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Dance in the Early Church

Sources and restrictions

Understanding the role of dance in the Western Christian tradition is an underexplored territory. Sources of historical investigations are few and many of them are problematic. In this article commonly used sources are questioned and a re-examination of earlier research is begun. Focusing on the Early Church in dialogue with writing from the patristic period, a new interpretation is done around the theme of dance prohibition. The important contributions of Donatella Tronca as well as Graham Pont and Alessandro Alcangeli to the understanding of dance in the Early Church period are expanded by means of a more extensive theological framework. This article also aims at bringing a broader philosophical and societal understanding of the worldview and social imaginary of the Early Church period to bear on earlier research studies.

HERMAN HESSE'S NOVEL, entitled *Narcissus and Goldmund* (1968, first published in 1930) is, among other things, a tale about the friendship of two men. Towards the end of the book they have a reunion. Goldmund has been out in the world, feeding his senses, slaking his lusts and exploring his emotions. He has become well acquainted with deep sadness, joy and the distressing consequences of death and evil, as well as moments of bliss. Narcissus on his part, has stayed within the enclosed world of the monastery, focusing his being on theology, philosophy and prayer. Still he explains that he also was not spared from the experience of a great deal of death, injustice and/or loss during the years he and his friend have been apart. As Narcissus hears Goldmund sharing his tales from the world he inquires of him whether he has found any path other than the seeing between a lust for life and sadness over death;

filling himself temporarily with the comforts of either lust or horror? Goldmund's answer is 'Yes': he has found another road – that of art. In the art of sculpture and image-making he has found he has the ability to make something out of the virtue of the sensual world and somehow make it more long-lasting. Goldmund says:

I saw that something remained of the fools' play, the death dance of human life, something lasting: works of art. They too will probably perish one day ... still they outlast many human lives. They form a silent empire of images and relics, beyond the fleeting moment. (Hesse 1968: 268)

Goldmund explained that to work with pieces of art was comforting to him, as it almost succeeds in making the transitory eternal. Narcissus, now the abbot of the monastery, encourages Goldmund in this and invites him to be the artist of their community. The two of them continue their talk about art. After a while Narcissus wants to add something more to describe the nature of art. He says that what Goldmund does is more than salvaging something mortal from death and transforming it into stone, wood and colour, so that it lasts a little longer. Real pieces of art are not mere copies of things in the world, nor the preservation of images. Narcissus explains:

The basic image is not of flesh and blood, it is mind. It is an image that has its home in the artist's soul. ... you have strayed unknowingly to philosophy and its secrets! ... Long before a figure becomes visible and gains reality it exists as an image in the artist's soul. This

image then, this basic image, is exactly what the philosophers call an Idea. (Hesse 1968: 269)

Having explained to Goldmund that his descriptions of art come close to philosophical concepts, Narcissus continues:

Now that you have pledged yourself to ideas and basic images, you are on mind-ground, in the world of philosophers and theologians. And you admit that at the center of the endless and meaningless death dance, of fleshly existence, there exists the creative mind. In you that mind is not that of a thinker, but that of an artist – but it is mind and it is the mind that will show you the way, out of the blurred confusion, of the world of the senses, out of the eternal see-saw between lust and despair. (Hesse 1968: 270–1)

The story then develops into a theme of homecoming. Goldmund – through the journey of finding himself – finally also finds his place in the Kingdom of God.

Introduction

This story is a brilliant image of how dance¹ is dealt with and approached within the history of the arts, but also of the encounters that dance makes in its relationship with both philosophy and theology.² On the one hand, dance does not fit into the main discourse. Partly this is because the description given of art as that which creates an empire of relics beyond the fleeting moment is basically the opposite of the passing nature of a manifestation of dance. To some extent this is because the philosophical and theological concepts described seem to value only that of the mind or that which pertains to the world of ideas. That which is sensual seems to be avoided because it is not lasting. The materiality or fleshiness of the body seems to be an echo only of lust, destruction and a blind, meaningless see-sawing. One of the most common reactions I get when tell-

ing people I am writing on dance and theology, is a perplexed look. Often the look is combined with the question ‘Isn’t dancing a sin?’ To be speaking about dance in the Western Christian tradition seems to be understood mostly as something abnormal. In a broad sense, the question this article seeks to answer is whether dance was also understood in that way in the Early Church? Or whether dance actually had a place among its practices?

