

Regular Article

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The Christological *Perichōrēsis* and Dance

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Abstract: In order to take the physical and incorporeal dimension of dance seriously in the context of Christian theology, we propose that it should be the neglected Christological *Perichōrēsis* (as well as concepts and ideas surrounding it) rather than the Trinitarian *Perichōrēsis* that is historically and traditionally relevant as a source of a dialogue between Christian theology and dance. First, we propose that the guiding metaphor should be *Christ as dancer*, historical examples of which already exist unlike with the notion of the Trinity as dance. Then, we look at St Maximus the Confessor's Christocentric cosmology. With the human being understood as a "microcosm" of body–soul(spirit) unity placed at the center of the entire creation, his Christocentric cosmology could be a potential source for enhancing a dialogue between Christian theology and dance, while helping us overcome the dualistic separation between the body and the spirit and consequently between nature and culture.

Keywords: St Maximus the Confessor, dance, *Perichōrēsis*, incarnation, microcosm

1 Introduction

In the article entitled, "Beyond Metaphor: The Trinitarian *Perichōrēsis* and Dance," we noted the strangeness of contemporary usage of the Trinitarian dance image or metaphor and critically examined how different authors use the image or metaphor of dance to describe the *perichōrēsis* within the Trinity as well as the creation's perichoretic participation. Some common themes and claims we have found are as follows: that God is not a static but a dynamic and relational being in terms of the intra-divine relationships as well as 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 concluded "Beyond Metaphor: The Trinitarian *Perichōrēsis* and Dance" by pointing out that the contemporary usages of the Trinitarian dance metaphor are still participating in the European Christianity's long-standing bias against dance, no matter how much they appear to appreciate it on the surface. We also argued that the bias is related to Christianity's ambivalent attitude toward the human body, despite its foundational belief that the Word became flesh. So, 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. 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 and soul(mind), matter and spirit, and consequently between nature and culture.¹

¹ See LaMothe, *Why We Dance*.

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We also suggested that dance has much in common with the theology of the body proposed by John Paul II in that both call for a more fully embodied and incarnational Christian faith, as opposed to the increasingly “spiritualized” form we often see today. Both dance and the theology of the body share a sacramental understanding of the human body; what the dancing body communicates in this visible material world is the spiritual reality, something beyond the physical world. We also suggested that partner dance like Tango Argentino, for example, would help us to explore the mystery of the Trinity (and eventually even to realize the perichoretic participation in the Trinity) while being grounded in the physical reality of the dancing, “spousal” body.

We also claimed that dance, when taken seriously and understood beyond metaphor, has the potential to provide concrete approaches to some of the practical, social, ecological, and pastoral concerns shared in the theological usages of the Trinitarian dance metaphor. Dance can do so with a concrete focus on both the corporeal *and* spiritual experiences, such as the healing of suffering bodies or bodily practice of ecology. However, as we have proposed at the end of Part I, it is through reflection on the mystery of the Incarnation that we could theologically connect such inputs from ordinary human dance to the exploration of the Trinitarian mystery. This is what we do below.

We propose that it should be the neglected Christological *Perichōrēsis* (as well as concepts and ideas surrounding it) rather than the Trinitarian *Perichōrēsis* that is historically and traditionally relevant as a source of a dialogue between Christian theology and dance. We also propose that the guiding metaphor should be *Christ as dancer*, for which we have some historical examples, unlike the idea of the Trinity as dance, which is more or less a modern “invention of tradition.”² Our move is theologically more valid and more traditionally oriented than applying such a physical metaphor as dance to the mystery of the Trinity at the risk of undermining both. After all, as Kathryn Tanner emphasizes, for example, “Christ is the key...to human nature, and to the sort of grace human nature was made to enjoy. But Christ is also the key...to the trinity and its significance for us.”³ A solid Christological (and even Christocentric) focus also would help us not to blur the theologically necessary distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity and not to fall into a panentheistic view of the world which could undermine divine sovereignty and freedom (and which ultimately could undermine the creatureliness and freedom of humanity as well). This point is important because some theologians who actively use the dance metaphor (such as Paul Fiddes and Leonardo Boff) show such a panentheistic tendency, and as a result, they invite critiques from traditionally oriented academic theologians.⁴ To be fair to these theologians, they themselves intentionally use the image of dance in order to challenge (at least to some extent) the so-called traditional view of God and the world, and, needless to say, such an attempt itself is theologically valid. It is rather unfortunate, however, that dance is used merely to strengthen the “newness” of certain theological viewpoints, for that could limit the theological potential of dance, which could actually represent *both* the new and the traditional. Instead, this article basically takes the position that dance, though it may provide a “new” lens, could help us remain faithful to the “tradition” in a newly drastic way (the tradition here understood as an orthodox affirmation of the material world and the body based on the holistically balanced view taken in Scripture).

Below, we begin by looking at some historical examples of Christ described as dancer. Then, we discuss a few attempts made by Christian theologians so far to make a case for dance as an important Christian art of embodiment. We will pick out the centrality of the body in dance and its close connection to the Incarnation as themes relevant for us. Then, we reflect on the Christological *Perichōrēsis*, especially the concepts and ideas developed by St Maximus the Confessor (580–662) in relation to it. With the human being understood as a microcosm of body–soul(spirit) unity placed at the center of the entire creation (cosmos), we suggest that St Maximus’s Christocentric cosmology may provide a potential source for a

² See Leutzsch, “Christus als Tänzer,” 216–9.

³ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 140.

⁴ For an exemplary critique of the concept of divine dance from a traditionally oriented point of view, see, for example, Molnar, “The Trinity and the Freedom of God.”

concrete dialogue between Christian theology and dance, while helping us to overcome the dualistic separatist tendency that has long existed in the history of European Christianity up to today. In the last analysis, this article claims that dance has the potential to bring us closer and help us be more faithful to the mystery of the Incarnation, the essential core of our Christian faith.

2 Christ as dancer

First, we propose to look at the metaphor of Christ as dancer. Unlike the idea of the Trinity as dance, it is not difficult to find examples of Christ described as the cosmic dancer in the history of European Christianity,⁵ even if this does not occur very often. For example, consider the commentary on the Song of Songs written by Hippolytus of Rome (170–230) in the third century (which may be the earliest extant Christian commentary on the Song of Songs):

21.2 O economy of new grace and of enormous mysteries! “Behold, [my] nephew arrived and came leaping” (Song 2:8.) What does the message about leaping mean? He leapt down from heaven into the womb of a virgin; he leapt from the holy belly and mounted the wood. He leapt from the cross into the underworld; he leapt up in human flesh to the world. O new resurrection! Then he leapt from earth to heaven. He [is] seated at the right hand of the Father, and from there he will leap again to the earth, that he may meet out appropriate recompense. 21.3 “Behold this is he who comes leaping upon the tops of the mountains, even to skip upon the hills.” For he does not set his foot upon those who think pridefully, but [as he is] leaping, he passes them by, not remaining (or sitting) upon them.⁶

Here, Christ’s entire salvific activities are imagined as a series of leaps, which makes Him look like a cosmic dancer, as an interpretation of “the leaping lover” of the Song of Songs 2:8 (“The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.”)

For the premodern understanding, “leaping” is like a kind of dancing.⁷ A similar idea of describing Christ’s life and mission as a dance can be seen in the medieval English carol “Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day” or its modern version “The Lord of the Dance” written by Sydney Carter in 1963 (also inspired by the Hindu God of Dance, Shiva).

Christ was also beautifully described as the cosmic choirmaster (choral dance master) by St Gregory of Nyssa (335–395):

For there was a time when the dance of the rational nature was one, and looked to the one leader of the chorus [choral dance], and, in its movement in relation to his command, interpreted the choral song in relation to the harmony exhibited thence. But later, when sin occurred, it put an end to that divine concord of the chorus, when it poured the slipperiness of deceit at the feet of the first humans who used to sing in chorus with the angelic powers and caused the fall, wherefore man was separated from connection with the angels. Because the fall put an end to this conjunction, there is the necessity of many hardships and labours by the one who has fallen, that he might again be restored, once he has prevailed against and overthrown the sentence that was imposed upon him by the fall, and has received the divine dance as a prize of his victory over the opponent.⁸

Here, St Gregory likens the whole original creation to a chorus and a dance, looking to the one choirmaster, interpreting his song in harmony. Then, sin brings about disharmony and removes human beings from this chorus. Only through Jesus Christ and after trials of purifying hardship can humanity be restored to the original chorus and the dance. So, here music and dance represent the perfect blissful relationship between the Lord and humanity.

⁵ See a thorough investigation done by Leutzsch, “Christus als Tänzer.”

⁶ Hippolytus of Rome, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 21.2–3. The translation from the Georgian manuscript (originally in Greek) is quoted from Smith, “Hippolytus’ Commentary on the Song of Songs in Social and Critical Context,” 336–7.

⁷ See Leutzsch, “Christ als Tänzer,” 140–2.

⁸ St Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptiones Psalmorum*, Part II, Chapter VI, 60. (The translation is taken from *Gregory of Nyssa’s Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, 139.)

We have further/additional examples from the medieval female mystics who describe a mystical union with Christ as a dance. See the example of Mechthild von Magdeburg (1207–1282) in the thirteenth century. In her vision, the young man (Jesus) says to her, “Young lady, my chosen ones have shown off their dancing to you. Just as artfully should you now follow their lead.”⁹ Then, Mechthild’s soul responds,

I cannot dance, Lord, unless you lead me. If you want me to leap with abandon, you must intone the song. Then I shall leap into love, from love into knowledge, from knowledge into enjoyment, and from enjoyment beyond all human sensations. There I want to remain, yet want also to circle higher still.¹⁰

Here, she describes a mystical partner-dance with Christ, He being the leader, she being the follower. Then, the vision of the dance takes on a further erotic image.

The young man speaks: “Young lady, you have done very well in this dance of praise. You shall have your way with the Son of the virgin, for you are delightfully weary. Come at noontime to the shade of the spring, into the bed of love. There in the coolness you shall refresh yourself with him.”¹¹

Then, fatigued with dancing, Mechthild’s soul enters “the secret chamber of the invisible Godhead. There she finds the bed and the abode of love prepared by God in a manner beyond what is human.”¹² Removing her clothes (“Lord, now I am a naked soul”), “He surrenders himself to her, and she surrenders herself to him.”¹³ Filled with sexual images, Mechthild’s words describe a dance leading to a spiritual intercourse with divinity. In addition to such examples of visions of a mystical dance with Christ, we even have the examples of dance enacted as a kind of spiritual exercise of *Imitatio Christi*,¹⁴ or even acts of humility or penitence,¹⁵ thanks to the recent medieval studies on dance. Therefore, the idea of Christ as dancer or a mystical dance with Christ sometimes works beyond a mere spiritual metaphor.

