

DANCING IN CHURCH BUILDINGS

J.G. DAVIES

To many Christians the very idea of dancing in church is somewhat distasteful. They are accustomed to thinking of a church as a building set apart exclusively for worship; it is a holy place, not to be 'profaned' by 'secular' activities, amongst which dancing may be included. Such an attitude stems, often unconsciously, from a particular theological position. It rests upon three doubtful assumptions, viz. first, that for Christians the holy is that which is separated from the every day; second, that one can distinguish between the sacred and the profane and, third, that dancing belongs to the latter. In fact it can be argued that none of these three views has a sound basis in the New Testament (1). However this article is not concerned primarily with theology but with history. Its intention is simply to provide a summary account of dancing in church buildings throughout the ages in order to demonstrate that in times gone by, and indeed continuing into the present century, many Christians have seen nothing wrong in dancing in churches. This miniature history is all the more necessary because Christians – like the adherents of any religion – tend to be conservative and to appeal to tradition. It is important therefore to recognize that those who wish to dance in churches at the present day have the weight of precedent upon their side and were their efforts to be crowned with greater success they would not be making an innovation but restoring a practice which has endured for centuries.

In the previous article Mr. Eaton has shown how dancing was part and parcel of the festivals and indeed of the worship of ancient Israel. There is nothing in the New Testament which requires Christians to set their face against the practice. It is however not until the early fourth century that we have unequivocal evidence of dancing in a Christian sanctuary, but then it is well to remember that it was not until that period that the Church had its own buildings specially planned – previously it had used houses, of restricted size, for its celebrations (2).

An anonymous homily, belonging to the first half of the fourth century and delivered on the anniversary of St. Polyeuctus, contains the exhortation: 'If you will, let us celebrate in his honour our *accustomed* dances' (3). On St. Cyprian's day in the year 368, the memorial church on the Area Macrobia at Carthage was the scene of dancing to the music of zithers (4). Some decades later, Augustine, who did not favour the practice because of the wantonness of much contemporary pagan dancing, says: 'Not so very long ago the forwardness of the dancers had penetrated even into this very place' (5). Later still a constitution attributed to Childebert I, who died in 596, refers to 'dancing in the sacred buildings at Easter, Christmas and other festivals' (6).

Throughout the Middle Ages these same feast days were the occasion for dancing in cathedrals, collegiate churches and parish churches. According to Beletus, writing in the twelfth century, there was dancing on Christmas Day, St. John's Day and either on the Feast of Circumcision or at Epiphany. The deacons were the principal performers on the first day, the priests on the second, the choir boys on the third and the subdeacons on the fourth (7). Durandus provides identical information (8) and there is an almost contemporary reference to their being performed in the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris (9). The title often given to these revels was the Feast of Fools, which seems to have been observed mainly in France, sporadically in Germany and Bohemia, and in some parts of England, especially at Lincoln and Beverley. The ruling idea at the feast was the inversion of status and the burlesque performance by the inferior clergy of functions proper to the higher grades. It therefore involved much more than dancing, and included what are properly to be called games. A vivid portrayal of what was taking place is contained in a letter of 12th March 1445 addressed by the Faculty of Theology at Paris to the bishops and to the deans of the chapters of France:

Priests and clerks may be seen wearing masks and monstrous visages at the hours of the offices. They dance in the choir dressed as women, panders or minstrels. They sing wanton songs. They eat black puddings at the horns of the altar while the celebrant is saying mass. They play at dice there..... They run and leap through the church (10).

In Bohemia the revellers also wore masks and the clergy turned their garments inside out and danced with vigour (11). At Châlons-sur-Marne singing and dancing were essential features of the feast (12).

For local dances, not connected with the Feast of Fools, we have the evidence of Giraldus Cambrensis (1147-c.1223) who witnessed a dance of peasants in and around the church of St. Elined, near Brecknock; the various occupations of village life, such as ploughing and sowing,

were represented in mime (13). At Limoges, on the feast of St.Martial, the people danced in the choir to the singing of psalms (14). There was a similar dance at Aix and at Chalon-sur-Saône on Whitsunday; this latter was obviously a lengthy affair since it is stated that all the clergy should be allowed each an opportunity to sing a song (15). At Echternach in Luxembourg, an annual dance was led by the clergy; it began on the banks of the Sure, thence to the church and so along the north aisle, around the altar and back down the south aisle; it is said to have begun in the eighth century and was held on the Tuesday after Whitsunday (16). On the same day there was dancing in St.Lambert at Liège and this continued until the cathedral was destroyed in 1794 (17).

