Research Article

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Beyond Metaphor: The Trinitarian Perichōrēsis and Dance

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Abstract: This article critically explores the question of how the image and metaphor of the Trinitarian divine dance could enhance the dialogue between theology and dance. Could this metaphor actually be a source of said dialogue? Does this idea of the Trinitarian dance really do justice either to the divine mystery of the Trinity or to dance itself? If we would like to go beyond metaphor, what further approach would be necessary? This article examines how different authors (e.g., C. S. Lewis, Paul S. Fiddes, and Catherine M. LaCugna) have used the image or metaphor of dance to describe the *perichōrēsis* within the Trinity as well as the creation's perichoretic participation. This article concludes the survey by pointing out that contemporary usages of the Trinitarian dance metaphor are participating in European Christianity's longstanding bias against dance, no matter how much they appear to appreciate it on the surface. The bias is related to Christianity's ambivalent attitude toward the human body, despite its foundational belief that the Word became flesh. Therefore, a call to bring the lens of dance into Christian theology should be taken as nothing less than a call to eliminate this bias against the human body itself.

Keywords: Trinity, dance, *perichōrēsis*, perichoretic participation, panentheism

1 Introduction

One bizarre trend in contemporary Christian theology and spirituality over the past few decades has been to use a metaphor of *dance* to refer to the inner life of the Trinity, especially what is expressed by the concept of *perichōrēsis*. It is bizarre not only because there is no etymological ground for it (as some are quick to point out) but also because dance is the most explicitly physical and corporeal form of art (as well as spiritual), whereas the inner life of the Trinity is the least physical and least corporeal thing possible. It is bizarre also because this apparent trend[1] does not seem to be a result of any theological engagement with dance itself, and it does not seem to have triggered any such movement in major areas of Christian theology either. Few theologians who actively use the metaphor of dance in their own argument about the Trinity appear to be interested in exploring what Christian theology could actually learn from dance itself. In a rare attempt to examine the religious experiences of dancers from a perspective of Christian theology, the Anglican theologian David Brown (1948–) critically notes this strangeness: "it is not that modern uses of the [dance] metaphor are wrong or unilluminating, but that they seem to place the cart before the horse.

1 As an example of how commonplace it has become, see the concluding chapter of Hovey, *Nietzsche and Theology*, 148: "theology surely failed Nietzsche since Christianity in fact holds that God is himself both a dance and his own music… The Trinitarian life is itself a non-instrumental dance of joy." If it can be taken for sure that the triune God is himself a dance, why did Nietzsche have to declare that "I would believe only in a god who could dance" as an implicit critique to Christianity in the first place?

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Dance as metaphor can be exciting, but it ultimately undermines itself, if it fails to follow through and offer some endorsement to its more literal counterpart."[2] After discussing some actual works of dance, Brown further comments that "little is to be gained by talking of a dance within the Trinity unless ordinary human dance is itself taken seriously."[3] Disappointingly, however, Brown himself does not clarify exactly how a theological investigation of ordinary human dance could enlighten us about the Trinitarian dance.[4] On the other hand, when scholars of dance or professional dancers refer to the dance within the Trinity, they have the tendency to take it for granted or to just happily use it without critically examining its theological validity.[5] Therefore, what seems to be lacking in this matter is a critical theological exploration of this metaphor accompanied by a serious interest in "ordinary human dance" itself.

Historically speaking, the relationship between dance and Christianity has been an extremely complex one. While it is true that dance has often been neglected, even denied, especially in European Christianity, we cannot simplify the relationship by saying that dance has always been forbidden in the Church. Thanks to the works of many church historians, at least now we know that dance has sometimes been practiced in the life of the Church.[6] Christianity's attitude toward dance has been deeply connected with its ambivalent attitude toward the human body (especially the female body). From a theological perspective, Christianity has no fundamental reason to view the body negatively, for its founding belief is in the God who became flesh. Nevertheless, ecstatic bodily movements connected with (sometimes erotic) mystical spiritual experiences have often been viewed as a temptation to sin or sexual immorality, which is one reason why dance has often been forbidden in European Christianity and why, unlike other forms of art, dance has suffered a serious shortage of interest from theologians. However, recently, a few attempts have been made to invigorate a dialogue between dance and Christianity (or Christian theology), partially motivated by an increasing emphasis on the *body/bodies* as well as by feminist and postcolonial critiques.[7]

Against such a background, this article will critically explore the question of how the image and metaphor of the Trinitarian dance could enhance the dialogue between theology and dance. Could this metaphor actually be a source of said dialogue? Does this idea of the Trinitarian dance really do justice either to the divine mystery of the Trinity or to dance itself? If we would like to go beyond metaphor, what further approach would be necessary? In order to explore these questions critically, we will start with a brief overview of the word and concept of *perichōrēsis* and then examine how some authors have contributed to circulating the image and metaphor of the Trinity as dance.

2 A brief overview of the word and concept of *perichōrēsis*

The keyword is the Greek noun *perichōrēsis* (περιχώρησις) and its verb *perichōreō* (περιχωρέω). Numerous articles have been written on this word and concept for the past decades,[8] so here we will just review its basic definition and history as far as it is related to the dance metaphor.

In the history of the usage of the word and concept in Christian theology, it was St. Gregory of Nazianzus (330–390) who first used the verb *perichōreō* theologically in the fourth century, and it was used in a Christological sense. Then, in the seventh century, St. Maximus the Confessor (580–662) further

2 Brown, *God and Grace of Body*, 89.

3 Ibid., 113.

4 Cf. Loades, "Some Straws in the Wind."

5 For example, see Félix-Jäger, *Spirit of the Arts*, 39–40.

6 For the latest example of investigations of medieval practices of dance within the Church, see Dickason, *Ringleaders of Redemption*; Leutzsch, "The Dances of the Virgin Mary;" Knäble, "Canons & Choreographies."