The other side of the story is that dancing does not seem, at first glance, to be of much interest within the theological or philosophical disciplines – it is almost as if it is non-existent; it is not seen. In the story of Narcissus and Goldmund, there are no instances of dance to be spotlighted. Yet, interestingly, to the discerning eye, the language of dance can be detected in the way certain things are described. This language is used when the narrative voice is wanting to express something about life and death.

This is a good insight: dance seems to have the capacity to grasp things that are important but not amenable to being pinned down. Many have concluded that the theological and philosophical importance of dance to theology mainly resides in its function as a ‘symbol’, or as a metaphor for something else. What I will argue however is that if one chooses one of these much-travelled roads in one’s telling of the story of dance and theology, or dance and philosophy, one will miss the significance of dance altogether. Formulated in another way: if the descriptions we have of dancing in the Early Church are understood either in terms of the restriction of dancing in church settings, or in terms merely of metaphorical and symbolic language, we will lose sight of the formative power of movement. The main argument of this article is that if we want to understand the discussions around dancing in the Early Church we will need to have a broader perspective on the social context of dance, and we will also need to have a deeper theological and philosophical understanding of the place of dance practices in the worldview of the people living in the era of the Early Church.

In my upcoming PhD study I have developed four distinct ways in which we can re-interpret our understanding of dance, focussing on the philosophical and theological roots of dance in the Early Church period. In this article, I will give the background to those four paths. This is done with a brief overview of earlier scholarship, with which I engage within my research. I will also put forward my critique, which is

1 I want to emphasise that I treat dance and philosophy and theology as having an equal status as conversational partners within the text and that they are valued academic disciplines.

2 My focus throughout this text is on the traditions and historical heritage of the Western world.

the core of a re-examination of the tradition of dancing in the Early Church period and which I will argue is a necessary implement for the theologian who wants to engage with dance.

Sources of examples of dance

Several works have focused on describing, and giving explanations for, the lack of literature on dance in the historical tradition of both theology and philosophy in the West.³ I have written about the biblical tradition of dance history elsewhere,⁴ so I focus here mainly on the early patristic period.⁵

On one level, an inquiry into the history of dance within the Western tradition of Christianity will lead one to think that dance has never had a place within the Church. If one starts at the level of general encyclopaedic commentaries, for example in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Ashbrook et al. 2008), or *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies* (Jeffreys et al. 2008), no articles can be found on the topic of dance. Nor will we find within the specific articles on music and liturgy any mention of dancing. More specific works on liturgy, such as Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman's classic book *Life Cycles in Jewish and Christian Worship* (1996),⁶ or Larry W. Hurtado's *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (1999) also have no mention of dance as a practice within the Early Church.

Once we move into more specific works focusing on dance in religious contexts, or the traditions of Christianity in the West, such as Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona's *Dance as Religious Studies* (2001) or Margaret Fisk Taylor's *A Time to Dance: Symbolic Movement in Worship* (2009) and

- 3 The neglected position of dance within the canon of arts is well documented in Copeland and Cohen 1983. Francis Sparshott in his classic work *Off the Ground: First Steps to a Philosophical Consideration of Dance* (1988) discusses the same patterns within the philosophical tradition.
- 4 I have dealt with this in my article: 'At the origins of dance? First steps in deconstructing the sacred dance foundation' (forthcoming in 2017).
- 5 I do not pretend to be giving a complete overview of patristic literature.
- 6 In the index of the newest edition of Bradshaw's *Early Christian Worship: A Basic Introduction to Ideas and Practice* (2010), there continues to be no mention of dance.

the much-referenced E. Louis Backman's *Religious Dances: In the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (2009)⁷ we come across several obstacles. One of them is the strong dependence on W. O. E. Oesterley's book *Sacred Dance in the Ancient World* (1923)⁸ and Lillian B. Lawler's *The Dance in Ancient Greece* (1964), both of which contain problematic cultural hegemonic references in relation to native people, and are steeped with a racialised discourse that taints their epistemology. The problematic use of comparative studies and anthropological research within the history of dance, and encyclopaedic discussions such as that of Curt Sach in the *World History of Dance* (1937) has been clearly pinpointed by Joann Kealiinohomoku in her article 'An anthropologist looks at ballet as a form of ethnic dance' (in Copeland and Cohen 1983).⁹ Unfortunately that discussion has not spread widely in theological circles. Finally, many of the sources that deal with dance in a Christian context build most of their descriptions of the practices on either Backman, Oesterley, or articles and books published by George Robert Stowe Mead in the Theosophical Society's journal *The Quest Society*, founded in 1909.¹⁰ It is beyond the scope of this article to scrutinise Backman and Mead in more detail, so I will leave it with the statement that both of them lacked any academic schooling within the field of theology and were very drawn to different types of esoteric knowledge, which has clearly influenced their writings.

