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THE LANGUAGE OF LITURGICAL DANCE IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Introduction

Human beings are innately driven by a need to communicate, allowing us to define, explore, and share a variety of experiences. It is through communication that we sense the essence of our humanity. This exchange of information is made possible by the acquisition of language. Language is so integral to communication and communication so integral to being human that it has been said "to be human is to use language..."[1]

Language is used to impact a variety of human experiences: mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. Spiritual occurrences are unique because they potentially involve each of the other categories. "Spiritual experience" can be understood in light of Howard Thurman's definition:

> Religious experience is interpreted to mean the conscious and direct exposure of the individual to God. Such an experience seems to the individual to be inclusive of all the meaning of his life—there is nothing that is not involved....He brings to his religious experience certain structural and ideological equipment or tools. This equipment is apt to be very determinative in how he interprets the significance not only of his religious experience but also the significance of experience itself.[2]

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[1]Thomas Pyles and John Algeo, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*, 4th ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1994), 1.

[2]Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1954), 20.

Because spiritual experiences are inclusive of all the meaning of a person's life, it is necessary to express them through a language that communicates their completeness. The language of liturgical dance has this capacity and allows communication of complex thoughts and feelings through physical expression. It is a discourse encompassing the entire being of the communicator and is, therefore, an appropriate vehicle for this expression.

In the following essay the writer discusses how liturgical dance functions as a language for the expression of spiritual experiences in African-American Christian worship. First, the similarities between primary and religious language acquisition and their impact on the development of the language of dance is explored. Second, there is an analysis of the ways cultural and religious streams have impacted the African-American Christian Church's relationship with dance. Finally, the writer reflects her journey as a liturgical dancer and her use of the language of dance to communicate spiritual experiences.

Similarities Between Primary and Religious Language Acquisition

Language can be defined as a system to express thoughts and feelings. In verbal language this is comprised of linguistic features assigned meaning and "allow mutually intelligible communication within a group of speakers."[3] Verbal language systems function as the primary means of human communication and can be distinguished by geographical and chronological origins.

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[3]Jean Berko Gleason, ed., *The Development of Language*, 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 330.

The typical means by which primary language is acquired is exposure to and imitation of linguistic models. Adults expose children to language and children imitate what they hear.[4] As the stages of language development progress, the child not only imitates sounds but associates meaning with what is being heard. Eventually these associations become more numerous and complex, and the child is able to use language to communicate in the environment.

The major stages of primary language development occur between birth and six years of age. After this period, the individual continues to acquire vocabulary, generates more complex grammatical structures, and develops cognitive skills. Cognition, the process of knowing, including perception, memory, and judgment, is a function of language.[5] Although there is continued scientific debate regarding the correlation between language development and cognitive development, it is understood that the two mediums develop in some parallel fashion.[6]

When an individual reaches the stage of cognitive development and communicates on complex levels (thinking, knowing, feeling, meaning-making), this is the process by which the reality is interpreted through the meaning system of the primary language. The complexity of this interpretation often increases in relation to the person's educational exposure and occupational requirements.

Primary language allows for a fundamental level of information exchange, but other forms of language are necessary in order to disclose more specific realms of human experience. These can be categorized in the general disciplines of

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[4]In the case of individuals with a hearing impairment this development process is altered.

[5]Victoria Neufeldt, ed., *Webster's New World Dictionary of American English,* 3d college ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 271.

[6]Gleason, *Development of Language,* 379.

the liberal arts and sciences, e.g., philosophy, music, biology, and physics. Each of these disciplines requires a certain system—a language—in order to communicate their impact as human experiences. These systems are a function of primary language as well as independent language structures. The discipline that provides us access to communication about spiritual experiences is religion.