7 For example, see Walz, "Dance as Third Space;" Schnütgen, "Dance and Gender in Churches in Germany since the 20th Century;" Sithole, "The Sacred Dance as a Miraculous Practice in Ibandla lamaNazaretha;" Montoya, "Flesh, Body, and Embodiment."

8 For a recent book-length study on this concept, see Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood*.

developed the usage based on St. Gregory's usage. He also used the noun *perichōrēsis* theologically for the first time. The Christological usage of the word tried to express that, in Christ, the human nature is united to the divine nature without confusion in a reciprocal communication. It is generally agreed that it was St. John of Damascus (676–749) in the seventh century who extended the Christological usage of the word to the Trinitarian usage, as a consummation of the definitions which other patristic authors had developed by then. The concept of the Trinitarian *perichōrēsis* is used to refer to the inner-Trinitarian relationship expressed by Jesus himself: "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me" (John 14:11). In the words of St. John of Damascus, "We do not say that there are three gods, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but one God... They are united but not confused, and they are in one another, and this *perichōrēsis*, each in the others, is without fusion or mixture."[9]

In terms of the exact meaning of the Greek word, the noun *perichōrēsis* comes from the verb *perichōreō*, which is compounded from two words: the preposition *peri* (περί), which usually means "around" but here adds the idea of reciprocity, and the verb *chōreō* (χωρέω), which can be translated as "to cede a place to" or "to make a room for something," as this verb is directly related to the noun *chōra* (χώρα), which means "space."[10] Just as space can be perceived in two opposite ways – both as something extending or spreading and as something receiving or containing – the verb *chōreō* (χωρέω) also functions in two ways. Accordingly, the word *perichōrēsis* has both a static sense and a dynamic one: in the former sense, the word is translated as "coinherence" or "mutual indwelling," and in the latter sense, it is translated as "interpenetration." When the Greek word was later translated into Latin, two different words were used to distinguish between its static and dynamic senses: namely, *circumsessio*, from *circuminsedere*, which means "to sit around," and *circumcessio*, from *circumincedere*, which means "to move around."[11]

Now some scholars say that certain medieval authors or mystics conjured the image of divine dance in order to express this dynamic movement within the Trinity. However, if we read the cited texts closely, they are actually speaking either about the celestial dance involving creatures in heaven[12] or about the mystic's spiritual dance *with* the Triune God,[13] rather than the divine dance *within* the Trinity itself. (We have to distinguish between the idea of the Trinity *as* dance or dance *within* the Trinity and that of Christ or God *as dancer*, for which we have many historical examples.[14]) In short, the historical sources about the idea of the Trinity as dance seem to be scant.[15] Therefore, it is only in the past few decades that the usage of the Trinitarian dance metaphor has become common in theology or spirituality. Evidently, this recent phenomenon has much to do with the unprecedented revival of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity in the twentieth century (led by such major figures as Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Karl Rahner (1904–1984))

9 St John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa*, I.8. This translation is taken from Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas*, 300.

10 For a thorough examination of the meaning of the Greek word, see Stamatović, "The Meaning of Perichoresis."

11 For example, St. Bonaventure and some other medieval theologians preferred *circumcessio*, while St. Thomas Aquinas did not use either of the Latin words and instead drew on the biblical expression "being in" (*esse in*) (Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas*, 301.)

12 For example, see the text of Gertrude of Helfta, which Ellen Ross quotes as a good example where "the spiraling dynamic Trinity is brilliantly portrayed" (Ross, "Visions of Spirit," 32.): "O love, you alone know this road of life and truth. In you are carried out dear contracts with the Holy Trinity... In the love of the nuptial contract, [let me follow] where you reign and govern in the fullest majesty of your divinity, [where] in the most dulcet coupling of your living love and in the living friendship of your fiery divinity, you lead with you in the most blessed circular dance in heaven thousands upon thousands of the very brightest virgins. They are adorned, at one with you, in snowwhite robes, jubilantly singing the dulcet songs of everlasting marriage" (Gertrude of Helfta, *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 49).

13 For example, see Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 274: "The Holy Spirit, too, shares its heavenly outpouring of love, enriching the blessed and so utterly satisfying them that they sing with joy, charmingly laugh and leap with measured step, flow and float along." Quoted in Dickason, *Ringleaders of Redemption*, 157.

14 For example, see the thorough historical investigation made by Leutzsch, "Christus Als Tänzer – Stationen Eines Motivs von der Antike bis Heute."

15 For example, Paul S. Fiddes says that the active sense of the word *perichoresis* "is expressed in a metaphor that occasionally came to be applied in the Middle Ages to describe the perichoresis, the image of a divine dance" but gives no reference at all (Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 72). Some articles simply repeat these words of Fiddes without giving any further reference.

and the subsequent emergence of the so-called "relational" or "social" models of the Trinity, which often appeal to the concept of *perichōrēsis*, especially its dynamic "relational" meaning (advocated by Jürgen Moltmann (1926–), and others including feminist and liberation theologians).[16]

We also have to note that there is an etymological confusion or a play-on-words working here, as the Greek verb *perichōreō* (περιχωρέω) sounds similar to *perichoreuō* (περιχορεύω), which means "to dance around." To complicate the matter further, this play on words has not been taken as such in some cases, and some people have actually misunderstood the Greek noun *perichōrēsis* to come from the verb *perichoreuō*, thus wrongly affirming that *perichōrēsis literally* means "dance."[17] While some critique the Trinitarian dance metaphor merely on the ground of this false etymology, others still find the image of the Trinity as dance attractive and useful for their purpose and use it anyway while admitting that there is no etymological ground.