Last but not least, we should deal with the questions of what Jesus Himself said about dance and whether He Himself danced or not. For one thing, the verses worth discussing are Luke 6:22–23 (part of the Sermon on the Plain), where Jesus says, “Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of man! Rejoice in that day, and *leap for joy*, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets” (RSV, italics added). We have already mentioned above that a “leap” is a kind of dancing.¹⁶ Here, the Greek word for “leap for joy” is σκιρτήσατε (*skirtēsate*, from σκιρτάω [*skirtaō*]), which means “to leap (for joy), to skip, to bound.”¹⁷ Interestingly, the only other passage where this verb occurs is in Luke 1:41–44, where John the Baptist (as a baby) “leaped” in the womb of Elizabeth (the verb used twice). Furthermore, this verb σκιρτάω (*skirtaō*) is the same term that is used in one of the ancient Greek translations of the Old Testament to describe the dancing of King David in front of the ark of the Lord (2 Sam 6:16).¹⁸ All this suggests that Jesus’s frequent message for his disciples to “rejoice” can be interpreted as “rejoice to the point of leaping or dancing” (even when we are persecuted for the sake of our faith in Him).

⁹ Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 1,44. The translation is taken from *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin, 59.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 60.

¹² Ibid., 62.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Dickason, *Ringleaders of Redemption*, 163–6.

¹⁵ Ibid., 105–40.

¹⁶ Also, it has been pointed out that, in the original Aramaic language, the verb for “be glad” (RSV) in Matthew 5:12 (the parallel verse to Luke 6:23) is also associated with movement and dancing. (See Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, 158.)

¹⁷ Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance, Greek 4640: https://biblehub.com/greek/strongs_4640.htm, accessed on February 6, 2022.

¹⁸ Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, *Holy Mass on the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, August 15, 2011: https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20110815_assunzione.html, accessed on February 6, 2022.

There is also a more concrete question concerning the historical Jesus and dance: whether He (and His disciples) danced at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11). This question has been asked since the sixteenth century, when dance began to be more explicitly criticized and banned.¹⁹ In the context where dance was negatively viewed as a temptation to sin, it was argued that Jesus and His disciples did not dance at the wedding at Cana.²⁰ However, since the Scripture itself does not explicitly tell us whether Jesus or His disciples danced or not, those arguments themselves were merely made in order to justify negative presuppositions about dance, regardless of historical evidence.²¹ On the other hand, if we consider the conventional circumstance of the first-century Jewish wedding feast, which usually included seven days of food, music, dance, and celebration,²² there is no historical reason to argue that Jesus or His disciples did *not* participate in dancing. Rather, it is only natural to assume that He did (or at least He let His disciples dance).²³

In this section, we have looked at some historical examples of Christ described as dancer in order to demonstrate that at least it has more historical evidence than the modern idea of the Trinity as dance. On the other hand, we have to admit that we cannot argue from these examples themselves that dance is *necessary* for a spiritual union with God, and some of the examples may be merely metaphorical. Our purpose here is rather modest but necessary: to confirm that associations of dance with Christ have at least some historical and traditional grounding. Only then could we further propose to encourage dance in the life of the Church as a traditionally and historically grounded Christian art of embodiment. We might also then propose dance even as a form of prayer to realize “perichoretic participation,” since, theologically speaking, if we are to dance with the Triune God, we will dance through (with) Christ in the Spirit.

3 Dance as a window into the mystery of the Incarnation

Recently, even within the context of the life of the Church, dance has been increasingly practiced in different forms: dance as part of spiritual formation or meditation, dance as (bodily) prayer, and dance as part of worship or liturgy.²⁴ Dance is not practiced in the context of the life of the Church everywhere, however, and when it does draw attention today, it still seems to be more a cause of controversy (or even a scandal) than an activity to be further encouraged.²⁵ In many cases, dance in the context of the life of the Church can still be compared to the “baby thrown out with the bathwater”; that is, even “good” “innocent” forms of dance so often tend to be ignored (or even denied) because of the excess of fear of the dancing body leading to sexual sins. Nevertheless, some Christian scholars/theologians/dancers such as Douglas Adams,

¹⁹ Leutzsch, “Christ als Tanzer,” 168–73.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Leutzsch, 173: “I firmly state: The early modern question of whether Jesus danced at the wedding of Cana is an example of a trend that unfolded broadly and differently from the eighteenth century – namely, the legitimization of current practices and ideas with the help of hypotheses about the historical Jesus.” (the translation is mine)

²² Kasdan, *God’s Appointed Customs*, 52; Ingber, “Introduction.”

²³ Consider some contemporary films (e.g., the recent popular series of *The Chosen* [2017–], Season 1, Episode 5) in which Jesus is seen to be enjoying dancing with His disciples and the guests at the wedding at Cana.

