

Christian and Western “High Culture” Perspectives on Dancing

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Dean Pritchford’s inspiration for the script idea for the 1984 movie musical “Footloose” was a newspaper item about an Oklahoma town, Elmore City, which had an actual law on the books dating from the late nineteenth century that prevented dancing. It seemed that the local high school wanted to have a prom and they needed to have the city government set aside the law to allow the teens to dance. Pritchford understood it was an odd idea to have a dance musical film about not being allowed to dance, but he loved the story idea. He was also worried that the premise would, in the late twentieth century, seem simply incredulous, yet research revealed that there were towns all over the country that still had actual laws forbidding dancing.

The basis for forbidding dancing for such laws is invariably based in Christian beliefs that dancing to popular music (rock n roll by the era of Footloose) leads to sex and drugs. The film was a smash hit and still resonates well in part because of the uneasiness between Christian beliefs about dancing and popular beliefs about dancing. Let’s look at a couple scenes to set the mood for our consideration of American Christian views dancing.

Ren (Kevin Bacon), a kid from Chicago, moves with his mom to a small Midwestern town where he is attracted to the wild and daring girl Ariel (Lori Singer) the preacher’s daughter. The Reverend Shaw Moore (John Lithgow) shepherds his flock of followers by preaching against dancing and lots of other faces of popular culture which he understands as God’s testing them. Ren stirs up the kids and they go to a town council meeting to ask for the law to be set aside so they can have a school dance. In this scene, the reverend reiterates his well-known position and Ren rises to make his case.

It is interesting that Ren (with assistance from Ariel) tries to fight fire with fire by quoting the bible because there are so few clear references to dancing in the bible and even these are rather questionable when one presses the references to dancing to the biblical languages and the originating cultural and religious contexts. The council rejects the request. Yet the kids have the dance at a nearby location outside the town limits and Rev Moore actually shifts his position on the event. I’ll show a bit of two other scenes simply because we need to experience these iconic dance moments.

As shown in “Footloose” there is and has long been a Christian concern with dancing, if not outright opposition to dancing. While, as Ren invoked, there are a few biblical references to movement that might be interpreted as dancing (though these are more like swaying with raised hands and rhythmic walking) there is an absence of anything resembling a significant Christian dance tradition.

In Judeo-Christian cosmology and anthropology humans were created by God in God’s image, implying that since humans are bodied so too must be God. Yet, shortly after creation The Fall, in popular imagery and mythology, strongly associated body with bodily knowledge, sexuality, and genitalia.

Although Christianity centers on an incarnate deity, the Christ event is deeply bodied, and the principal sacrament of the Eucharist is, though ritually sanitized, a rather grizzly affair of eating flesh and drinking blood, there has been an uncomfortableness about human bodies extending through much of the history of European Christianity. The body is subject to sin, decay, impurity, and death. The body is temporal and personal and deeply based in senses and sensuality. Senses and sensuality are commonly associated with sexuality, with sexuality associated with sensuality and sin. Dancing seems to have evoked throughout most of Christian history an association with sensuality, sexuality, body, and sin. As body is contrasted with soul and spirit, so is so is it associated with sin and evil while the soul/spirit is associated with good.

This attitude toward the body is reflected in Christian liturgical garb which typically amounts to full and flowing robes that cover the body from neck to foot leaving exposed only the hands and head. Even the head is often covered. These garments render the body somewhat unarticulated in that only the largest movements of limbs can be discerned. Heads tend to float atop inarticulate bodies. Even members of choirs wear similar garments.

A liturgical dance movement has developed in contemporary Christian society. The dance movement is closely controlled by costume and choreography. It is often rhythmical walking with swaying and praise-offering gesturing. Hands upraised in a gesture of praise date from early Christian iconography. The costuming is often full flowing robes resembling other Christian liturgical garments. Liturgical dancing in Christianity is more commonly done in African American Christian communities. Though dancing may occur in Christian sanctuaries, it is perhaps more common in church auditoriums or halls and done as worshipful entertainment. Here is an example of a Georgia liturgical dance.

It need be noted that while ballet emerged into prominence in the French court of King Louis XIV and has been confined largely to secular high culture, the values that pervade classical ballet correspond closely with Christian values: elevation, verticality, clear distinction of good and evil with the triumph of good, transcendence presented through minimizing the connection to floor (earth) via dancing en pointe and through leaps, balance, control beyond anything seemingly possible to human bodies, the absence of hip and pelvic articulation thus reducing or eliminating the sexual connections with dancing.

It is surprising to many to learn that Christianity as it exists in the southern hemisphere is the largest growing segment of contemporary Christianity; these are African, Latin American, and Indonesian and Pacific Christianities. I've been quite careful to this point to limit my comments about the Christian opposition to dancing to European and American Christianity, because there is less opposition to dancing in southern hemisphere Christian churches. In light of this it is no surprise that dancing and dance-like movement in North American Christian churches is much more likely to occur in African American churches.

There are also complex dance traditions in southern hemisphere religious traditions with very strong African connections that have, through the colonial process and the context of incorporating Africans brought to South America as slaves into Christianity. Traditions like candomblé in Brazil, vodun in Haiti, and Santería in Cuba align their African-based orixás with Christian saints, done originally as a strategy of

embracing Christianity under colonial pressures, while retaining continuity with their own traditions. These African-Latin American religious forms incorporate ecstatic and trance-inducing dance forms. This is a video of dance in a Candomblé initiation rite.

For many years I taught a two-semester course that surveyed almost thirty dance traditions around the world. Christianity was considered late in the course. To study Christian reticence to dancing was often experienced by students, most being from a Christian heritage, with discomfort and even anger. They recognized that most of them had entered the course incredulous that religion and dancing (the name of the course) could ever be conjoined, yet at this point in the course they had experienced in their studies as well as in their bodies in studio the richness of religious and cultural dance traditions all over the world. They asked how it is possible that seemingly every culture and religion in the world can recognize the importance of dancing in ritual and practice and in the formation of identity and community, yet their own tradition somehow saw dancing very differently, very negatively.