In short, the contemporary trend of using dance as a metaphor to speak of the inner life of the Trinity is a kind of modern "invention of tradition."[18] It was apparently triggered by a revival of interest in the "relational" meaning of *perichōrēsis*, motivated by a desire to update this classic doctrine with a seemingly dynamic image, and, fortunately or unfortunately, supported by an etymological misunderstanding or a play-on-words, which inspired the aesthetic imagination of some authors. Whether this "invention of tradition" is a mere passing fashion or it has really proved itself to be a worthy "tradition" is yet to be seen.

Next, we will see how some major authors who have contributed to the circulation of the idea of the Trinity as dance have actually used the metaphor.

3 C. S. Lewis and the "Great Dance"

Considering the enormous impact that the Anglican author C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) has had not only on theologians but also on non-academic Christians all over the world, we have to look at the image and metaphor of dance he used in his theological and fictional writings, even though, unlike most of the theologians who actively use the Trinitarian dance metaphor, Lewis himself did not bother with an interpretation of the technical term *perichoresis* itself. Lewis has certainly played a central role in circulating this idea of the Trinity as dance. In fact, the Baptist theologian Paul S. Fiddes (1947–), who has developed his own pastoral theology on the basis of the Trinitarian dance, suggests that Lewis might be the first author to have extended the image of cosmic dance (like the one found in Pseudo-Dionysus's treatise on the *Celestial Hierarchy*) to the Trinity.[19] In *Mere Christianity* (published in 1952, adapted from a series of BBC radio talks given in the 1940s), Lewis describes the Trinity as "a kind of dance":

> In Christianity God is not a static thing – not even a person – but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost, if you will not think me irrelevant, a kind of dance... The whole dance, or drama, or pattern of this three-Personal life is to be played out in each one of us: or (putting it the other way round) each one of us has got to enter that pattern, take his place in that dance.[20]

In a way, the image of dance that Lewis uses here for the Trinity summarizes what most of the subsequent theologians have tried to emphasize in their usage of the metaphor of dance for the Trinity – namely, the concept of the creaturely *participation* into the divine life of the Trinity.

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16 See Collins, *The Trinity*, 76–85.

17 Surprisingly, some books (including first-rate academic ones) are still written with this etymological misunderstanding. For example, see the casual mention in Dickason, *Ringleaders of Redemption*, 157; and Kearney, "Anatheism," 157.

18 Here we join Martin Leutzsch, who, having made a thorough historical investigation of the motif and metaphor of Christ as Dancer from the ancient time to the present, treats the idea of dance within the Trinity as merely a recent phenomenon. See Leutzsch, "Christ als Tänzer – Stationen Eines Motivs von der Antike bis Heute," 216–9.

19 Fiddes, "On Theology," 91.

20 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 148–50.

Despite the originality of using the image for the Trinity, it is not difficult to speculate the sources from which Lewis received this image.[21] Being an expert on medieval and Renaissance literature, Lewis was well-acquainted with the classical and medieval image of the celestial or cosmic dance.[22] In one book of his cosmic trilogy, *Perelandra* (1943), he creatively revives it as "the Great Dance." In the novel, the protagonist Elwin Ransom, confused by all the events that he has experienced since he arrived on the planet of *Perelandra*, doubting the coherence of things and fearing that they are nothing more than mere chaos and chance, receives a glimpse into the Great Dance.[23] Just before the vision, the eldila (the spiritual beings in the novel) give a long, beautiful hymn of praise to describe this mysterious Great Dance:

> The Great Dance does not wait to be perfect until the peoples of the Low Worlds are gathered into it. We speak not of when it will begin. It has begun from before always... The dance which we dance is at the centre and for the dance all things were made... Each grain is at the centre. The Dust is at the centre. The Worlds are at the centre. The beasts are at the centre. The ancient peoples are there. The race that sinned is there... the gods are there also... Where Maleldil is, there is the centre. He is in every place. Not some of Him in one place and some in another, but in each place the whole Maleldil, even in the smallness beyond thought... Each thing was made for Him. He is the centre. Because we are with Him, each of us is at the centre... There seems no plan because it is all plan: there seems no centre because it is all centre.[24]