A religion is a "comprehensive meaning system that locates all experiences of the individual and social group in a single general explanatory arrangement" referred to as a worldview.[7] The worldview is the structure that defines the ways in which religion as language allows for discourse about human interaction with the divine. While the language of religion is not the only way individuals can discuss these interactions, religions are the most socially available languages and the primary choice of most persons.[8]

The symbols, precepts, traditions, and stories of a religion's worldview are communicated through the language of that religion. This is developed in a fashion similar to primary language development. There is exposure to the language through teaching, preaching, or other forms of transmission; imitation of its use through the memorization of sacred writings, creeds, and prayers; association of meaning through learning doctrine and interpretation of sacred texts; an increase in vocabulary and conceptual structure which leads to the formulation of a worldview; and finally cognitive development in which personal experiences are interpreted through the worldview and perceptions of reality are articulated. In the language of religion this development may be referred to as

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[7]Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context,* 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997), 26.

[8]Ibid.

conversion.

Unlike primary language development, religious language development can occur at any age. In childhood exposure it is typically a result of the social environment in which the individual lives. Opportunities for the child to encounter religious language usually arise from familial or educational settings. When religious language and primary language development occur simultaneously, there may be no comprehension on the part of the child who is learning two distinct systems of communication. Under these circumstances, the particular religion's worldview is presented in a singular context, possibly as if no other worldview exists.

In the case of adults acquiring religious language because a primary language is already present, the other steps in the acquisition process are simplified. The major developmental stage happens on the cognitive level when the individual must choose whether or not life experiences are interpreted through that particular religion's worldview. In order for an individual to have a spiritual experience that person must have reached the level in religious language development where cognitive awareness occurs. The worldview, structured prior to cognitive development, impacts how spiritual experiences are interpreted. This is what Thurman references when he speaks of the structural and ideological equipment or tools that impact the interpretation of the spiritual experience.

How is this related to liturgical dance? This medium, as a language expressing spiritual experiences, is founded on religious language. Spiritual experiences occur when the individual interprets a divine encounter through the lenses of religion and uses that language to describe the incident. The individual can speak verbally about the experience, using reli-

gious language; but if the encounter has impacted the person's entire being, then verbal language falls short of conveying the occurrence. It is at this level that the development of the language of dance becomes instrumental in communication. In order to understand this progression it is necessary to comprehend dance and how it functions in various realms of human experience

Movement exists innately in nature. All life forms move in some manner. When human beings move in reaction to or in conjunction with music or rhythm, we call it dance. We note that "[d]ance emerges from the repetitive movements and patterns of life that become stylized and are given significance."[9] These progressions involve the whole body. The dancer uses arms, legs, feet, and even facial expressions to communicate. It is the significance that is given, the meaning attached to movement, that makes dance a linguistic expression.

Through the attachment of meaning to movement, dance can be used to express the universal experiences of primary language such as joy or sadness and communicate the spiritual experiences of religious language. When speaking of dance as a language for relating spiritual experiences in the Christian worldview, the term liturgical dance is used. The ability to distinguish dance as liturgical comes from the understanding of liturgy as the work of the people in service to God.[10] The dance is liturgical because it gives testimony to God's work in the life of the dancer and the dancer's work in service to God. It is a means of communicating an individ-

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[9][Robert E. Webber, ed.], Preface to "Dance, Movement, and Posture in Worship" in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 4, bk. 2, *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1994), 719.

[10]Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 23.

ual's relationship to the divine and the associated thoughts and feelings.

Dance and African-American Christianity

To more adequately illustrate how liturgical dance functions as language we can examine the development of the language of dance in the context of African-American Christian spiritual experiences. To do this it is necessary to explore three traditions which influence African-American Christianity's relationship to dance: Judeo-Christian religion, Western/Euro-American Christianity and culture, and traditional African worldviews.[11]

Dance was an integral part of Israelite worship. The Hebrew scriptures are filled with references to dance as an appropriate and often required activity of worship. The Israelites danced to celebrate their escape from Egyptian slavery (Exodus 15:20), the return of the ark (II Samuel 6:14), and in the temple worship recorded in the Psalms (Psalms 149:3; 150:4). These religious texts clearly cite dance as a part of Jewish worship. How then did Christianity, deriving from the Jewish tradition, develop a sometimes adversarial perspective of dance in worship?

