

REVIEW ARTICLE

'The Representation and Reality of Religion in Dance'.
Judith Lynne Hanna. Journal of the American Academy of Religion [JAAR], LV/2:281-306, 1988.

For someone who has followed this author's work for several years,¹ the title of this article came as a surprise because it is so ambitious, yet, on second thoughts, I realized that the initial response was not so much surprise as it was consternation. Added to everything else that Hanna has already said that the dance is or includes (see 1983, 1987 and 1988), it is now meant to enlarge its scope to embrace "...theology, ideology, world view and social change" (p. 281). Is there anything that 'dance' does not include or cannot handle?² Are there no limitations whatsoever? One would have thought that anything (including 'dance') which includes everything is ultimately vacuous. But, we are faced at the outset with yet another definition: "A system of palpable, vital signs, dance is a barometer of theology, ideology, world view, and social change" (p. 281). Does that mean that any dance, anywhere in the world, at anytime, performed by anyone is (or has been) "a system of palpable, vital signs"? And, upon what conception of 'signs' is this assertion based?

We are then told that "... dance does not figure prominently in religious studies or other nondance scholarly disciplines", and it is no wonder that it does not, if its major spokespersons insist on making these kinds of rash claims and hasty generalizations about it. Moreover, does the author really mean to imply that all of us, like sheep, have gone astray? In our blindness have we all failed to see the truth the author knows about and obviously intends to expound? Hanna evidently believes that we have ignored this "dance"; this "mechanical barometer measure" of our various theologies and ideologies. Instead of dealing with such contentious inferences (if she was aware that they existed), the author asserts that, "Words take price of place over kinetic images," a statement which is nothing more than a fallacy of ignoratio elenchi.³

As if this were not sufficiently problematical, we are told that, "Although there are established traditions for the study of texts, nonverbal communication, socio-linguistic, and semiotic studies developed only after World War II, and perspectives from these fields have only more recently been applied to dance". This assertion is followed by citations, not from the field of study of the anthropology of the dance and human movement, but from the author's work alone.

How, one wants to ask, do the works of Marcel Mauss, Karl Buhler, Wilhelm Wundt, W.O.E. Oesterley, Rudolph von Laban, Jacques Dalcroze, Gertrude Prokosch Kurath, Edward Sapir, Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Peirce, Edward Burnet Tylor, Alfred Kroeber, Robert Lowie, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, the Abbe Sicard, Delsarte, Gallaudet, and many others fit into her hopelessly shallow, virtually non-existent historical framework? The answer is that they do not. The works of these scholars, upon which any legitimate present study depends in one way or another, is simply swept off the board, along with any reference to them that the works of any of Hanna's senior (and some of her junior) colleagues might have suggested.

It is precisely the characteristics of hollowness and superficiality in the article on "divinity in dance" and indeed, of all of Hanna's work, including her recent books, that I must finally protest against in the strongest possible terms.⁴ To read Hanna successively, as I have done over the years, has forced me to conclude that by doing so, one simply commits oneself to the effects of a certain kind of micro-social amnesia, or, "... the repression of critical thought" (Jacoby, 1975:150). In the past, I have been guilty of such repression for I have been unclear about when can one say that one is finally fed up with a history of "dance anthropology" (a term coined, as far as I know, by Hanna) which is simply a history of exclusion, arrogance and disregard.

Neither Hanna nor the problem is unique. In many fields of study, problems, issues and ideas once examined seem to fall out of sight and out of current authors' minds only to resurface later as something which is trendy and new. With regard to the anthropology of the dance, Hanna seems to remember less and less of more and more, and now, she undertakes to explore "... the relationship of dance to divinity", while aiming to "... call attention to a neglected form of expression in the comparative and critical examination of religion" (p. 281). She tries to draw an "analytical typology ... from the ethnographic and historical record" without giving thought to the nature of the ethnographic record in particular, which in many cases was written by men who were either indifferent about -- or openly hostile to -- the notion of religion in any form.

It requires very little study of the founding fathers of the social sciences⁵ to understand why it is that not only dances but the act of dancing itself was largely ignored by theologians and scholars of religion in the past, cf. Evans-Pritchard, 1928, 1956, 1962 and 1965, and Trompf (1990). The ambivalence between science and religion at the end of the nineteenth century created severe

dissension and an inhospitable climate of thought for positive growth, to say the least.