One of the few places where the problematic referencing to Backman, especially in relationship to his writing on the patristic period, is highlighted, is in the preface to J. G. Davies' *Liturgical Dance: An Historical, Theological and Practical Handbook* (1984). Here Davies also mentions the lack of theological enquiry into dance practices and aims at remedying the situation (p. x). Unfortunately though,

- 7 The first edition is found in Swedish: *Religiösa dansen inom kristen kyrka och folkmedicin* (Norstedt 1945)
- 8 Reprinted as late as 2002.
- 9 Also within other disciplines, such as that of history, there are works like William McNeill's *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (1995), which continue to keep up the racialised discourses and engage in little debate as to how to move away from that.
- 10 Most of his articles on dance have been compiled and republished in his book *The Sacred Dance in Christendom* (1926).



Dancing as the angels is a re-occurring theme in the Church Fathers and in later medieval art. Here Fra Angelico in 1426.

even in more recent works, such as *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts* (Burch Brown 2014) where there is an article by Anne-Marie and Tony Gaston on 'Dance as a way of being religious' or Elina Gertsman's *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance* (2010) the continuous referencing of Backman shows that this critique by Davies has clearly not been recognised.

As I see it, the problematic use of not just Backman, but Lawler, Mead and Oesterley without any problematising of their epistemological defaults is, on the one hand, a sign of how young the field of dance research is and, on the other hand, how the marginalised position the field is accustomed to results in a fear of questioning the few sources that are available. In my work I have thus put a strong emphasis on scrutinising and re-interpreting older sources and am hopefully not following their accustomed patterns of interpretation.

Once we do find sources that mention dancing as part of the practices of the Early Church, such as Andrew B. McGowan's *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (2014) or the already mentioned works by Gaston or Gertsman, they tend to place much emphasis on two non-canonical accounts. One of these is the discovery of the 'Hymn

of Christ', often also referred to as the 'Dance hymn', in the apocryphal Acts of John.¹¹ It relates the celebration of the Last Supper, where Jesus invites the disciples to dance in a circle and sing in a reciprocal, poetic, trinitarian litany (128–9). According to McGowan this practice can be compared to the foot-washing of the Gospel of John (John 13), where similarly we do not have actual accounts of how the early Christian communities practised these liturgical gestures (129). The difference is only, of course that at the Council of Nicea in 787, the Acts of John texts were condemned as heretical and to be subjected to consumption by fire, which is not the case in the story of foot-washing in John (Hennecke 1992: 156). It is not primarily the fact that the text of the Acts was condemned as heretical that raises my concerns about having it as one of the key texts when writing about dance in the Christian tradition. My concern is more around the fact that I have found no mention of the use of, or reference to, the 'Hymn of Christ' in the medieval period, or even during the Renaissance, where we otherwise see a blossoming of apocryphal themes in art. This makes me question the historical importance of this text. The text itself was 'rediscovered' and fully translated in 1898 (Hällér 2012: 197), yet interest in it within dance research seems to begin only after Mead and Backman bring it under scrutiny in 1909 and 1945 respectively. Mead, in particular, is clear about his agenda for translating the 'Dance hymn', as in his opinion Gnostic texts contain a purer revelation of theosophy than the canonised Christian gospels (Mead 1963: 9; 14–15). So even though McGowan (2014: 129) rightly reminds his readers that what at certain times has been seen as gnostic text, or condemned as gnostic thought, has in recent years come under question within the research field, I am not so convinced by the use of specifically this text as a 'canon' for dance in the Christian tradition. The description of the 'Dance hymn' does make it seem more likely that people danced as part of a religious celebration; maybe even people that would have called themselves followers of Jesus. With the help of insights from practitioners of circle dances, such as those collected by Ingegerd Hällér (2012), we might also get a glimpse of how they danced. Still, there remains quite a lot of research to be done, if one

11 For full exegetical and historical accounts see Hennecke 1992.

wants to present the pattern of the 'Dance hymn' as a key example of how liturgical dances in the era of the Early Church and later would have been more commonly practised.