The New Testament, dedicated primarily to the life and teachings of Jesus and the apostles, has significantly fewer references to dance than the Hebrew Scriptures. This, however, does not mean that dance vanished in the development of Christian worship. The absence of scriptural references may suggest that Christianity emerged during a period in Jewish culture when the Temple was no longer the center of

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[11]In addition to these three, Costen cites African-American folk religion as a major influence in African-American Christian worship.

worship. As a result, dance may have been less central in Jewish worship and, therefore, less influential. In addition, there was an attempt to distinguish the religious practices of Christianity from those of pagan religions. Nevertheless, there are early church writings that mention dance in worship. In the apocryphal writing, Acts of John, the writer describes dancing at the Last Supper. As the disciples dance in a circle around Jesus, he says, "Whoso danceth not knoweth not the way of life....Now answer thou to my dancing."[12] The historical writings of church fathers such as Augustine, Ambrose, and Chrysostom also cite dance as a part of the life of the church.

As the church grew in Western Europe, a distinction developed in the worldview between sacred and secular activities. The result was a break in the relationship of dance to Christian worship. From the fourth century through the fourteenth century European Renaissance, there are accounts of church councils taking stands against dance.[13] The accepted rituals of worship became increasingly stylized, and ultimately the Protestant church began to view dance in worship as a practice to be condemned.[14]

Although no longer accepted in sacred settings, dance flourished in the Western European secular world. Peasant and court dances were performed in their appropriate social settings without the restraints of the church. Visual artists and poets, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Dante, depicted dance as a part of the cosmic order of life. As a result, dance acquired

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[12]Walter Sorrel, *The Dance Through the Ages* [New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1967], 19.

[13]See Lincoln Kirstein, *Dance: A Short History of Classic Theatrical Dancing* [Little Rock: Revival Press, 1982], 59-60.

[14]Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance from 1619 to Today,* 2d ed. (Princeton: Princeton Book Company, 1984), 48.

greater significance as an activity to be performed and observed. Removed from the context of the sacred, it became art instead of worship.

Removing dance from the sacred arena and restricting it to an art form impacted the way dance was embraced later as a part of Euro-American Christian worship. In early twentieth-century America professional dancers began exploring the use of dance with religious themes. Pioneers in this arena as Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn and Erika Thimey brought professional dance into worship settings and performances acquired religious significance.[15] Still, the relationship between the dancer and the congregation was one of performer and audience. Margaret Fisk Taylor describes this as vicarious participation. The implication is that observers can gain spiritual value from watching the performance. Taylor quotes John Martin from his book, *Introduction to the Dance*, to support this view.

> We shall cease to be mere spectators and become participants in the movement that is presented to us and though to all outward appearances we shall be sitting quietly, we shall nevertheless be dancing synthetically with all our musculature.[16]

This concept of vicarious dance is totally foreign in the traditional African worldview. Since in the African context there is no separation between the sacred and the secular, dance is never removed from religious expression. Lerone Bennett states, "art, like religion, was a life expression. There were no

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[15]Margaret Fisk Taylor, *A Time To Dance: Symbolic Movement in Worship* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1967), 143.

[16]Taylor, *A Time To Dance*, 9; quoted in John Martin, *Introduction to the Dance* (Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1965), 53, n. 3.

art museums or opera houses in pre-white man Africa. Art and aesthetic expression were collective experiences in which all the people participated."[17]

Dance in the African context was viewed as a natural expression of life. Although religious worship was one of the primary environments for dance, Africans danced for many reasons. Dance was a means of celebrating the harvest, marriage, birth, and death. It also had at least one distinct purpose in religious expression, spirit possession.[18] The focus on this spiritual experience was a communal activity with the intent of facilitating the participation of the entire community. In his essay, Boka di Mpasi Londi describes communal participation as a function of dance.