²⁴ For a thorough investigation of various forms of dance practiced within the contemporary contexts of the Church, see Schnütgen, *Tanz Zwischen Ästhetik und Spiritualität*. For the latest examination of Christian approaches to professional dancing, see Wright, *Dancing to Transform*.

²⁵ For example, see the recent event of the resignation of the dean of Toledo Cathedral; in October 2021, the dean submitted his resignation, because (apparently as a result of some communication failures) he had permitted an improper use of the sacred space in a music video which included sensual dance scenes within the church. (<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/249267/dean-resigns-after-filming-of-questionable-music-video-in-toledo-cathedral>, accessed on February 6, 2022). It is also worth noting that even some apparently “innocent” practices of dance like the case of “breakdancing priests” at a youth conference sometimes cause controversy. See Fr. Damian Ference, “In Defense of Breakdancing Priests”: <https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/fellows/in-defense-of-breakdancing-priests>, accessed on February 6, 2022.

Diane Apostolos-Cappadona,²⁶ Carla de Sola,²⁷ and Martha Ann Kirk,²⁸ Sarah Savage,²⁹ Eboni Marshall Turman,³⁰ and most recently Ángel F. Méndez Montoya,³¹ among others have made contributions to the case for dance as an important Christian form of art on the basis of the embodied nature of dance.³² The works of these scholars basically suggest that dance could provide a unique “window to the Incarnation.”³³

In the words of dancer and choreographer Sarah Savage, for example, “Dance can bring back *more of ourselves* with which to know Christ, and, in a sense, can bring back to us *more of Christ*.”³⁴ Commenting on her own choreographic work on the theme of the Deposition (the taking down of the body of Jesus from the cross) paradoxically constructed against the heavenly music of Olivier Messiaen’s piece “Praise to the Immortality of Jesus” and performed by able-bodied dancers and one wheelchair user, Savage demonstrates that dance can drive home for us how God’s divinity and His eternal love for humanity are expressed in the broken body of Jesus on the Cross, which is connected with all the broken bodies in history.³⁵

Another dancer/theologian, Turman, connects the body of Jesus specifically with the broken bodies of black women in the Black Church through a particular focus on the body of the dancer. Using the distinction between *kata sarka* (“according to the flesh” or “what happens to” the flesh) and *en sarki* (“in the flesh” or “what happens in” the flesh), Turman presents the body of the dancer (as well as the bodies of black women) as instantiations of embodiment (*en sarki*) that must constantly contend with the choreographed narrations of oppression (*kata sarka*). The oppression of black women is of the body, but it is also their bodies that hold possibilities of emancipation and liberation. Thus, she presents the body of Jesus, that of the dancer, and that of black women, as a joined ethical reality.³⁶

Although dialogue between Christian theology and dance is not yet very common, dance holds various implications for Christian theology, especially when/if we recognize that experiences of the body can more deeply ground us in the mystery of the Incarnation. Dance as an art of embodiment could encourage us to assert the body to the point of awareness that *we are bodies* and consequently could help us overcome the modern dualistic thinking between body and soul, matter and spirit, and consequently nature and culture. We take a generally accepted hypothesis that the Christian suspicion against dancing goes together with its long-standing hostility toward the body,³⁷ which apparently has existed since the early times,³⁸ *despite* the essential teachings of Christianity that God took on flesh and that the body itself is something good, even holy as “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19). Following this reasoning, for one thing, dance can be advocated for as a medium to help Christianity maintain a healthy, balanced relationship with the body (and eventually with the whole creation through our body, because it is part of the created material world).

Such a strong focus on the body in relation to the mystery of the Incarnation has been almost entirely missing in contemporary theological usages of the dance metaphor for the Trinitarian *Perichōrēsis*, which was the topic of Part I of this article. In order to fill in this significant lacuna, we propose looking at the Christological *Perichōrēsis* (which, in fact, historically and theologically, precedes the Trinitarian one, though the former has been relatively neglected). Inspired by the insights of those scholars/theologians/dancers mentioned above, we now turn our attention to the Christological *Perichōrēsis* to see whether it

²⁶ Adams and Apostolos-Cappadona, *Dance as Religious Studies*.

²⁷ De Sola, “...And the Word Became Dance.”

²⁸ Kirk, *Dancing with Creation*.

²⁹ Savage, “Through Dance.”

³⁰ Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*.

³¹ Montoya, “Flesh, Body, and Embodiment.”

³² See Illman and Smith, *Theology and the Arts*, 151.

³³ Savage, “Through Dance,” 77.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 78–80.

³⁶ Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*.

³⁷ See Montoya, “Flesh, Body, and Embodiment,” 301–2.

³⁸ See Turner, “The Body in Western Society;” Ware, “‘My Helper and My Enemy’.”

may provide a better source for further enhancing a concrete collaboration between Christian theology and dance.

