

INTRODUCTION

The second half of this century has witnessed something of a quiet revolution within the Church in the way that liturgy and religious communication have accommodated the growth and development of the performing arts as a means to prayer and worship, outreach and renewal. This represents a liturgical innovation unknown in the history of the Church, at least since the Reformation.* The sixties saw a careful and modest but nevertheless very real innovation within one of the most established and traditional of church arts – music. This was followed in the seventies by a slightly more radical innovation in the form of drama as a means of coming to know and express the Christian faith. And more recently in the late seventies and early eighties, we see the most radical of innovations, that of dance as a means to worship and communication. Although, perhaps, not quite so spectacular an innovation as music and drama and by no means as acceptable and uncontroversial, dance has nevertheless begun to make itself known and felt within the Church.

Yet there were many explorations of dance as a means of religious expression long before this time. This is shown in the writings and work of the early modern dance pioneers in the United States and on the Continent, as well as in this country. A most extraordinary, if not unique, spiritual focus within dance as art and dance as education occurred during the first half of the twentieth century. In more recent

* In some aspects a return to ancient roots; liturgical dance, drama and music have always had a prominent role in Ethiopian, Egyptian and Armenian Christianity.

times there are such names as Dr. V. Bruce, the first Ph.D. in Dance in this country; Janet Randell, who established one of the early professional dance companies in religious dance, at that time called the Cedar Dance Theatre; Anne Long, who made a very significant contribution in laying the foundations for the present developments in dance; and many more to whom we owe much.

But it is, I believe, only within the last five years or so that the Christian faith has witnessed something of a sacred dance explosion corresponding to the dance explosion in society generally. While it is by no means on a scale with secular dance, there has never been as much interest in the practice and theory of religious dance as there is today. I do not know how many religious dance groups exist in this country, but there are at least three full-time professional dance companies and many amateur companies. I know also from the major religious festivals and dance workshops around the country that dance is being received most enthusiastically. More and more churches are considering using dance as a means of expression and the growing number of publications on the subject reflect this interest. But it has to be admitted that dance does not yet have the established place or widespread credibility enjoyed by music and drama. Indeed, sometimes quite the opposite, for it appears that alongside the growing interest is a corresponding fear and scepticism (see the church press!). For many Christians, dance seems to be the most difficult of the performing arts to accommodate within the liturgy. Whereas music and drama have become more or less established as legitimate and credible forms of religious expression, dance has still to prove itself and be accepted by the Church generally.

This book is written in response to this paradoxical attitude of Christians who on the one hand express a growing interest and enthusiasm for the arts in worship, and yet on the other, an equally growing fear and scepticism of dance.

It aims primarily, however, to give wholehearted encouragement, love and support to those already committed to dance and the Christian faith within the Church, edu-

cation and community, and to those who are seeking to become committed. It seeks to share, in both theoretical and practical terms, a modest, disciplined and critical exploration into the nature and conditions of religious dance. It does so through three major disciplines: scripture, education and dance as art. It does not purport to represent an all-embracing, definitive account of dance and the Christian faith, either in scriptural, educational or dance terms. Nor does it in any way seek to 'put down' or undermine the many and varied positive explorations that already exist or are still being worked out. Rather, it seeks to contribute, in as positive a way as possible, to an already existing and ongoing debate within the Church both in this country and abroad.

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