> Dancing has a very special function in a shared action carried out by the whole assembly under the guidance of an animator. On the one hand, it bears witness to the depth of the participants' feelings. On the other hand, it symbolizes their contact with the sphere of mystery. Dancing testifies to a special density of feeling that cannot, in the normal course of events, be exteriorized in any other way. The intensity of feeling united vertically with what lies beyond this world has repercussions in the horizontal communion through the fact that it is shared with the community in dancing. The dance therefore marks the summit of communication between beings.[19]

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[17]Lerone Bennett Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 25.

[18]Leonard Lovett, "Black Holiness-Pentecostalism: Implications for Ethics and Social Transformation" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1979), 25.

[19]Boka di Mpasi Londi, "Freedom of Bodily Expression in African Liturgy," in *Symbol and Art in Worship*, ed. Luis Maldonado (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 59.

This perspective of dance as the "summit of communication between beings" was the ideology Western European Christian missionaries encountered when they began attempts to convert Africans to Christianity. They felt compelled to spread a European cultural expression of Christianity which resulted in what Brenda Eatman Aghahowa describes as "liturgical imperialism." This stripped Africans of the ability to express familiar forms of worship through the cultural restrictions of European Christianity. Quoting black Catholic scholar Cyprian Rowe, Aghahowa details the effects of being stripped of one's culture:

> This kind of psychic and cultural imperialism can be stark and bold or it can be a very subtle process. In either case, it has devastating effects on the persons whose culture is not respected and understood. Such a person loses the ability to know where truth is and even to enter into the process of arriving at truth. The whole epistemological procedure which has been part of that person's inheritance is fouled up.[20]

What occurred for these Africans was the separation of what had formerly been one. The sacred was torn from everyday life and limited to a particular day and time of expression. This separation was particularly violent in the lives of Africans kidnapped from their homeland and placed in slavery in America. They were forced to search for truth amid the devastation of slavery

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[20]Brenda Eatman Aghahowa, *Praising in Black and White: Unity and Diversity in Christian Worship* (Cleveland, OH:United Church Press, 1996), 28; quoted in Cyprian Lamar Rowe, "The Case for a Distinctive Black Culture," in *This Far by Faith*, ed. Robert W. Hovda (Washington, DC: National Office for Black Catholics and the Liturgical Conference, 1977), 21, n. 11.

without the benefit of familiar cultural and religious expression. In order to retain any semblance of their worldview and truth, Africans had to use the language of Christianity to express their religious understanding and find meaning in their situation. Drumming and dancing, integral parts of African worship, were forbidden so African slaves created new ways of moving and making rhythm. The ring shout, which in form is similar to the funeral ring dance of the Ekoi people of Nigeria, developed during this time.[21] Even in this expression, the Protestant prohibition against dance surfaced as participants in the ring were careful not to lift or cross their feet for fear of being accused of dancing.[22]

Over time the descendants of African slaves born in America began to adopt the Protestant Christian view of dance. One ex-slave said,

> You know, I really objected to Christians dancing…I see sin in dancing. I prayed to the Lord to take that off of me, and he sho' did. For a long time, you know, I could not git religion 'cause I wanted to dance, yessirree, I know what my religion done for me, it cleaned my soul for all eternity. Dancing was an injury to me, I see it now….The only real sin I committed, I was a dancer, that's all."[23]

By the early 1800s the African-American Christian leaders who had been indoctrinated into the Protestant view, began to speak out against dance. But from within the populace there were still those for whom dance was an essential part of wor-

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[21]Walter F. Pitts, *Old Ship of Zion: The Afro-Baptist Ritual in the African Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 93.

[22]Emery, *Black Dance from 1619 to Today,* 122.

[23]Ibid., 127.

ship. A.M.E. Bishop Daniel Payne is said to have been preaching when a man began a ring shout. When he spoke out against this behavior, the young man replied, "Sinner's won't get converted unless there is a ring..."[24] In spite of resistance, African religion and spirituality continued to surface within Christian expressions of worship.

Remnants of African worship can be seen most evidently in what Cheryl Sanders describes as the African-American Sanctified church. The Sanctified church, which is comprised of Holiness, Pentecostal, and Apostolic traditions, is the "segment of the black church that desperately sought restoration and spiritual revival through a recovery of latent spirituality."[25] This was often expressed through worship forms such as dance.