Here is the image of cosmic dance in eternity, for which all things were made. Where God [Meledil] is, it is the *centre*, which is a centre where all created beings equally are. All indwell the centre, for God is the centre, and the centre indwells the all as well as the particular. Here is the vision of the omnipresence of the centre, which was shared by medieval theologians such as St. Bonaventure: "God is an intelligible sphere whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere."[25] Now the puzzling question is whether the Trinity itself is moving in this Great Dance or not. Obviously alluding to the Incarnation, one of the eldila's voices says, "all which is not itself the Great Dance was made in order that He might come down into it. In the Fallen World He prepared for Himself a body and was united with the Dust and made it glorious for ever. This is the end and final cause of all creating..."[26] In this case, the created world appears to be distinguished from the Dance itself, which seems to be identified as God in essence. One voice also says, "All things are by Him and for Him. He utters Himself also for His own delight and sees that He is good. He is His own begotten and what proceeds from Him is Himself."[27] This might imply that this eternal generation is part of the Dance. As Fiddes says, "one could then read all this as meaning that the patterns of the dance are the patterns of God's love, and so are the movement of the Trinity itself."[28] Fiddes also reads the cosmic dance of *Perelandra* as a deconstruction of the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian concept of the Unmoved/Unmoving Mover.[29] Although this reading seems to be important for Fiddes's own untraditional Trinitarian theology (as we will see below), whether Lewis himself had such an intention is unclear. (At least he does not seem to be deconstructing Neoplatonism any more than the major Christian theologians in history, such as the Cappadocians, St. Maximus the Confessor, and St. Thomas Aquinas, have already done.) Rather, we should appreciate the poetic veil which Lewis places between us and this mystical vision of the Great Dance, which is imagined as a vision occurring on a planet far away. This literary device sets Lewis apart from the subsequent authors who theologize the Trinitarian dance because here Lewis is not trying to make a theological argument, but simply inspiring our poetic imagination to reflect on the dynamic mystery of the Trinity.

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21 Lewis described himself as someone who "can dance no better than a centipede with wooden legs" (Lewis, *Prayer*, 94), so it seems that the appeal of dance for Lewis arose not from experiencing dance as an activity but rather from its aesthetic and imaginative impact.

22 Scholars on Lewis also point out the influence of the Inklings authors, such as Charles Williams. See Schakel, "Dance as Metaphor and Myth in Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams;" Fiddes, "Charles Williams and the Problem of Evil," 83–5.

23 Lewis, *Voyage to Venus* (*Perelandra*), 197–203.

24 Ibid., 198–202.

25 See Fiddes, "'For the Dance All Things Were Made'," 34.

26 Lewis, *Voyage to Venus* (*Perelandra*), 199.

27 Ibid., 201–2.

28 Fiddes, "On Theology," 91.

29 Fiddes, "'For the Dance All Things Were Made'," 33–49.

It is also worth noting that Lewis himself was fully aware of the surprise or even shock that such a usage of the image of dance may trigger among some of his readers. In his posthumously published book, we find him writing to his fictional friend Malcolm as follows:

> I know that my tendency to use images like play and dance for the highest things is a stumbling-block to you… I do *not* think that the life of Heaven bears any analogy to play or dance in respect of frivolity. I do think that while we are in this 'valley of tears,' cursed with labour, hemmed round with necessities, tripped up with frustrations, doomed to perpetual plannings, puzzlings, and anxieties, certain qualities that must belong to the celestial condition have no chance to get through, can project no image of themselves, except in activities which, for us here and now, are frivolous. For surely we must suppose the life of the blessed to be an end in itself, indeed The End: to be utterly spontaneous; to be the complete reconciliation of boundless freedom with order – with the most delicately adjusted, supple, intricate, and beautiful order? How can you find any image of this in the 'serious' activities either of our natural or of our (present) spiritual life? – either in our precarious and heart-broken affections or in the Way which is always, in some degree, a *via crucis*: No, Malcolm. It is only in our 'hours-off,' only in our moments of permitted festivity, that we find an analogy. Dance and game *are* frivolous, unimportant down here; for 'down here' is not their natural place. Here, they are a moment's rest from the life we were placed here to live. But in this world everything is upside down. That which, if it could be prolonged here, would be a truancy, is likest that which in a better country is the End of ends. Joy is the serious business of Heaven.[30]

This passage, which is intended as a kind of *apology* for using such apparently "frivolous" images as play and dance to talk about such "serious" matters as "the highest things," is reminiscent of *Man at Play* by Hugo Rahner (1900–1968).[31] Seizing on the concept of play as a means of explicating the freedom of the children of God, Rahner presents play as a profound way of participating in the freedom of God himself. For Rahner, dance is the exemplary form of play: "The dance is a sacral form of play because it is, first and foremost, an attempt to imitate in the form of gesture and rhythm something of that free-soaring motion which God as creative principle has imparted to the cosmos."[32] Like Rahner, Lewis too groups play and dance together as activities which have no end in themselves; hence, for him, they become the perfect metaphors for the highest things. "Dance and game are frivolous, unimportant 'down here,'" he says, "for 'down here' is not their natural place." Seen from the side of those who engage with dance *seriously* here on earth, this passage of Lewis seems to reflect well the irony of the theological usage of metaphor of dance; dance is used as a metaphor for the highest things not because dance *is* considered as important on earth but rather because it is *not*. Lewis adds, "But in this world everything is upside down," which suggests that it is not that Lewis is undermining the importance of play and dance itself after all (perhaps even the other way around), but still the irony remains.

As a matter of fact, this kind of irony has existed throughout the history of the European Christianity; dance, the most physical, corporeal, earthly form of art, has been *shelved* for heaven, the most spiritual realm, hence put out of reach for us. However, we cannot help wondering – if dance represents a heavenly activity, why don't we encourage dance more on earth as a foretaste of heaven, even within the Church? Why should we postpone dancing until the End? Most probably, the answer lies in the European Christianity's suspicion of the *body*, for Christians have often treated the physical dimension of dance as a temptation to sin, which itself is understandable, if not entirely unjustifiable. This point should be kept in mind by those who want to take dance itself seriously within the framework of Christian theology, for this (over-)spiritualization of dance is not foreign even to the theologians who actively use the Trinitarian dance metaphor.

4 Trinity as dance in feminist and liberation theology

Some feminist and liberation theologians have also found the image or metaphor of dance (as circle dance) of the Trinity attractive. For example, following Patricia Wilson-Kastner (1944–1998),[33] Catherine Mowry

30 Lewis, *Prayer*, 93–5.
31 Rahner, *Man at Play*.
32 Ibid., 87.
33 Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ*, 127.