The second most frequently found account is that of the Jewish ascetically and philosophically minded community referred to as the 'Therapeutae'. They are described by Philo of Alexandria in his *Contemplative Life* (McGowan 2014: 129–30). He likens them to the community of the Essenes and clearly admired them and their practices. In Mireille Hadas-Lebel's book on Philo: *Studies in Philo of Alexandria. Philo of Alexandria: A Thinker in the Jewish Diaspora* (2012) she quotes his description of their celebration of Passover:

All dressed in white, they sit at the table while young, free men offer them voluntary service; indeed, the Therapeutes, like the Essenes, do not permit slavery. 'Banquet' is really too grand a name for this meal of leavened bread, salt, water and hyssop. They then celebrate, in song and dance, their 'exodus from Egypt', which allegorically signifies their spiritual exodus, their liberation from bodily servitude. Thus, the Therapeute community lives 'by the soul alone'. They are the beloved of God because they worship 'the Self-existent who is better than the good, purer than the One and more primordial than the Monad'. (Hadas-Lebel 2012: 174–5)

In order to fully understand this scene we need to go further than McGowan does in his book and return to the whole text of the *Contemplative Life* described by Philo. Before this serene 'banquet' Philo has given three different descriptions. The first is of the wine-fuelled and violent orgies of the pagan Greeks (Winston 1981: 48–9). The second one is what he calls the Italian-style banquets, where there are displays of luxury ornaments, lavish foods, the bidding of slaves and undertones of strong sexual urges (49–51). The last feast described is that of worthy philosophers such as Socrates. Even if these banquets are recorded by Plato and others as examples of sophistication, according to Philo they still involve excessive indulgence in common and vulgar acts of love, expressions of worldly lust, such as dancing and flute-playing and, worst of all, untruthful ideas about the origins of man, love and sexuality (51–2). The banquet of the people of Moses, contrary to all

of this, is dedicated to knowledge and the contemplation of reality, as created by God. What describes their purer way of life is: they do not have slaves, women have an equal status amongst their group due to their self-appointed chaste lives, dressing in simple clothing, eating vegetarian food and drinking only water during meals; they are 'naturally' high only on the Word of God and movement. The reading of passages from the scriptures always arises out of silence, is accompanied by calm and conscious movements and ends in celebratory applause. A led engagement with the words and stories of the scriptures continues into a period of worship: worship arises from silence, moves into harmonious musical tunes that ebb and flow in choral dancing and the responses of chorus to the leader. This culminates in partaking of unleavened bread, drinking a cup of wine and jubilantly praising God's deliverance across the Red Sea – once again involving dancing and singing, led by men and women separately (52–7). The description ends accordingly:

Exceedingly beautiful are the thoughts, exceedingly beautiful are the words, and august the choristers, and the end goal of thought, words, and choristers alike is piety. Thus they continue till dawn intoxicated with this exquisite intoxication and then, not with heavy head or drowsy eyes, but more alert than when they came to the banquet, they stand with their faces and their whole body turned to the East, and behold the rising sun, with hands stretched heavenward when they pray for a joyous day, truth, and acuity of thought. And after the prayers they retire each to his own sanctuary once more to ply the trade and cultivate the field of their wonted philosophy. (Winston 1981: 57)

It is not hard to understand that the historian Eusebius, some centuries later, identified these people as Christians, an idea that prevailed throughout the Middle Ages (Winston 1981: 35–6, 313–14). Historically though, Philo, being a contemporary of Jesus, most likely would not have had much knowledge of the early Christian communities and their practices. Yet, the way he combined Hellenistic thinking with Jewish philosophy came to influence later Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, as they combined Platonic ideas with the

Christian canon (Hadas-Label 2012: 207–8). It is not only Philo who held the life of simplicity and worship, practised by the ‘Therapeutae’ in high regard, but also the fifth-century Christian writer Pseudo-Dionysius, who likens them to the monks of his time (Winston 1981: 36).¹² Clearly we have here a description of how, in the era of the Early Church being a philosopher, attaining to matters of the mind and referencing both ascetic practices and contemplation, were not removed from ritual practices that contained dance and prayerful movement that engaged the whole body. The ‘Therapeutae’ were clearly not Christian, but their lifestyle practices were admired by the Church Fathers. Philo’s writings also continued to be used as an example of a devoted life, not only during the period when the Christian communities were more closely related to the Jewish, but in later medieval times, when the Church often preferred to disassociate itself from the Jewish way of life. With the account of the ‘Therapeutae’ I thus find a stronger relationship to what might have been actual practices of Christian communities.