4 Christological *Perichōrēsis* and St Maximus the Confessor's Christocentric cosmology

It was St Gregory of Nazianzus (330–390) who first used the verb *perichōreō* (περιχωρέω) theologically, and it was used in a Christological sense. In a famous passage in *Epistle 101*, which discusses how divinity and humanity are united in Christ, St Gregory writes, “Just as the natures are mixed, so also the names pass reciprocally (περιχωρούσων) into each other by the principle of this coalescence.”³⁹ Here, the verb *perichōreō* indicates the interchange of names/titles and attributes between the two natures, which later came to be called the *communicatio idiomatum* (communication of attributes). Even though the verb is not applied directly to the two natures of Christ, “this interchange of names is grounded ontologically in the mutual interpenetration of natures.”⁴⁰

Then, St Maximus the Confessor (580–662) further extended the word to refer to the interpenetration between the two natures in Christ as well as the energies of the incarnate Logos in deified human beings as well as in the transfigured creation.⁴¹ It was St Maximus who transformed the word into an “almost technical Christological term.”⁴² In the words of St Maximus,

“And in a manner beyond man, He does the things of man,” according to a supreme union involving no change, showing that the human energy is conjoined with the divine power, since the human nature, united without confusion to the divine nature, is completely penetrated [*perikechōrēke* (περικεχώρηκε)] by it, with absolutely no part of it remaining separate from the divinity to which it was united, having been assumed according to hypostasis.⁴³

There has been a debate over whether what is described here can be considered as an “*inter*-penetration” between the human nature and the divine nature, as it is typically assumed that the human is not capable of interpenetrating the divine; it should be a one-way street.⁴⁴ On the other hand, there is a view that St Maximus here simply presupposes the deification of the humanity of Christ as it is penetrated by the divine nature.⁴⁵ The latter view sounds more convincing, if we consider St Maximus’s entire cosmology and his understanding of ultimate participation in the divine (as can be seen below).⁴⁶

St Maximus most often employs the term *perichōrēsis* (περιχώρησις) for the hypostatic union of Christ, but he also uses the word in a soteriological sense, as follows:

The soul’s salvation is the consummation of faith. This consummation is the revelation of what has been believed. Revelation is the inexpressible interpenetration [*perichōrēsis* (περιχώρησις)] of the believer with (or toward, *προς*) the object of belief and takes place according to each believer’s degree of faith. Through that interpenetration the believer finally returns to his origin. The return is the fulfillment of desire. Fulfillment of desire is ever-active repose in the object of desire. Such repose is eternal uninterrupted enjoyment of this object. Enjoyment of this kind entails participation in supranatural divine realities. This participation consists in the participant becoming like that in which he participates. Such likeness involves, so far as this is possible, an identity with respect to energy between the

³⁹ St Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle 101*, 87C. The translation taken from Harrison, “Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers,” 55.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 56–7.

⁴² Thunberg, “‘Circumincension’ Once More,” 365.

⁴³ St Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum 5*, 1053B. The translation is taken from Constas ed. and trans., *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers, the Ambigua*, volume I, 45.

⁴⁴ See Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 292–3.

⁴⁵ See Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, 425.

⁴⁶ Cf. Harrison, “Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers,” 57–9.

participant and that in which he participates by virtue of the likeness. This identity with respect to energy constitutes the deification of the saints.⁴⁷

Another different edition has the *περιχώρησις* here translated as the “relation of mutual love.”⁴⁸

Here, we can see that the *perichōrēsis* means that the believer becomes united with the energy of God. It is described here that the believer participates in the divine, according to their degree of faith, so we can see here that the *perichōrēsis* means exactly the human penetrating the divine from below, as it were.

Furthermore, for St Maximus, the human being is considered as a microcosm (a miniature image of the cosmos), which itself is no new idea, as it was a very common view dating back to Greek philosophy (or earlier). The human being is a body–soul composite, so, as a body–soul unity, the human being bridges the material and the immaterial, the intelligible and the sensible. St Maximus’s non-dualistic position can be seen in the following words, for example:

For after the death of the body, the soul is not called “soul” in an unqualified way, but the soul of man, indeed the soul of a particular human being, for even after the body, it possesses, as its own form, the whole human being, which is predicated of it by virtue of its relation as a part to the whole. The same holds in the case of the body...it is inconceivable to speak of (and impossible to find) the soul and body except in relation to each other.⁴⁹

Even after death, which is usually considered to be the soul’s separation from the body, the dead body and the intelligible soul constitute only the parts of a whole; the wholeness of the human person continues to be thought of as the body–soul unity. (Therefore, for St Maximus, the human being only reaches perfection in the resurrection of the flesh.)

Being a microcosm is also a vocation and duty for the human being as a mediator between God and creation (cosmos). In St Maximus’s own words,

This is why man was introduced last among being – like a kind of natural bond mediating between the universal extremes through his parts, and unifying through himself things that by nature are separated from each other by a great distance – so that, by making of his own division a beginning of the unity which gathers up all things to God their Author, and proceeding by order and rank through the mean terms, he might reach the limit of the sublime ascent that comes about through the union of all things in God.⁵⁰

The human being is appointed by God to bring the cosmos into union with God. St Maximus further speaks of the final stage of cosmic synthesis: deification of humanity.

And finally, in addition to all this, had man united created nature with the uncreated through love..., he would have shown them to be one and the same by the state of grace, the whole man wholly pervading [*perichōrēsas* (*περιχώρησας*)] the whole God, and becoming everything that God is, without, however, identity in essence, and receiving the whole of God instead of himself, and obtaining as a kind of prize for his ascent to God the absolutely unique God, who is the goal of the motion of things that are carried along to Him [...].⁵¹

Here, we see St Maximus boldly speaking of the human being’s *perichoretic* participation in God’s divine attributes (God and humans, joined by love, would inter-penetrate one another in perichoretic union). On the other hand, he stays focused on Christ, the Incarnate Son of God:

This was why ‘the natures were innovated,’ so that, in a paradox beyond nature, the One who is completely immobile according to His nature moved immovably, so to speak, around that which by nature is moved, ‘and God became man’ in order to save lost man, and... united through Himself the natural fissures running through the general nature of the

⁴⁷ St Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestiones Ad Thalassium*, 59, PG90, 608C–609B. Quoted by Harrison, “Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers,” 57–8.

