

The Importance of Dancing to World Religions and Cultures

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I've been to Bali several times. Immediately upon arrival I have invariably been whisked off by my friends to a temple festival or engaged in an upcoming festival. These are amazingly elaborate events that last days on end with months long preparation. They seem to be occurring constantly in Bali. With thousands of temples and each temple having annual (on a Balinese calendar of 210 days) temple festivals for each one, it is quite remarkable that it is even humanly possible. Indeed, one might propose that ritual preparation and ritual performance is the principal occupation of most Balinese. Dancing is ubiquitous to temple festivals and many other religious events in Bali. And the dancing is not simply a group of grooving social dancers bouncing around to music. It is highly precise and rehearsed trained dancing in elaborate immaculate costumes and accompanied by the performance of live music— gamelan or other type of music ensemble. There is a remarkably close relationship between Balinese religion and dance performance.

I have experienced a similar connection between religion and dancing in other places I have visited. Indeed, upon arrival at a new and unknown location when I have inquired about upcoming religious activities, I have often been referred to a dance event.

I have spent many a day perched on a pueblo rooftop overlooking the dance plazas at numerous villages at Hopi and also at Zuni and other villages among the eastern Pueblo peoples where dancing is the principal ritual activity that goes on all day long.

Outside of European and American Christianity, it is difficult to find a religious tradition that does not incorporate dancing and many hold dance central. Think immediately of Hindu temple dancing like bharata natyam, Nataraja as form of Shiva “Lord of Dance,” Mevlevi dervish turning dance in Sufi Turkey. And I could go on endlessly. Most ritual traditions involve dancing and dance drama as essential. Australian Aboriginal, African, Native American, Indonesian, etc. it is difficult to imagine much of a ritual or religious ceremonial event that does not include dancing in some way.

The world over dancing is associated with cultural identity: Travel brochures often include images of costumed dancers along with distinctive natural features, cityscapes, and animals. The opening and closing ceremonies for the Olympics features dancing on a spectacular scale with the dances performed selected because they are iconic to the host countries. Some traditions hold dancing as fundamental to cosmogony and cosmology, suggesting a highly developed theoretical understanding of dancing as a human activity. Dance is used metaphorically as identified with life, with interrelationships, with abstract concepts.

Movement patterns, costumes, ritual, sensory experiences that are inseparable from religious and cultural identity, value, meaning are danced. Yet, there is little to no dance theory that adequately

supports the comparative and interpretive study of dance traditions. We have yet to ask much about what is dancing, what does dancing do and how does it do it, how does dancing reveal fundamental dimensions of being human ... and how do we actually get at and understand the insipience that is the dancing that animates and provides distinction to all dances however disparate? How does dancing relate to quotidian movement and other forms of movement and action?

It is without question that throughout history in almost all cultures dancing is inseparable from religion and culture, from agency and identity, from tradition and change. And certainly, even though dancing does not seem to align with European and American Christianity, the attention it receives in being opposed and outlawed actually serve importantly to define religious and cultural value and identity.

This series of lectures will place dancing central to the study of culture and religion and it will attempt to articulate ways of understanding dancing that provide insights that have been intuited, yet not adequately stated.