Attempts to expel dancing of all kinds from church buildings were many and persistent and largely in vain. It was condemned by councils at Avignon (1209), Rome (1231) and Cognac (1260). At Puy in 1327 the clergy were forbidden to dance on the Feast of the Circumcision. In 1435 a council at Basel pronounced against it (18). Antonio, bishop of Florence, also in the fifteenth century, was unhappy to learn that 'in the churches themselves they sometimes dance and lead carols with the women' (19). But although a Provincial council of Rheims, held at Soissons in 1546, forbade masquerades, plays, dances and buying and selling in churches, this was but another attack without effect (20). Indeed in England, at St.Edmund's Sarum, we find in 1490 payment to William Belrynger for cleaning the church 'at ye Dawnse of Powles', i.e. for a maypole dance in the nave (21).

The attitude of the clergy to all this was somewhat ambiguous. In general the bishops desired to stamp out what they regarded as a desecration, advancing, among other arguments, the thesis that it was because of dancing that John the Baptist lost his head (22). The cathedral canons and village priests, on the other hand, were prepared to tolerate it, either in order to control it or to engage in it wholeheartedly regardless of episcopal opinion; indeed after the celebration of his first mass a newly ordained priest often danced in the church with his mother (23).

After the Reformation dancing did not cease even in Protestant countries, although in view of the prevailing climate of opinion it was inevitably under attack. In 1544 a document was issued with the title: *A Supplicaion to our moste Sovereigne Lorde Kynge Henry the Eyght*. Among the items which it besought his majesty to suppress was the 'keeping of church ales, in the which with leaping, dancing and kissing, they maintain the profit of their church' (24). Besides these feastings, there was also Morris dancing, for which we may cite as examples St.Ives and St.Column Major, Cornwall, in 1595 (25). In 1621 the churchwardens of Great Marlow, Bucks., derived part of their income from the hiring out of their stock of Morris dancers' coats and bells (26). Episcopal injunctions were issued in a sustained campaign against this form of jollification in church buildings, yet in the late seventeenth century in Yorkshire country churches, on Christmas Day after service, the parishioners are reported to have danced to the singing of 'Yole! Yole!' (27).

In Europe, and particularly in Roman Catholic areas, the evidence is more plentiful. At Aix, dancing was still going on in the cloisters of St.Mary Magdalen in 1647. In St.Stephen's in the sixteenth century there was dancing too, after which the participants went to the chapel of St.Martin for food and drink (28). In 1551 the provincial court of Narbonne tried to stop dancing in the cathedral and similar synodal statutes were issued in Lyons in 1566 and 1577 (29). An attack from the Protestant side was launched by Thomas Kirchmaier, whose work was translated into English by Barnabe Googe in 1570. He scornfully recounts the Christmas Day practice of placing a wooden doll on the altar 'about which both boys and girls do dance' (30). But at Besançon, from 1582 to at least 1738, the *bergeratta* was danced in St.Mary Magdalen after nones on Easter Day in the cloisters, or, if raining, in the nave (31).

Up to the beginning of the seventeenth century there were dances in the churches of Bohemia (32) and in Paris at the same period clergy and singing-boys were to be seen dancing on Easter Day (33). In 1682 when de Menestrier published his *Des ballets anciens et modernes suivant les règles du théâtre*, he noted in his preface that he had himself witnessed dancing in numerous Parisian churches to the singing of the prose *O filii et filiae*. As late as 1749 a Basque bishop allowed male dancers and tambourine players to enter the church on Christmas Day and his permission was also extended to the festivals of the patron saints (34). At Echternach in Luxembourg the medieval dance survived into the nineteenth century (35). At the end of that century the dance known as *El Baile de Pifano* was performed in the churches of the mining districts of Chile, the men moving from cross to cross and altar to altar (36). In Abyssinian churches and in the Azores, Whitsunday dancing has not yet died out (37), while at Pola there is the *Guglia de San Paolino* on 26th June in honour of the patron saint (38). In Breton chapels of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries dancing was common (39), while on 17th May, the feast of St.Pascal Baylon, people still dance in front of his altar at Calatayud and at Manilla (40).

Of all the dances that of Los Seises at Seville is probably the most well known. Said to have been instituted by Cardinal Ximenes (1436-1517) when he restored the Mozarabic rite at Toledo and Seville, it is performed on the feasts of Corpus Christi and the Immaculate Conception, during the octaves of these two, and the three days of carnival.

At the present day the dance is re-entering church buildings, nor is this confined to any one denomination (41). Dancing in a liturgical setting is practised by the Pentecostals, as described in an article by Walter Hollenweger elsewhere in this volume. A number of liturgical dance groups, mainly Anglican, have been founded and an account of their activities is to be found in the article by Dr Jasper. The consecration festivities of the Roman Catholic cathedral in Liverpool included a danced mass, consisting of simple modern dances presenting the mass visually in choreographic images and set to Cavelli's *Missa Concertata* and to the unconventional electronics of Pierre Henry's *Mass of Christ the King*. Coventry Cathedral is the regular scene of similar dances. The Women's League of Health and Beauty have danced there, and so have both the Royal Ballet and the Black and White Minstrels. At SS Philip and James, Hodge Hill, Birmingham, dancers have played their part in the Sunday worship.