⁴⁸ St Maximus the Confessor, *The Responses to Thalassios*, 417.

⁴⁹ Ibid., *Ambiguum* 7, 1101B. The translation is taken from *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers, the Ambigua*, volume I, 139.

⁵⁰ Ibid., *Ambiguum* 41, 1305B–C. The translation is taken from *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers, the Ambigua*, volume II, 105–7.

⁵¹ Ibid., *Ambiguum* 41, 1308B. The translation is taken from *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers, the Ambigua*, volume II, 109.

universe...to fulfil the great purpose of God the Father, *recapitulating all things, both in heaven and earth, in Himself, in whom they also had been created.*⁵²

These words of St Maximus paraphrase Ephesians 1:9–10 (“... according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth”), which underlines that Christ’s redemptive work through the Incarnation has effects on the entire creation, while being done principally for the sake of human beings. Here, we can see that St Maximus is working with a neoplatonic framework, but still offering a Christian alternative, hence presenting God as “the One who is completely immobile according to His nature,” but who “moved immovably... around that which by nature is moved,” at no risk of falling into panentheism or pantheism.

We can contrast this view to the panentheistic view of the cosmos taken by some theologians who advocated for the “cosmic dance” involving the Trinity itself.⁵³ As Hans Urs von Balthasar observes in his interpretation of St Maximus, with his Christocentrically synthesized cosmology, “Maximus has built the Alexandrian doctrine of divinization into his own theory of synthesis by removing its Neoplatonic and spiritualist sting. In the form in which he presents it, there is not the slightest danger of pantheism.”⁵⁴ God, the human being, and creation are distinguished but synthesized in a dynamic circular image (what we could also call the “cosmic dance”); this image is totally free from the risk of pantheism because of the solid Christological focus. At the same time, in parallel to Christ, the human being as a microcosm and as a unity of body–soul is also placed at the center of the cosmos, given the mission and vocation by the Triune God to bring creation into the divine life, thus realizing the perichoretic participation.

5 The implications of the Christocentric cosmology for dance

What implications does such a Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus hold for our exploration of dance as a Christian art of embodiment? We will discuss below a few significant points by mainly using the concept of “ecokinetic” knowledge while referring to a concrete example.

5.1 Dance and the significance of “ecokinetic” knowledge

Recently, the Christocentric cosmology of St Maximus has been increasingly popular as a source of Christian ecology or eco-theology.⁵⁵ This prompts no wonder, for with the human being understood as a body–soul unity placed at the center of the cosmos as a microcosmic mediator between God and creation, it does seem to provide a framework to condemn the attitudes that perpetuate the contemporary environmental crisis and to offer solutions for it while remaining deeply rooted in the mystery of the Incarnation, the core of the Christian faith.

More important for our purpose, it also presents a cosmic framework suitable for a fruitful dialogue between Christian theology and dance. St Maximus’s cosmology seems to fit well what scholars of dance or dancers say about dance; they also often work with the idea of the human being (or the human body) as a microcosm and point out the deep connection between dance and nature (earth). For instance, Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950), a Dutch pioneer in the realm of theological aesthetics, discusses dance as the

⁵² Ibid., *Ambiguum* 41, 1308C–D. The translation is taken from *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers, the Ambigua*, volume II, 109–11.

⁵³ See Part I of this article (“Beyond Metaphor: The Trinitarian Perichōrēsis and Dance”).

⁵⁴ Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 274–5.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Bordeianu, “Maximus and Ecology;” Theokritoff, “The Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor.”

most *primitive* form of art. The following definition of dance presented by him describes well the rhythmic harmony with nature that is inherent in dance:

In the dance, man discovers the rhythm of the motion that surrounds him, just as it surrounds another man or an animal or a star. He discovers the rhythm and invents a response, but it is a response that has its own forms, that is stylized and ordered...He places his own movements and those of the creatures which surround him into an ordered whole.⁵⁶

Here, Van der Leeuw describes the process in which a human being discovers the rhythm of movement in nature, responds to it with their own rhythmic movement, and finally becomes one as “an ordered whole” with their natural surroundings. Such a fundamental connection between dance and nature/earth has been pointed out by other dancers and scholars as well. For example, an American philosopher of dance and a dancer herself, Kimerer LaMothe, who explores dance as a philosophy of “bodily becoming,”⁵⁷ also works with the basic idea of the human being as a microcosm (with a stronger stress on the “bodily self”): “Every human bodily self is a microcosm of the whole, and a macrocosm of the smallest movements made.”⁵⁸ She stresses how dance leads us to find “earth within,”⁵⁹ as well as how we need to “dance the earth to life within me [us] as a guide to letting others live,” others here meaning other human beings as well as all kinds of creatures.⁶⁰ She goes as far to say that “Religion, without dance, loses its moral compass,”⁶¹ because “dancing remains the practice by which humans acquire the eckinetic knowledge needed in order to participate consciously in creating culture that honors, abides by, and upholds the movement of earth in us and around us.”⁶²