The act of dancing, while it was not assigned a central role in nineteenth century debates over science and religion, was certainly considered a decisive defining act by some of the protagonists on both sides of the arguments -- which, by the way, were never satisfactorily resolved. In this writer's opinion, it is simply jejeune to scorn the past while celebrating the present not only as best, but as some kind of progress. According to Hanna, since World War II we have developed techniques (but in a kind of instant historical vacuum) which can spawn typologies and concepts by the dozens, conveniently ignoring the fact that typologies and methods, valuable though they may be in certain contexts, are not adequate substitutes for reliable thinking and breadth of scholarship. However, without adequate examination of this record, she intends to show us "... some of the ways in which dancers and spectators draw the power of the supernatural to the human world and reach out to the holy" (p. 281). Why anyone should bother to undertake this enterprise is puzzling: Surely we are not being instructed that the act of dancing has been strongly connected with many of the world's religions? That is a fact so patently self-evident that it is trite.

Nor does Hanna's conclusion (pp. 300-301) help. All that we learn there is how the author's emphasis changed from her original statement of purpose. But then, the essay doesn't fulfill the promise of the title or the original statement of aim in any case. This essay isn't really an "exploratory" piece which is on "religion in action" (as if it weren't in action in any other mode than dancing!). Basically, we are informed about that which we already know: that is, through "dance", people may be absorbed in, animated by, or see the divine. "Dance", we are told, is "... rarely studied over time", inferring that we really don't know much about what has actually happened. We are told that some Christian missionaries (especially English-speakers), stamped out many dances in Africa, and that the Chinese, by closing the border of Tibet, adversely affected Ladakhi traditional religious "dance". This is followed by a cliché: "Sometimes old practices disappear, but frequently they persist and are overlaid with new beliefs and customs". Ho hum!

The final paragraph (p. 301) is a masterpiece of extravagant generalization and inconsequential observations about "some traditional faiths with dance practices" up against "... technological demands, scientific requirements and the advent of humanism and Marxism", but we never know what dances are involved, which communities, or specifically the technologies involved. One is irresistibly reminded of Russia and the eastern European countries, of course, where it is clear that dance forms of all

kinds became even stronger in the face of political changes, Marxism, space-age technology and all the rest, but in the context of a title which promises world-wide coverage, this article falls far short of fulfillment on this, or any other level. However, we shall persevere: Hanna's article is divided into two main sections, 'Concepts' and 'Categories of Danced Images of the Divine', both of which include sub-headings; however, I will comment on the piece as a whole.

Two issues are chosen for discussion regarding the usage of images of the divine in dances. The first is put to the reader as a question, i.e., "... is the deity knowable in bodily form?" The second is stated as an assertion, i.e., "... a religion's attitude toward the body, especially emotionality and sexuality, affects its use of dance in religion and other aspects of life." Three authors are cited with regard to the two propositions. The relationship of two of these authors' works, i.e., Wachs (1958) and Wilson (1982), to the statements made by Hanna remains unclear to me. The citation of Faruqi (1984) is clear, although basically unnecessary, since any reasonably educated scholar of comparative religion is aware that Islam's stance on representations of the body is -- and always has been -- essentially different from that of Judaism or Christianity. Nevertheless, six paragraphs are devoted to the discussion of these issues, during which we are given to understand that Christianity's attitudes toward the body are "... inconsistent but generally negative." The author's level of generalization is offensive, as is the reification of such terms as 'divinity', 'deity', 'religion', 'Christianity', and others.⁶

Dr. Hanna talks of Christianity as if it were an embodied entity which could sit in the same room with us. She talks as if Christianity has a mind to think with and a single embodied persona with which it operates in the contemporary world. In so doing, she violates a basic rule of anthropological discourse, prevalent among novices, who also reify, e.g., Durkheimian concepts like 'society' in exactly similar ways. One would have wished to be able to say that the author engaged her reader in admirably constructed anthropological dialogue, but that she had got her theological facts all wrong, perhaps, as Leach (1970) so often tended to do. Or, that she had violated anthropological rules but had shared valuable insights into religious dances or dancing or something of the kind. Unfortunately, we are treated, instead, to a sophomoric chat which skips from one 'family resemblance'⁷ to another in a spirit of naive abandon.