Thus a long tradition, which lasted from at least the fourth century to the nineteenth and in some places has continued uninterrupted until now, is being rediscovered to the enrichment of worship and to the glory of God. Yet it must be recognized that however keen the desire to dance before the Lord (42), there are many church buildings where this would be quite impossible, especially if, as would be appropriate in corporate worship, the congregation as a whole were to join in. It is impossible because the heavy bench-type seats, most of which were introduced in the nineteenth century under the aegis of the Camden Society, freeze the worshippers into virtual immobility. Similarly quite a number of new buildings erected over the past two decades are also unsuitable, either because they have perpetuated the fixed seating of the Gothic Revival or because they have raked the floor of the congregational space to turn it into an auditorium totally unsuited to the dance, except possibly for a small group around the altar. These impediments are not necessarily absolute – apart from the raked floor. A vast number of church buildings have been and are being re-ordered, i.e. their interiors have been replanned so that with changing ideas of worship a better setting can be provided for it (43). Most re-orderings to date have been concerned with liturgical rearrangements, but if dancing comes to be regarded as part of the liturgical celebration, then provision for this should and could also be made. Practically speaking this means the removal of heavy benches and their replacement with light stacking chairs which can be disposed in any pattern one likes in order to allow ample space for the members of the congregation to be engaged actively in dance.

REFERENCES

1. *See my Every Day God. Encountering the Holy in World and Worship*, SCM, 1973.
2. The evidence for dancing in church buildings is surveyed in my *Secular Use of Church Buildings*, SCM, 1968. This article mainly reproduces the material contained in that work. This reproduction seems necessary, despite the fact that the information is already available in print, because the subject is so closely connected with the general theme of this volume.
3. A. Aube, *Polyeucte dans l'histoire*, 1882, p.79.
4. F. van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, E.T., 1961, p.514.
5. *Sermo* 311, 5.
6. Texts of this and other statements are given in full with references by F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, IV, 1, 1920, 252f.
7. *Rationale Div. Off.*, 72, 120.
8. VII. 42.
9. E.K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, I, 1903, 276.
10. *P.L.* CCVII.1169.
11. Chambers, *op. cit.*, I, 321.
12. *Ibid.*, 305.
13. *Itinerarium Cambriae*, I, 2.
14. *Collections des meilleurs dissertations, notices et traités particuliers relatifs à l'histoire de France*, ed. C. Leber, IX, 1838, 430.
15. *Ibid. loc. cit.*
16. Chambers, *op. cit.*, I, 163.
17. J. Gougoud, 'La danse dans les églises', *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, XV, 1914, 237.
18. E. Male, *L'art religieux de la fin du moyen age en France*, 1922, 12d., 234.

19. *Summa major*, III, 2. 4. 13.
20. Leber, *op. cit.*, IX, 438.
21. J.C. Cox, *Churchwardens' Accounts*, 1913, 66.
22. G. van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, E.T., 1963, 50.
23. *Ibid.* 37.
24. *Four Supplications 1529-1553*, E.E.T.S., Extra Series, XIII, 1971, 41.
25. A. Tindal Hart, *The Man in the Pew, 1558-1660*, 1966, 75.
26. J. Nichols, *Illustrations of the Manners and Expences of Antient Times in England*, 1797, 133.
27. J. Aubrey, *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, 1686-7, ed. J. Britten, 1881, 5.
28. Leber, IX, 432.
29. *Ibid.* 438.
30. Phillip Stubbe's *Anatomy of the Abuses of England*, ed. F.J. Furnival, 1877-9, 325.
31. Leber, 426ff.
32. L. Grove, *Dancing*, 1895, 226f.
33. Chambers, I, 163.
34. Grove, 317.
35. *Notes and Queries*, 7th Series, IX, 1890, 381.
36. Grove, 118.
37. *Ibid.* 309.
38. *Ibid.* 120.
39. Gougaud, 237f.
40. *Ibid.* 243.
41. Nor, indeed, to any one county, c.f. *Religious Studies*, ed. Joan Tooke, 1972, 122-33.
42. As did David, 2 Sam. 6.22.
43. Reports on re-orderings will be found in the annual *Research Bulletins* of the Institute.

This study was originally published in 'Worship and Dance' edited by Professor the Reverend J.G. Davies MA DD, Director of the Institute for the Study of Worship and Religious Architecture of the University of Birmingham. It is reprinted here by his kind permission.