LaCugna (1952–1997) considers "divine dance" to be an apt image for *perichōrēsis*, for it evokes the image of a free and egalitarian communion. In her words,

> Choreography suggests the partnership of movement, symmetrical but not redundant, as each dancer expresses and at the same time fulfills him/herself towards the other. In interaction and inter-course, the dancers (and the observers) experience one fluid motion of encircling, encompassing, permeating, enveloping, outstretching. There are neither leaders nor followers in the divine dance, only an eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving, giving again and receiving again... The divine dance is fully personal and interpersonal, expressing the essence and unity of God. The image of the dance forbids us to think of God a solitary.[34]

Here LaCugna appeals to the image of dance to stress the "eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving" conveyed by the concept of the Trinitarian *perichōrēsis*. LaCugna further argues that *perichōrēsis* should be more clearly located in the economy than in the inner divine life:

> 'the divine dance' is indeed an apt image of persons in communion: not for an intradivine communion but for divine life as all creatures partake and literally exist in it. Not through its own merit but through God's election from all eternity (Eph. 1:3–4), humanity has been made a partner in the divine dance. Everything comes from God, and everything returns to God, through Christ in the Spirit. This *exitus* and *reditus* is the choreography of the divine dance which takes place from all eternity and is manifest at every moment in creation. There are not two sets of communion – one among the divine persons, the other among human persons, with the latter supposed to replicate the former. The one *perichōrēsis,* the one mystery of communion includes God and humanity as beloved partners in the dance.[35]

Thus, LaCugna tries to describe the mystery of the Trinity in terms of the relationship between Creator and creation by using the metaphor of a perichoretic dance. Such a way of involving the entire creation into a perichoretic dance could invite a criticism that the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity is blurred, but it should also be understood within the context of her attempt to reconceptualize the very paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity.[36]

The Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff (1938–) also stresses the cosmic (creaturely) dimension of the *perichōrēsis*:

> Creation exists in order to welcome the Trinity into itself. The Trinity seeks to welcome creation within itself... men and women will reveal the motherly and fatherly face of God in communion, now including the Trinity with creation and creation with the Trinity. It is the feast of the redeemed; it is the heavenly dance of those set free. It is shared life of the sons and daughters in the home and homeland of the Trinity as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.[37]

In *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, Boff explicitly updates the concept of *perichōrēsis* as a form of "panentheism": "God is present in the cosmos and the cosmos is present in God. Theology in the early centuries expressed this mutual interpenetration with the concept of perichoresis. Modern theology has coined another expression: *panentheism*... that is, God in all and all in God."[38] For Boff, panentheism is expressed as a perichoretic dance involving both God and creation. In his words, "The process continues to constitute beings that are themselves open and process-oriented and hence ever producing and reproducing their existence in a dance of relationships, exchanges, communications, and unities. Indeed, God is involved in this cosmic dance, which is God's creation."[39]

On the other hand, Elizabeth A. Johnson's (1941–) way of describing the Trinity as dance is quite nuanced. She does not even use the word "dance":

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34 LaCugna, *God for Us*, 272.

35 Ibid., 274.

36 See Groppe, "Catherine Mowry LaCugna's Contribution to Trinitarian Theology": "LaCugna was convinced that the standard paradigm of the economic and immanent Trinity was fraught with a variety of limitations. She offered as an alternative framework the principle of the inseparability of theologia and oikonomia, and within this structure she developed a relational ontology of persons-in-communion." (730).

37 Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 109–10.

38 Boff, *Cry of the Poor, Cry of the Earth*, 153.

39 Ibid., 149.

> At its most basic, the symbol of the Trinity evokes a livingness in God, a dynamic coming and going with the world that points to *an inner divine circling around in unimaginable relation*. God's relatedness to the world in creating, redeeming, and renewing activity suggests to the Christian mind that God's own being is somehow similarly differentiated. Not an isolated, static, ruling monarch but a relational, dynamic tripersonal mystery of love.[40]

With the image of dance ("an inner divine circling around in unimaginable relation"), Johnson is trying to refute all monolithic and totalizing tendencies to define God. Dance represents movement, formlessness, and freedom from limiting definition.

The womanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher's work on the Trinity is permeated with the image and metaphor of dance. She discusses not only *positive* types of dance, such as the divine dance within the Trinity and creation's dance with God, but also *negative* types of dance, such as the dance of sin, woundedness, and suffering. Such brokenness of creation is to be healed through its dance with the Trinity in the power of the Spirit. Although she works with the basic etymological misunderstanding,[41] Baker-Fletcher's work is still worth mentioning because hers is rare in that she actually uses insights from real-life dance production. Thus, she tries to go beyond the dance metaphor to some extent. For her, "The dance of the Trinity is a dance of the Spirit,"[42] and "The Holy Spirit inspires the dance of God, calling all to participate in the dance of divine love, creativity, healing, justice, and renewal."[43] Specifically, she turns to the sacred dance productions of Vanessa Baker as a type of healing theological praxis. For Baker-Fletcher, Baker's work, created through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, serves as an instrument of healing for the suffering or the victims of evil and injustice. Despite her repeated usage of the metaphor of dance and her reference to real dance productions, however, the physical and bodily dimension of sacred dance is not discussed in detail. (For example, something like a theological analysis of the relation between the Holy Spirit and the dancer's body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19) would be helpful.) As a result, her call for us to dance with God remains an abstract, spiritual metaphor just like the usage by other theologians.