McGowan’s conclusion about the practice of dance in the Christian communities of the Early Church is that it was most probably part of the worship-life of certain highly educated, philosophically minded communities. Even though I do not contest the plausibility of such a claim, I do not see exactly how the examples given by McGowan of the Acts of John and the ‘Therapeutae’ combined with a couple of statements by Early Church Fathers led to such a claim.¹³ A broader perspective is needed in order to understand more fully the role of dance within the Early Church. More significantly though, the conclusion that dancing was mostly part of the practice of a small elite does not give voice to the practices of the common, ordinary masses of people. McGowan does attest to the development of more public commemorations and communal festivities, once the Christian communities were freed from the earlier threats of persecution (McGowan 2014: 131–2). Still his account does not give an explanation, or an understanding, of the

restrictions and prohibitions of dancing that we will encounter throughout the Early Church and well into the medieval period. Nor does it explain the encouragements given by several Church Fathers to participants to partake in dancing during festivals and feast days. McGowan’s account leaves dance as a practice *extraordinaire* and only for a select few.

Restrictions on dance

Let us now move into the area of prohibitions. The number of pronouncements against dancing and the frequent renewal of such condemnations are often taken as an indication that dancing was quite a common practice in various parts of the Roman Empire (Davies 1984: 22, 45). Most overviews of the practice of dance within the Early Church will give descriptions in which it is basically concluded that some Church Fathers were for dancing and others against it.¹⁴ Especially in historical overviews authors tend to build their arguments on Backman. As Davies has already pinpointed, Backman’s account of the era of the Church Fathers is full of inaccuracies: ‘his translations are questionable, his interpretations highly suspect and many of his references are wrong’ (Davies 1984: x). To show the consequences of such questionable conclusions I will present Gertsman’s referencing to Augustine’s Sermon 311.

Gertsman follows Backman’s writing, where both of them make it sound as if Cyprian reviled himself for dancing in spirit with the celebrants of his own martyr feast (Backman 2009: 33; Gertsman 2010: 56). The context for this sermon is that it was delivered by Augustine in Carthage around the time of the commemoration of the martyr Cyprian. As I understand Augustine, he condemns, just as Cyprian during his lifetime had, the common practice of having celebrations including drinking, singing improper songs and dancing on the feast days of martyrs. This attitude is also congruent with Augustine’s communication with other congregations around similar feasts (Augustine: Letters 22, 26, 29). To state, as do Backman and Gertsman, that after Augustine’s

12 Jerome even adds him into his list of Church Fathers.

13 My argument is that these descriptions are not presented ‘thickly enough’ to make dance comprehensible within a Christian setting. Partly also due to the fact that the Early Church often worked specifically at finding their identity in the world by trying to define themselves against the two social groups that are used as examples here.

14 Most often it seems to be Tertullian (d. 240) together with Ambrose (d. 397), and sometimes St Augustine (d. 430), who are portrayed as the condoners while Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) and Basileios, Bishop of Caesarea (d. 407) are seen as protectors (see Backman 2009: 18–37 and Adams and Apostolos-Cappadona 2001: 16–19).



Five dancing angels, c. 1436. Belonged to Lord Northwick (1859/08/10); then to duke of Aumale. Musée Condé.

condemnation Cyprian would have appeared in a non-bodily state at one of these martyr feasts, for his own commemoration, sounds quite unlikely. In Timo Nisula's recent translation into Finnish, *Saarnoja* (2005) the text rather reads that Augustine encourages his listeners not to dance, that foolish dancing is forbidden.

Nonetheless, what is found in both Luke 7:32 and Matthew 11:17, are statements that criticise those who do not dance. In order to interpret both of these points into a congruent whole, Augustine uses the statement about dancing as an encouragement to transform the inner person and thus be moved by the Word of God (Nisula 2005: 19). Instead of saying that Cyprian was spiritually present dancing at this feast, the texts show how Augustine is grappling with the fact that he knows very well of passages both in the Old¹⁵ and in

15 References are commonly made to David and to the Psalms.

the New Testaments¹⁶ where dance is encouraged as a way of approaching God. Yet, Augustine seems to be struggling with the way the dancing is performed at the martyr feasts and the fact that he cannot totally exclude dancing as a practice of worship, as the Word of God encourages its readers to dance.