Sanders states that this portion of the African-American Christian church rejected the European sacred context in which movement and music are separate and the focus of power is to achieve equilibrium, balance, and control. Instead, these traditions embraced the African context in which music and movement are interlinked, and the power that arises in the sacred is for transformation and change.[26]

The ecstatic worship forms of the Sanctified church, such as shouting and speaking in tongues, are similar to the worship forms in traditional African religions that facilitated spirit possession. In the context of the Sanctified church this experience of spiritual possession is translated as being possessed by the Holy Spirit.[27] For African Americans in this tradition, shouting was and is a physical expression of a spiritual experience that divinely empowers worshipers in the midst

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[24]Ibid.

[25]Cheryl Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

[26]Ibid., 67.

[27]Ibid., 59.

of human struggle. Agahowa quotes James Cone's explanation of the significance of this experience. Cone says,

> The authentic dimension of black people's shouting is found in the joy the people experience when God's spirit visits their worship and stamps a new identity upon their personhood in contrast to their oppressed status in white society. This and this alone is what the shouting is about.[28]

Within the context of African-American Christian worship today, the three influential traditions just discussed are components in the development of liturgical dance as a language to express spiritual experiences. They are largely responsible for the ways in which this art form has been accepted or rejected within the African-American Christian context. In the traditions where liturgical dance has been accepted, the stages by which it advances into a language can be compared to the evolution of primary language and the language of religion.

Liturgical Dance and the Writer

The process by which I developed liturgical dance as a language is founded on my acquisition of English as a primary language and the expression of Christianity as a religious language. It is important to note that being exposed to English and Christianity simultaneously, the progression of these two languages happened at different stages. As a child, I was exposed to the language of Christianity in my extended family environment. I followed the process of imitation

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[28]Aghahowa, *Praising in Black and White,* 37; quoted in James H. Cone's "Sanctification, Liberation and Black Worship," *Theology Today* 35 (July 1978), 145-146, n. 33.

through the memorization of scripture and prayers and began the process of meaning-association by learning the basic doctrines and traditions of the church.

This level of development in the language of Christianity provided an awareness of my connection to God and a means of communicating that attachment. Unfortunately, upon becoming a young adult, the language of Christianity did not seem expansive enough to communicate many of my individual experiences. As a result, the cognitive process of interpreting my personal reality through the worldview of Christianity did not occur. In spite of this initial break in language development there was a lingering desire to communicate through the religious language of my childhood. Eventually, I returned to the church to explore this language and the worldview in which it was structured.

Returning to the church as an adult, I joined a Pentecostal denomination. In this environment I was exposed to vocabulary in the language of Christianity that was previously foreign. Because the Pentecostal tradition is rooted in a literal interpretation of the Bible, all of the language encountered in the biblical text is used to formulate a structured worldview with the possibility for intense interaction with good or evil. One can be filled with the Holy Spirit or be possessed by the devil, sanctified, or bound by demonic strongholds. This is the worldview through which I chose to interpret and communicate my spiritual experiences.

From this sphere I became acquainted with the scriptural references to dance in the Old Testament. From this perspective I developed an understanding that dance is an integral part of worship and an appropriate expression of human encounters with God. In my church, shouting with its "characteristic steps and motions, rhythms and syncopations," is a

common expression of the divine/human encounter.[29] Shouting is a type of dance, but my understanding of the scriptural references to dance seemed to be drawing me toward a different form of expression.

One of the key facilitators in the Pentecostal worship experience is the worship leader. It is from this individual that the congregation receives cues how to participate. In my congregation the worship leader continually encourages us to lift our hands, clap, shout, jump up and down, and do simple group choreographed movements with religious significance. In general, there are two categories: expressions of adoration to God or declarations of war directed at the devil. Although unaware at the time, the association of meaning to these movements would eventually allow me to communicate through liturgical dance.