5 The divine dance and Paul S. Fiddes' pastoral theology

One of the theologians who has most recently played an important role in circulating the idea of the Trinity as divine (circle) dance is Paul S. Fiddes. Largely drawing from the writings of Lewis, major Trinitarian theologians such as Moltmann and Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988), and feminist and liberation theologians, Fiddes has structured his conception of *perichōrēsis* with deep pastoral concerns while using the metaphor of divine dance in a radically untraditional way.

In his historical survey of the concept of *perichōrēsis* and his historical search for the image of divine dance, he admits that "it seems that the picture of dance did not take hold on the Christian imagination as a metaphor for the inner participation or perichoresis of the Triune God," while dance was widely accepted as an image "for the participation of all created beings in God."[44] Analyzing this fact, Fiddes speculates that it is because of the Neoplatonist vision of God as the Unmoving Mover that dance has not been used as a metaphor for *perichōrēsis* in the traditional framework of theology. Therefore, with his active use of the dance metaphor for the Trinitarian *perichōrēsis*, Fiddes intentionally rejects this traditional way of thinking and tries to present a God in movement, or rather God as "an event of relationships."[45] For Fiddes, the

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40 Johnson, *She Who Is*, 202. Cf. "The threes keep circling round. Whatever the categories used, there is reflected a livingness in God; a beyond, a with and a within to the world and its history; a sense of God as from whom, by whom, and in whom all things exist, thrive, struggle toward freedom, and are gathered in." (221–2).

41 Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God*, 24–5: "Historically, the Greek Eastern Orthodox tradition speaks of 'the dance of the Trinity' or *perichoresis* – the way in which God relates dynamically within God's self as the immanent Trinity. 'Dance' names this divine, creative, compassionate 'whirlwind.'"

42 Ibid., 45.

43 Ibid., 163.

44 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 73.

45 Ibid., 36, 242.

divine Persons are first and foremost understood as *relations*, and the Triune God can be known only through *participation*. In his words,

> Identifying the divine persons as relations brings together a way of understanding the nature of *being* (ontology) with a way of *knowing* (epistemology). The being of God is understood as event and relationship, but only through an epistemology of participation; each only makes sense in the context of the other. We cannot observe, even in our mind's eye, being which is relationship; it can only be known through the mode of participation.[46]

For Fiddes, the *perichōrēsis* being imagined as divine dance is important because it fits his understanding of the divine Persons as "relations." For him, the image of the divine dance is "not so much about dancers as about the patterns of the dance itself, an interweaving of ecstatic movements."[47]

Another distinctive characteristic of Fiddes's Trinitarian pastoral theology is his boldness to include suffering and death (both the suffering and death of Christ and humanity) into the divine perichoretic dance.[48] Fiddes writes,

> The negative movement of perishing is, accordingly, a separation entering into the heart of God's own relationships. The dance of perichoresis can be disturbed; the measures can be broken; a gap can open up between the movements of the dance. The story of the cross of Jesus, with its cry of forsakenness, tells us that God has taken the most desolate kind of death into God's self in identification and empathy. But if the dance is to absorb this interruption, to weave this very brokenness into the dance and make death serve it, transforming the movement to nothingness into a movement to possibility, we have to think carefully about the nature of the breach… if the dance of perichoresis already has this gulf at its heart, we can begin to understand how God in extravagant love allows death itself to enter that space.[49]

Here Fiddes gives the idea of participation in divine dance a soteriological depth, and divine dance is working as a kind of answer to the problem of pain and suffering. Suffering and death are taken up into divine dance, and their meaning is transformed from "the movement to nothingness" into "a movement to possibility."[50] While his deep pastoral concerns and his efforts to present the Trinity as something relatable for us can be appreciated, one of the most problematic points about Fiddes's concept of the Trinitarian dance is that the divine Persons are reduced to mere relations or movements. As a result, despite all his efforts to present God as being relational to us creatures with the dynamic image of dance, God seems like something we cannot relate to in person. After all, it is not to relations or a cosmic process of movements but to the divine *Persons* that we give a praise or prayer.[51] We believe in and build a relationship with the *tri-personal* God, not a pattern of movements. Seen from the side of dance, as the divine Persons are reduced to relations, dance is also reduced to a mere pattern of movements. The dance is ironically presented as something too abstract for us to participate in, despite Fiddes's contrary intention. As we mentioned the irony surrounding the heavenly place given to dance within Christianity in the section of Lewis, we can detect the same kind of irony in Fiddes too.

Another serious problem is that this metaphor of divine dance and Fiddes's call for participation blur the distinction between divine and human relationships, falling into *panentheism*, if not *pantheism*, and blurring the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity.[52] This is also related to a lack of solid Christological focus, for, as Fiddes rejects the traditional understanding of the Trinity, he rejects the traditional understanding of Christ as the one and only mediator between humanity and divinity. Instead, Fiddes's position is what is described as a "degree Christology."[53] In his own words, "the

46 Ibid., 38.
47 Ibid., 72.
48 Ref. Collins, *The Trinity*, 84.
49 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 242–3.
50 Here we see the great influences of Moltmann, von Balthasar, and Lewis.
51 See McCall, "Response to Paul S. Fiddes," 202.
52 See Molnar, "Response to Paul S. Fiddes," 195: "Fiddes's panenehtistic description of participation represents a classic case of confusing the immanent and economic Trinity." However, like the example of LaCugna, Fiddes's approach also should be situated in his explicit attempt to reconceptualize the classical paradigm of the immanent and economic Trinity.
53 See Molnar, "Response to Paul S. Fiddes," 192–3; and McCall, "Response to Paul S. Fiddes," 197–8.

