is not just the unity of the dancers that may be asserted but also the unity of the very person, spirit and flesh in harmony, working together to create the sacrifice of thanks and praise. As Sacraments are God and people in action, so there is a sense of sacramentality about dance, where body and spirit are seen together in act, and the wholeness of a person is seen to be engaged in relation with God through worship.

This theme of integration deserves comment, for not only must there be integration of the person and that with God, but the acts must be integrated with the other acts of worship to show their essential unity - dance must not become something performed for its own sake, but for its interpretative role; as words illuminate actions, so too bodily movement may illuminate the whole sacred drama of liturgy, both accompanying and highlighting it. For example, when seen as movement, dance may illuminate the words we often use of the people of God as being on pilgrimage; when seen as a reaching-up, it may illuminate our talk of growth or of the attractiveness of God's grace and love. And the joy of the dance may be symbol more eloquent than any other of the final and ultimate joy of the eschaton, realised or inaugurated in the here and now.

Symbolic acts are common to humankind, and to worship; no one symbol can speak everything at all times, but perhaps the medium of dance ought seriously to be considered by liturgists, and by those responsible for the conduct of worship, and should take its place amongst the great universe of symbols already appropriated to Christian use. Certainly dance will be difficult to foster, impossible to legislate for in rubric, will be practically awkward in so many of our buildings (but then our buildings make so many things impossible already); nonetheless, dance may prove to be one of the most moving expressions of what our worship is really about, the statement and restatement of the relation of God to his people, of human person to person, and a grasping out too for the transcendent.

Ron Farrell

(Ron Farrell recently graduated from New College, Edinburgh, with Honours in Systematic Theology. He is currently training for the ministry of the Church of England at the (ecumenical) Queen's College, Birmingham, and working towards a Master's degree in liturgy and worship in the Department of Theology at Birmingham University.)

A DIP IN THE ARCHIVES

ANNUAL MEETING OF THE CHURCH SERVICE SOCIETY, THURSDAY, 28TH MAY 1874.

The Revd G W Sprott (North Berwick), Chairman:-

"I shall conclude by mentioning a somewhat curious circumstance connected with the new edition of "Euchologian." In making arrangements for putting the burning bush on the title-page, it was discovered that for the last thirty years the rays, which of old used to surround the bush, have been generally changed into smoke, as if the wood were actually on fire and in the process of being consumed. We have had great pleasure in banishing the smoke and restoring the rays; and I hope this is an omen for good to the Church, while I think we may claim it as in some sort an illustration of the work in which our Society is engaged".

CRW