The problem Augustine is faced with, is how to address dancing that is 'out of line'. The way he does this, is to address dance – metaphorically – as an image for the soul and its relationship to God. Nisula uses the phrase 'to dance in one's Heart' (Nisula 2005: 19) to the word of God, instead of dancing with one's limbs to the music of the world. Clearly, for Augustine any kind of physical dancing seems quite problematic, yet the question is, is this due to it being

16 Except the places already mentioned also the feast that the father gives once the son comes back is a common reference to how we shall dance as part of Christian celebrations.

a bodily act, or are there other issues at stake here? Further, Augustine's attitude to dancing in relation to these examples does not define the view of the whole Church on dance. Other Church Fathers have shown, even when they also condemn lust-fuelled celebrations revolving on improper dancing and singing improperly, that they have a more hands-on attitude to the scriptural statements on dance. For example, Ambrose in his work *Concerning Repentance* (Book II), begins with this same passage in Luke 7:34, first warning against dances that are impious, but then giving the example of David's dance as something that is to be commended. Ambrose is not interested in luxurious dances, but wants to portray the 'spiritual' theme of dancing in relation to repentance. He moves on to citing Paul, pointing out that there are certain expressive gestures and movement-patterns of the body that will help us to become receptive to grace, or able to accept repentance.

Once we extend our reading from simple statements for or against dancing and enlarge our horizon with the subtleties within the statements of a specific writer, we soon come to see that attitudes towards dancing are more complex than has been so far suggested in the field. What is needed is not only a deeper appreciation of a specific theological account – such as getting under the skin of the nuances in, for example, Augustine's writing – but also widening our horizons onto the cultural contexts. In Davies (1984) we find one such account. He scrutinises non-Christian authorities – both philosophical and political – in the Roman Empire, who are contemporaries of the Church Fathers. They also condemn lavish feasting that contains promiscuous dancing. In the light of Davies's descriptions there seem to have been no greater differences between the arguments of church authorities and the educated classes when it comes to wanting to prohibit dancing within the population (22–3). Further, Davies points out that one way for the newly formed Christian communities to differentiate themselves from both the practices of Jews and other Christian sects, is through their attitude towards not just feasts, but fasts, prayers and celebrations of different kinds. If dance was included in Roman and Jewish practices, the likelihood that the Church also would commend it diminishes (Davies 1984: 25). In all of these ways Davies puts forward a broadened viewpoint to dance practices during the Early Church period.

When Davies turns his attention towards philosophical discussions; Platonic spirituality and its relation to ascetic practices of the Early Church, his portrayal becomes strangely dualistic. Davies describes Platonic philosophy as a cause of denigrations of the body within the Church's theological thinking and the practices of asceticism as only subduing, regulating and punishing all kinds of spontaneous movement (Davies 1984: 25). Here I believe Davies has come to something of a dead end and what is needed are deeper theological insights. The relationship of ascetic practices and the body, or the place of dance in Platonic philosophy is beyond the scope of this article, so I will leave the topic for my forthcoming research and now move on to a consideration of other societal and philosophical aspects for an understanding of prohibitions of dance in the Early Church period.

New winds in research

In a recently published article 'Restricted Movement' Donatella Tronca (2016) bravely ventures under the surface of the restrictions of dance and gives these discussions a fresh perspective. Tronca refutes the common belief that the decline in dancing is due to the Church's condemnation of it as diabolic.¹⁷ Instead she pleads a case for the idea that the central concern for those who wrote about dancing at a holy time or place was related to the alignment of the body with a spiritual harmony (Tronca 2016: 53). She identifies four different categories for the prohibitions of dance ruled by the Church Fathers and church councils.

The first of these is *possession*. Here Tronca refers to Philo and the way that the Therapeutae gave themselves up in order to be filled with the Joy of God. The way Philo describes what happens when the soul is filled with a smile that makes it rejoice in dance is such that for those that do not participate in the worship, it might look very similar to the kind of delirious intoxication that were found in Bacchic wine cults (Winston 1981: 173). Philo seems to have no problem with naming the inexplicable encounter as a kind of possession, which later Latin sources render problematic (Tronca 2016: 55–6). In Tronca's argument

17 The theme of dance as diabolic is an important topic that needs its own article to be examined further. In my thesis I will argue that the rhetoric of the diabolic was developed by the Church at a later period.

the problem of a certain kind of possession is that it showed a disjointed body and thus was linked to an invasion of a foreign element into the harmony that the Church was striving for (61). Speaking about possession in this specific way is a wholly different thing from talking about diabolic possession. As I understand it what Tronca is referring to here, the phenomenon would theologically be related to being filled with the Holy Spirit – something that brings disjunction to order – yet is a sign of God's presence.