'movement' of the life of Jesus fits more exactly into the movements in God than do other finite lives, but that all life shares to some extent in this same dynamic."[54] He continues, "The relations of Jesus fit exactly into the divine dance to a degree that ours do not."[55] Unlike traditional Christian theology, Fiddes's Trinitarian thinking does not begin and end with Jesus Christ, the unique incarnate Son of God, who alone can reveal to us who God is.[56] This lack of strong Christological focus eventually leads to a lack of concreteness in Fiddes's own call for participation into the divine dance, and consequently this dynamic idea just remains an abstract metaphor (beautiful, maybe, but nothing more). To be fair to Fiddes, he does discuss "bodies," as well as the body of Christ, and says, "Meeting God through bodies, we are always dependent upon the particular body of Christ."[57] For some reason, however, he does not literally connect the physical aspect of dance (the dancing body) to participation in the divine dance. If we try to go beyond dance as a mere metaphor and seek to engage with dance theologically, dance has to be taken seriously not only as a spiritual metaphor but also as a *physical* activity.

6 Summary and critiques

We have critically examined how different authors have used the image or metaphor of dance to describe the *perichōrēsis* within the Trinity as well as creation's perichoretic participation. We can summarize some common themes and claims: that God is not a static but a dynamic and relational being, in terms of both the intra-divine relationships and God's relationships with creation; that perichoretic dance encompasses not only human beings but also the entire creation (cosmos), to the extent of *panentheism* (God is in all, and all is in God) in many cases, if not *pantheism* (God is all, and all is God); that the Trinity is to be explored as a source of responses to practical, social, ecological, and pastoral questions and concerns.

We could also distinguish between poetical and literary usages of the image/metaphor of the Trinity as dance (intended to inspire our pious imagination) and its theological usages (intended to make an argument), though sometimes there is only a thin line between the two, like in the case of Lewis. When we use any image or metaphor to refer to the mystery of the Trinity, we should do so in a way to expand our pious imagination and theological language in order to remind us of the very inexplicable and indescribable nature of the Trinity. On the other hand, we should restrict the use of any image or metaphor from referring to the mystery of the Trinity if it risks theologizing it too much. (In short, we should avoid reductionism, whether we use it or not.) In our survey, the usages of the dance image or metaphor for the Trinity by Lewis and Johnson seem to fall under the former category, while LaCugna, Boff, Baker-Fletcher, and Fiddes seem to fall under the latter. In terms of the Trinitarian theology, the problematic dimension of the Trinitarian dance metaphor can be summarized as that it risks a pantheistic worldview (despite the claim that it is only *panentheistic*) while blurring all the theologically necessary distinctions between the economic and immanent Trinity as well as between Creator and creation. This type of criticism has been made by some scholars,[58] so here we will not repeat it. We simply claim that if the theological metaphor of the Trinity as dance can be considered to undermine the mystery of the Trinity, it also undermines dance.

Our survey of the literal and theological usages of the Trinitarian dance metaphor has shown that they are still functioning in Christianity's longstanding bias against dance, no matter how much they appear to celebrate dance on the surface. This point is reflected well in Lewis's letter to Malcolm: "Dance and game *are* frivolous, unimportant down here; for 'down here' is not their natural place."[59] To put it differently, this spiritualization of dance reflects the fact that in the history of European Christianity, the physical and

54 Fiddes, "Relational Trinity," 177.
55 Ibid., 179.
56 Fiddes does not follow the Christocentrism of Lewis or von Balthasar, whom he otherwise draws a lot from.
57 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 289.
58 Cf. Molnar, "Response to Paul S. Fiddes," 191–6.
59 Lewis, *Prayer*, 94–5.

corporeal aspect of dance has most often been found problematic, avoided or often even denied, as it has been regarded mostly as a temptation to sin. This point simply becomes clearer when we contrast dance with another form of art which is often used as an image for heaven as well but has never suffered from the kind of bias forced upon dance – namely, music and singing. Like dancing, playing musical instruments and singing have often been described as part of the activities of angels in heaven and yet regarded as important "down here." The theological usage of dance as a metaphor for the Trinity is meaningless unless theologians try to overcome this historical bias against dance (and consequently against the human body itself). In this sense, David Brown has rightly said, "they seem to place the cart before the horse."[60]

This longstanding bias against dance should be challenged. Further, it should be taken as a challenge to the entire European Christianity, if we may say so, as it has so often had an ambivalent attitude toward the human body, despite its foundational belief that the Word became flesh. Therefore, a call to bring the lens of dance into Christian theology should be taken as nothing less than a call to challenge this ambivalent attitude toward the human body itself. This point is repeatedly stressed by the American dancer and Nieztschean scholar Kimerer L. LaMothe, for example. She claims that dance requires shifting "a dualistic worldview that privileges spirit over matter, male over female, and words over bodies as media of religious authority."[61] Dance could concretely remind us not only that the human body is good and beautiful but also that we actually think, feel, and act in our bodily selves, thus constantly challenging the modern cartesian dualism between body/soul(mind), matter/spirit, and consequently between nature/culture.[62] Therefore, a call to bring the lens of dance into Christian theology can also be a call for a more fully embodied and incarnational Christianity, as opposed to the increasingly "spiritualized" form of Christianity we see today. Thus, the lens of dance has the potential to bring us closer and more faithful to the mystery of the Incarnation, the core of our Christian faith.