Such a claim might shock the reader of our age and might be taken as an exaggeration, but it would not have been surprising for the ancient mind, because the microcosmic view of the human being and the attempt to argue for the significance of dance based on it can actually be traced back to Greek thought including Plato (or even earlier).⁶³ For the Greeks and most other early societies, the choral dance was of special significance, as it was considered to be based on the cyclical movement of the stars, and it was through music *and* dance that the Greek people “acquired not only a range of social and survival skills, but also a pervasive sense of *harmony* – not only of the inner, spiritual harmony of a well-balanced personality but also that of the well-formed figure and of a well-ordered society and its larger environment.”⁶⁴ Lying behind such an idea is the Greek view of the cosmos as a hierarchy of ordered systems, ranging from the human body and soul to the family, *polis*[city]; all these were regarded as part of the microcosm, a reflection in miniature of the *macrocosm*, which is the celestial system including Earth, Sun, Moon, stars, and planets. For Plato, too, dance was essential for education of both body and soul in order to build an ideal city-state made from ideal citizens (with noble souls and beautiful bodies).⁶⁵ This ancient assumption that music *and* dance were essential for maintaining our sense of harmony (grounded in our society and the cosmos surrounding it) became weaker and weaker in the course of the history of European Christianity, especially in the process of modernity in which the Cartesian dualism between body and soul, matter and spirit, and consequently nature and culture became increasingly dominant. It is generally agreed upon that the significance of the body in dance is among the reasons why dance came to be accepted relatively late as a form of art in modernity. This had much to do with the hegemony of reason during the Enlightenment, which led to a devaluing of both the body and the emotions, the things closely associated with dance.⁶⁶

⁵⁶ Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, 14.

⁵⁷ LaMothe, *Why We Dance*.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 203–10.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 197.

⁶³ See Pont, “Plato’s Philosophy of Dance.”

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁶⁵ For example, see Plato, *Laws*.

⁶⁶ See Illman and Smith, *Theology and the Arts*, 151.

5.2 Dance to overcome dualism and strengthen the holistic view attested in Scripture

On the other hand, we should pause to take into consideration whether the antipathy that Christianity developed toward dance was imported from Greek philosophy (most notably Platonism), more specifically, from its dualistic and hierarchical view of the body and the spirit, and the belief that the spirit is superior to the material (and the body).⁶⁷ Christianity has been shaped by two main pillars, namely, the Jewish and Greek inheritances. Since the Jewish tradition (reflected in Scripture) does not present a dualistic but a holistic understanding of the human person⁶⁸ (and dance was clearly an important part of Jewish culture), it follows that Christianity's suspicion of dance and the body must have been imported from the Greek side somehow (but still in a very complicated way, considering the Greek culture also appreciated dance greatly). Thanks to scholars of the early church, we now know that dance was sometimes practiced even in early Christian communities,⁶⁹ and even the Church Fathers' discourses on dance were much more nuanced than generally assumed; while many Church Fathers condemned the type of dancing associated with the dance of Herodias' Daughter (Matthew 14, Mark 6),⁷⁰ they also tried to accept (and sometimes even encouraged) the type of dancing associated with the dance of King David (2 Samuel 6).⁷¹ In fact, dance *in itself* was never condemned.

Against such a complex background, we propose to qualify and update the microcosmic view of the human person and reuse it to make a theological case for dance as a Christian art of embodiment, in order to strengthen the holistic view of the human person and creation attested in Scripture, because, even when dance was actively practiced in ancient Christian communities in the Greco-Roman world, it was not free from a highly dualistic and hierarchical view of the human person and the created world, which is more a characteristic of Greek philosophy than Scripture.

This point can be further demonstrated by the fact that the earliest existing account of the dancing Jesus actually comes from the apocryphal *Acts of John*, which is a gnostic text from the second century. If we regard dance as a fully positive assertion of the human body,⁷² we cannot ignore the irony that the earliest example of the description of Jesus dancing is found in a text strongly marked by the Gnostic heresy, which usually considers the material world including the human body as "evil."⁷³ It is generally assumed that the account of Jesus dancing among his disciples on the night before his crucifixion reflects an actual cult practice of circle dance embraced by a Gnostic community.⁷⁴ According to Karin Schlapbach, who specializes in the practice of dance in the Greco-Roman world, the account of dancing Jesus in the Acts of John tells us that dancing was practiced as part of the ancient tradition of mystery rites on the basis of the notion that "physical movement – both another's and one's own, and especially as they respond to each other – is a privileged way into the experience of one's own being in its relatedness to others."⁷⁵ Schlapbach further writes, "The dance it [the Acts of John] depicts allows the participants to get a sense of their susceptibility to intersubjective experience, and this goes perhaps towards understanding what it means to be a human being."⁷⁶ Such an ancient example of "the intimate connection between dancing, experience, and cognition"⁷⁷ and the "ecokinetic knowledge" we mentioned above are closely related.

⁶⁷ See Savage, "Through Dance," 68; also see Hart, "Through the Arts."