The second reason is *disorder*. Tronca makes a case for the fact that the many ambiguous statements of several Church Fathers concerning dancing are best understood not as condemnations of dancing *per se*, but being negative exclamations regarding situations of disorder, drunkenness and lust, where dancing also occurred (Tronca 2016: 58). Especially at conciliar meetings the banning of dancing seemed to be mostly a case of restoring order. According to Tronca, at least in the Gaelic Councils of Vannes (461–491) and Agde (506) as well as in Auxerre (c. 573–603) and Chalons (639–654) these prohibitions were just as much against improper singing as obscene dancing (Tronca 2016: 58–9).

The third reason is that of social control. Here Tronca is especially focused on the conciliar meetings. She alludes to later medieval practices where the games, dances and festivities of the people compete with the church services or events in the liturgical year (Tronca 2016: 59–60). By trying to restrict the dancing and by terming the practices pagan, leaders of the Church are trying to establish coherence within the body of the Church. I will leave this claim for now, as I see that it relates more to a later time period. Yet, there is one aspect of this claim that Tronca highlights that I do find important in the patristic period, and which is interlinked to her fourth statement. It is that when the Church interferes in the dancing and other physical practices of the members of its community it is not only to be seen in terms of social control, as we, in the wake of the Foucauldian tradition, would understand it; there is a worldview of a Divine Order at play (57, 61). The Church's self-image, not only mandates but also urges the Church to uphold a unity of practices within its arena of influence.

The final reason is that of immorality. One could assume that a link is being made where occasions of dancing are simultaneously situations involving drinking, gambling and lustful sexual encounters, as with the feasts Philo related to earlier. Shunning

immorality of this kind becomes a case made for the Church to issue prohibitions against both dancing and games of other kinds. For example Alessandro Arcangeli in his article 'Moral views on dance' (in Nevile 2008) puts forward arguments of this kind within the literature of prohibitions by the Church on dancing. Interestingly though, Arcangeli shows that the strong association of dancing with, for example, occasions where men and women come together for courting, actually seem to be of much later origin (284–5). The confessional books where priests are asked to question the members of their congregation about participating in dances in order to find out about other sins, are constructions of the later, medieval period (285). Together with Tronca, Arcangeli instead emphasises that what is meant by the term 'immoral dancing' is a lack of harmony (Arcangeli 2008: 284–5; Tronca 2016: 61). In order for us to understand what is at stake here we need to return to the teachings of Plato.

In the works of Plato there is a strong emphasis on the harmony and order of the universe. Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989) explains that in the worldview of the Greeks, goodness, beauty and justice were to be found in the world of order, stability and hierarchy. This place existed outside the material world of bodies, death, chaos and destruction, in the realm of ideas. Furthermore, two forces, disorder and harmony, are engaged in a ceaseless battle within the human between the soul and the body (Taylor 1989: 115–16). The cosmos with its skies, sun and the stars moving around in orderly circles was the strongest representation of the 'heavenly' and the purpose of a human was to resemble this harmony.¹⁸ Tronca explains that only those who are trained to follow the harmony can live in the 'Platonic City', while those who cannot dance are rejected by the 'Ideal State'. The connection of a harmonious body with a virtuous

18 '... the Greeks viewed the cosmos as a hierarchy of similarly ordered systems, ranging from the human soul and body, to the family and the city-state: all of these were part of the "Microcosm" or smaller order and this in turn was seen as a reflection in miniature of the "Macrocosm", the celestial system of Earth, Sun, Moon, stars, and planets. Linking the system at every level was the unifying principle of "Harmony" in Graham Pont's "Plato's Philosophy of Dance"' (Pont 2008: 269).

soul is so strong that failure to move one's body in harmony with others is seen as immoral (Tronca 2016: 54). Tronca continues by arguing that the idea of the structure of a harmonious state was something that the Christian communities adopted in their understanding of the Church. The Church hierarchy not only aspired to, but also considered the actions of the world on the basis of an equilibrium in which every element had to be coordinated into a harmonious symphony (59) Tronca concludes:

This is the reason why approval was granted to the harmonious dancing around the relics of Saint Vitus, but not to frenetic dancing, which was at times considered a manifestation of demonic possession. The presence and behaviour of disharmonious dancers interrupting the symphony were treated as immoral and depraved. (Tronca 2016: 59)