Continuing to imitate what I was reading in scripture and hearing from the worship leader, the breath of my movements became easily distinguishable in public worship. In private worship I began to incorporate movement in prayer, meditation, and scripture recitation. The only thing that kept my movements somewhat restricted in public worship was the desire for permission to express myself through a heightened level of dance. I was looking to the worship leader to give me a sign of approval. This sanction was granted while attending worship at another church within my denomination.

The pastor of this church also functioned as the worship leader for his congregation. As such, his instructions to the congregation regarding expressions of worship were similiar to those spoken by the worship leader in my home church. But on this particular occasion he said something new. As the

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[29]Sanders, *Saints in Exile,* 61.

congregation was settling down after a period of ecstatic worship, the pastor said, "If you want God to do something for you that [God's] never done before, then you have to do something for [God] that you've never done before." Half way through that sentence I was on my feet, lifted by a force operating both inside and outside of my being, and I began dancing up and down the aisles of the church. This was not shouting. I was fully using every part of my body to move in response to and as an expression of my encounter with God. In that moment the language of liturgical dance became a fluid expression of this incarnational experience.

Even though for a period of time I was the only one dancing, the congregation was aware that this was not an experience to simply be observed. This was not a performance; it was the first part of a dialogue. I was speaking through liturgical dance about my spiritual experience. The other congregants "heard" and began to respond. Soon people all around me were expressing their own spiritual experiences through various forms of dancing and shouting. We were all involved in a conversation about our encounters with God. I had functioned in the capacity of the "animator" about which Boka di Mpasi Londi spoke, and now the community was dancing.

At the time this event occurred, I had some indication that it would not be an isolated one; but I did not yet know its meaning in the context of my life and ministry. I realized I had something to say that had never been fully communicated through preaching or teaching, but where would this need to disclose be placed within the context of public worship? I now felt free to express myself through liturgical dance, but was this just for my benefit or for the benefit of community? A few weeks after this initial experience I received the answer to these questions.

While in a worship service at my own church, I began to dance with the same freedom that I had recently experienced. Again, the majority of the congregation followed me into a communal experience. One of the exceptions was an older woman who grabbed my arm as I was dancing and whispered in my ear, "Don't let the devil use you, baby." This was evidence that even in this tradition in which dance was more accepted, there are still detractors. As I continued to dance, I heard the voice of God speak the following words, "You thought I was going to use your mouth, but I'm going to use your feet." Attempting to express the intensity of this moment and these words is not possible in writing; but when I dance, I am driven by that statement.

Conclusion

Through these experiences and my continued exploration of the language of liturgical dance movement, a dancer can communicate spiritual experiences beyond words. I believe this is true because spiritual experiences often impact individuals on levels not verbally articulated. Some people who cannot hear verbally and understand can "know" through dance. This kind of "knowing" has not been embraced by all cultures, but for our African ancestors it was a part of life. As a result, when I am asked why there seems to be a revival of liturgical dance within the African-American Church, my answer is in line with a statement by Cyprian Rowe who comments on African Americans' willingness to face the negative impact of cultural imperialism: "What [African Americans] are asserting, with their growing freedom to face these problems, is that they want to revive a manner of arriving at and perceiving truth that

is congenial to their deep cultural traditions."[30]

Continuing to study the language of Christianity and liturgical dance, I desire to give meaning to movement in order to communicate my spiritual experiences and to facilitate these for others. When I dance, I am beginning a dialogue between the worship community and myself about our experience with God. I dance and then state to the community in the words attributed to Jesus by the apocryphal writer of the Acts of John, "Now answer thou to my dancing."[31]

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[30]Aghahowa, *Praising in Black and White,* 28; quoted in Rowe, *This Far by Faith*, 21, n. 11.

[31]Sorrel, *Dance Through the Ages,* 19. Also Marilyn Daniels, *The Dance in Christianity: A History of Religious Dance Through the Ages* [Rams, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981], 18.

"...LITURGICAL DANCE FUNCTIONS AS A LANGUAGE FOR THE EXPRESSION OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP."

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