⁶⁸ See, Ware, "'My Helper and My Enemy,'" 91–5.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*; Schlapbach, "Dancing with Gods;" Hellsten, "Dance in the Early Church."

⁷⁰ See Lepeigneux, "The Indictment of Dance by Christian Authors in Late Antiquity."

⁷¹ See Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*, 26–7.

⁷² See, for example, Montoya, "Flesh, Body, and Embodiment."

⁷³ Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 28–9.

⁷⁴ See Schlapbach, *The Anatomy of Dance Discourse*, 154–5.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 166.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 154.

5.3 An example of cultivating “ecokinetic knowledge”: *Sacred Dance*

Further, as a concrete example of dance which could possibly cultivate “the ecokinetic knowledge” on the basis of the microcosmic view of the human person and the created world, let us briefly look at Sacred Dance, which has been more and more practiced in the context of the Church in some areas of the world as part of meditation, prayer, and spiritual formation.⁷⁸ Sacred Dance was founded by the German Protestant theologian and ballet master Bernhard Wosien⁷⁹ (1908–1986) in the 1970s and further developed by his students such as Friedel Kloke-Eibl⁸⁰ and others. Sacred Dance is basically a circle dance, which is regarded as the most ancient form of dance, a circle representing unity and harmony. The Sacred Dance takes a microcosmic view of the human person, and this point is reflected in many of its choreographic movements which can be described as microcosmic presentations of macrocosmic movements.⁸¹ The Sacred Dance uses many ancient symbols and images, which are expressed in the forms of simple rhythmic, arm movements, footsteps, postures, and formations. Concepts, words, motifs, images, music and rhythm, and body movements are all integrated into a harmonious unity in the choreography. The Sacred Dance thus cultivates a “ecokinetic” sense of community and belonging as well as a sense of harmony with nature. In particular, when it is practiced in a prayerful atmosphere of complete silence,⁸² it could cultivate both a horizontal sense of community with other participants and a vertical sense of communion with God. In the last analysis, the sacred circle dance can be practiced as a dance in harmony with other people as well as with nature and as a dance with and for the Triune God, thus realizing a concrete form of perichoretic participation.

6 Conclusion

Despite its potential to demonstrate theological visions in a concrete and dynamic way, even Sacred Dance is not yet often explored in the context of Christian theology. Therefore, we propose to pay more attention to this type of dance as a concrete medium to strengthen the microcosmic and holistic view of the human person and creation. We also claim that St Maximus the Confessor is relevant for this purpose, as he developed the Christocentric cosmology along with the holistically balanced view of the human person as a microcosm. In short, we propose dance as a means to concretely realize his Christocentric and holistic view of the human person and creation, which would help us to overcome the dualistic separation between body and soul, matter and spirit, and consequently the modern separation between nature and culture, which has eventually brought about our modern ecological crisis.⁸³

⁷⁸ In some English-speaking areas, German-speaking countries, and some countries in Latin America.

⁷⁹ For the general concept of Sacred Dance, see Wosien, *Der Weg des Tänzers*; Wosien, *Sacred Dance*.

⁸⁰ For details about her programs and workshops, see the homepage of Kloke-Eibl institute for formation: “Sacred Dance – Meditation des Tanzes”: <https://www.sacreddance.de/start.html#slide-2>, accessed on February 6, 2022. For specific concepts and works of choreography, see Kloke-Eibl, *Tanz und Klang und Tiefe Stille*.

⁸¹ For example, see Kloke-Eibl choreography “Women’s Dance.” According to the description on the homepage of her program, “It presents a geometrical transformation. Throughout the dance, a decagon develops into a pentagon or rather a five-pointed star. This five-pointed star grows smaller and disappears completely until a ten-sided star appears. Hartmut Warm discovered exactly the same transformation in an astronomical relation without even being aware of the dance. This so-called dance of the planets is made up out of the Earth and Venus which revolve around the Sun and the rotation of Venus.” (<https://www.sacreddance.de/the-dance-of-women.html>, accessed on February 6, 2022).

⁸² For example, see the program called *Bibel Getanzt* developed by the Dominican Sister M. Monika Gessner OP in Germany: <https://www.bibelgetanzt.org>, accessed on February 6, 2022.

⁸³ There is a profound connection between our ecological crisis and the dualistic separation of the body (the material) and the spirit. This has also been pointed out in Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’*, which is widely regarded as an important document on ecology from a perspective of the Christian faith; “learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology.” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no.155).

In the last analysis, as we also stressed in “Beyond Metaphor: The Trinitarian *Perichōrēsis* and Dance,” a call to bring the lens of dance into Christian theology can also be a call for a more fully incarnational Christianity as opposed to the increasingly spiritualized and increasingly privatized form of Christianity we see today. Dance has the potential to bring us closer and make us more faithful to the mystery of the Incarnation, the core of our Christian faith, understood in the sense of positive affirmation of the material world including the human body.

Only with a firm focus on the body and bodily experience in light of the mystery of the Incarnation can we finally start to explore the Trinitarian *Perichōrēsis* concretely and meaningfully in light of dance. After all, if the notion of Trinitarian dance were to be taken beyond metaphor to indicate the actual practice of dance as a concrete possibility for spiritual union with the Triune God, such dance must be foremost led by Christ. It is through our body that we may experience such a spiritual dance.

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