Tronca actually goes so far as to claim that condemnation by the Church of dancing as a remnant of pre-Christian tradition is not what is at stake. The fear of losing control, potentially leading to disorder, is what is actually at the core of the prohibition (Tronca 2016: 59). This also gives a fuller understanding of Davies's explanation that the Greek and Roman authorities similarly had an aversion towards certain kinds of dancing. The principle of falling out of order would have been associated with being outside of God's order. Being outside God's order was as much a concern of the state as it was of the Church. Even though Tronca does not articulate this thought further, the lack of understanding of the role that harmony plays in the cosmos during the patristic period is of vital importance. The Greek worldview has far-reaching significance for our understanding of dance prohibitions.

The relevance of social imaginaries

There is a common misconception about the idea that the Early Church would just 'highjack' earlier pagan festivals and then through time work at 'cleansing' them of 'foreign' elements. If this was true, prohibitions on dancing would be a step in a process of abolishing pagan practices. Yet what actually seems to be happening is that when church authorities make a move towards restricting dancing activities, members of the congregation oppose these direc-

tions (Tronca 2016: 61). The opposition is not simply mounted by ignoring the decisions of church councils and other legislative decrees, but also by the raising of voices saying that their worshipful practices have been approved of earlier (Quasten 1930: 243).¹⁹

Ramsay MacMullen in *Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200–400* (2009) writes that members who directly or indirectly claimed their right to continue practising dance²⁰ were not termed pagan or non-Christian by the disapproving bishops, but were named 'the simple ones' (MacMullen 2009: 109). This title would indicate that dancing, contrary to what McGowan was suggesting, was not a practice of the elite only, but a tradition of the *populace*. William T. Cavanaugh in *Migrations of the Holy: God, State and the Political Meaning of the Church* (2011) explains that when the Church started replacing Greek and Roman cults with Christian festivals, what was happening was that the Church was 'taking itself seriously' (122). What is meant by this is that what is at stake here is a much more profound, theological question of worldviews. In what Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (2007) calls the 'social imaginary'²¹ of the Early Church, there was actually a sense of 'the Kingdom of God' being a force that is actively at work, in and through our world. In Cavanaugh's explain of this he uses St Augustine's treatise on *The City of God* and writes:

19 Thanks to Frank Berger for the translation from German.

20 The same dialogue was held for practices of pilgrimage, where the authorities also interfered in order to restrict commerce and disorder (MacMullen 2009: 107–8).

21 Taylor's definition: 'I want to speak of "social imaginary"... , rather than social theory, because there are important differences between the two. There are, in fact, several differences. I speak of "imaginary" (i) because I'm talking about the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, legends, etc. But it is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.' (Taylor 2007: 171–2).

Augustine complexifies space by arguing that the church itself is a kind of public; indeed, it is the most fully public community. The city of God has to do with ordering matters that are considered public, because the city of God makes use of the same temporal goods as ends. There is no division between earthly goods and heavenly goods, secular and sacred; there is no sphere of activities that is the peculiar responsibility of the earthly city. The city of God, therefore, is not part of a larger whole, but is a public in its own right. Indeed, the city of God is the only true 'public thing,' according to Augustine. (Cavanaugh 2011: 57–8)

For the Church Fathers, the action of the Church was not an attempt to manipulate people into changing their ways, but a proclamation of a new world order, one which affected everything. They saw themselves as agents at work within a much larger reality and much more all-encompassing 'power-structures'. Also the people of the Church, not just its leaders, saw themselves as the Body of Christ, so that when they danced in harmony the whole world would be moved into more harmony. Dance practices of the populace were not concerned with worshipping other gods, but with bringing God's Kingdom on earth into force. If we choose to understand Tronca's problematisation of abolishing pagan cults within this framework, I think we are embarking on important new pathways of understanding the role of dancing within the Early Church.

Lastly I want to say that there is also a case to be made for both restrictions of pagan dance practices and, as already mentioned, possessions of a diabolic kind. Yet, what Tronca's important differentiations have put forward is the idea that once we start defining all prohibitions as the abolition of pagan practices, we lose sight of the social imaginaries that were dominant at earlier time periods. We move onto questions as to who has the power to construct history, and when it was that we now define as history was written. My premature guess is that the idea of abolishing dance as a measure of purification of the Church is a much later, modernist construction. What is clear, from this work, is that there is still much dance history within the Church to be written and many unanswered questions lie ahead of us. ■

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