In this respect, dance has much in common with the theology of the body proposed by John Paul II; dance actually has the potential to realize its vision concretely. Based on the bodily interpretation of Genesis 1:27 ("So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them"), the essential teaching of the theology of the body is that the human body, in its masculinity and femininity, makes visible the Triune mystery of Truth and Love.[63] The human body, as a clearly *sexed* body, has the power to express the love by which the one person becomes a gift for the other ("the spousal meaning of the body"). Such a sacramental understanding of the body is fundamentally shared by dance as well; what the dancing body communicates in this visible material world is the spiritual reality, something beyond the physical world.

Further, what dance fundamentally confronts us with is the naked reality of the *sexed* body of the dancer, among other things.[64] This point probably used to be one of the main reasons why dance was so often forbidden in the context of the Church, the fear of dance leading to sexually immoral acts, but it can also be a unique reason why dance should be treated as an important Christian form of art, especially in our contemporary society when the increasingly complex questions of sex, gender, and sexuality so often challenge the traditional Christian teachings. In particular, as some Christian women have recently been warning against "the eclipse of [biological] sex by the rise of gender,"[65] the theological discourses over sexuality and gender have been drifting away from the physical reality of the biological, *sexed* body, consequently undermining the sacramentality of the body as well as the holiness of sex. Under such a circumstance, a traditional Christian teaching may find an unexpected partner in dance because both of them fundamentally work on the concept of the human person inseparable from the physical reality of the biological, sexed body. It does not at all mean that dance endorses gender essentialism only. Rather, dance

60 Brown, *God and Grace of Body*, 89.

61 LaMothe, "'I Am the Dance'," 136. Cf. Loades, "Some Straws in the Wind," 202–5.

62 See LaMothe, *Why We Dance*.

63 John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, no. 19:4–5 (203–4).

64 Even in his attempt to explore dance as a metaphor for thought, Alain Badiou, for example, states that "the body of dance is essentially naked" (Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 66).

65 For example, see Favale, "The Eclipse of Sex by the Rise of Gender."

could help us explore the complex gender questions ranging from gender essentialism to gender fluidity, while being concretely rooted *in the physical reality of the sexed body*.

In this respect, in particular, some forms of partner dance could be relevant for the teachings of the theology of the body,[66] and consequently for the *perichōrētic* participation in the loving life of the Trinity on the basis of the physical reality of the spousal body. Partner dance like Tango Argentino, for example, shows not only the dynamics of male–female complementarity, and thus the spousal meaning of the body in an aesthetic form of movement, but also a way for spiritually intimate union with God. As some dancers phenomenologically discuss the spirituality of Tango, the dynamic movements in Tango can be compared to the relationship between God and the human being.[67] In other words, through the bodily movements of embracing, surrendering, leading, and following, we could concretely learn spiritual ways of interaction between God and us, that is, through our sexed body as a medium between the human and the divine, between the physical and the spiritual. This type of bodily concreteness is entirely missing in the abstract metaphors of circle dance associated with the Trinity seen above, as they reduce dance to mere movements and ignore the physical reality of the dancing body. If we bring in the lens of dance into the exploration of the Trinity (or other matters), however, we should start from the reality of the human body, sexed in masculinity and femininity, as the *imago dei*. Dance, because its main instrument is the body, can drive home this theological truth in a uniquely dynamic, concrete way.

Another point we would like to make is that dance taken seriously beyond a mere image or metaphor would be able to provide concrete approaches to some of the practical, social, ecological, and pastoral concerns shared in the usages of the Trinitarian dance metaphor we have seen above. Dance can do so with a concrete focus on both the corporeal *and* spiritual experiences, such as the healing of suffering[68] or disabled bodies[69] or the bodily practice of ecology,[70] just to name a few examples.

However, we propose that it should be only through a reflection on the mystery of the Incarnation (reflection on the "body" of Jesus Christ) that we can theologically connect such inputs from ordinary human dance to the doctrine of the Trinity. Therefore, speaking of the concept of *perichōrēsis*, we propose that it may instead be the neglected Christological *perichōrēsis* (as well as concepts and ideas surrounding it) that is particularly relevant as a source of fruitful dialogue between Christian theology and dance. The guiding metaphor would be *Christ as dancer*,[71] rather than the Trinity as dance. We propose that this is the way that dance could concretely contribute to the realization of the "*perichōrētic* participation." After all, this move would be far more traditional and historically grounded than the idea of the Trinity as dance. However, it would require another whole article to explore this proposition further.

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66 For an actual attempt at using ballroom dance to teach the theology of the body, see the program "Theology of Dance," for example: https://www.theologyofdance.org/about-u (accessed December 5, 2021). Also see Christopher West, a strong advocate for the theology of the body, using a metaphor of dance to describe human love as well as divine love: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyGpersorsw (accessed December 5, 2021).

67 Thiele-Petersen, *Bibliotanz*, 48; and Schnütgen, *Tanz zwischen Ästhetik und Spiritualität*, 442–50.

68 For example, see Vanessa Baker's sacred dance productions mentioned above.

69 For example, see the "physically integrated dance" performed by dancers with disabilities from the Dancing Wheels Company in Cleveland, which was founded by Mary Verdi-Fletcher, the first professional wheelchair dancer in the US.

70 For example, dance improvisation in nature could be practiced as "dance ecology." Ref. Ashley, "Improvisation and the Earth."

71 For example, see the thorough historical investigation made by Leutzsch, "Christus als Tänzer – Stationen Eines Motivs von der Antike bis Heute."

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