Apparently believing that the past is dead and gone, the author now arrogantly launches into a three-paragraph 'compare and contrast' treatment of Hinduism and Christianity (starts from the middle of p. 283, continuing to the top of p. 284), in which, not

unexpectedly, Christianity comes out the loser. But that is not the most important gaffe that the author commits by undertaking this comparison. One would want to ask which 'God concept' are we meant to compare here, and on what grounds? The known classificatory list is formidable, regarding the number of gods and degrees to which it is believed in any given religious denomination that God is identical with or is an immanent or transcendent force operating in the universe.⁸ Such facts would clearly determine the notions of embodiment involved, wouldn't they?

Further to the point, it is unnecessary for an anthropologist of the dance or any legitimate ecumenist to make garbled or wildly generalized statements about "prevalent strands of Hinduism" or "some Christian denominations" with regard to things "sacred" or "erotic" (third paragraph, p. 283). First, why not consult readings on sexuality and Christian theology such as Nelson (1978) and others? Second, why confuse Tantric Buddhism (where the sexual act is central to worship), with a form of Bhakti yoga characterized in one of its manifestations by North Indian Kathak dancing?

Third, why not be ethnographically accurate? In pictorial form the stories of Radha and Krishna are represented in Rajput and Moghul miniature paintings; in literature, in the Bhagavad Purana, or the "Lord of the Autumn Moons." In the Kathak dance, the ghats of which treat of stories of Radha and Krishna, human love is vindicated through a particularly complex and beautiful symbolism.⁹ There is nothing I know of that is comparable in the Christian tradition, but so what?

Krishna is an incarnation of Vishnu, one of the elements of the tripartite Godhead, Brahma. The other member of the trinity is Shiva. Radha symbolizes the human soul. The Kathak stories, the ghats which the dancer enacts are interpretable on several levels; literally, as two human beings, and progressively more spiritually, until the stories are seen as stories of the human soul in search of the divine. The Kathak dancer represents Krishna in a series of poses or postures, which are interspersed throughout the dance, and the Bhakti (or yogic) part of the effort is to become, for those moments (a Krishna pose is rarely held for more than eight or sixteen beats at a time), a 'vessel' for the spirit of Krishna. This kind of representation should not be confused with the kind of representation to be found either in Balinese and some Indonesian dancing, or the forms of representation in some sub-Saharan African and a few Caribbean dances known as 'possession'.

On the Christian side of the equation, it is a pity that Hanna is not better acquainted with Carmelite thought -- especially John

of the Cross -- on the subject of love, since she obviously believes that Christianity is bereft of any comparable symbolism (see Williams, 1976, for further discussion). She seems, for example, unaware of the possible interpretations of "... praeclarum Calicum ...", the good, upstanding, noble chalice (a female symbol, by the way), referred to in the Latin words of the consecration of the wine in the post-Tridentine High Mass (see Williams, 1975, for further discussion). Here, we find a long tradition of intoxication indicated, which is connected with a theme in Philo, i.e., the "sobrias [in]lebratas".

In ecumenical discussions with which I am familiar, it is axiomatic that different religions locate their central symbols in different areas of human life and experience. The central symbol of Christianity, unlike Tantric Buddhism or Hinduism, is not sex, but food; the Eucharistic meal. Two central symbols of Islamic meditation and preoccupation are water and the desert, although some Catholic religious Orders have utilized the desert symbolism, just as one of the sacraments fundamental to Christianity is baptism, in which water is centrally featured. In Saussurian terms, the 'valeur', the 'weightings', the 'valency' are different.

Choosing more examples at random, were we to conceptualize a semantic field for the word 'logos' in Christian thought, we would discover that the Hebrew word 'debar' (also 'debarim') and the greek word 'rhema' would have to be included. 'Debar' can mean both 'word' and 'thing' (in the sense of material object), as 'rhema' means both 'word' and 'actual event'. For example, the shepherds go to see the 'rhema' which is happening in Bethlehem, and Mary kept the 'rhema' or 'debarim' in her heart.

Further to the understanding of 'logos' in Christian thought, it is necessary to look to the Judeo-Hellenistic period of Christianity which produced a kind of 'mixture' of thought which is particularly relevant to the kind of historicity that I would advocate with regard to any studies of the dance and religion. That is, it seems impossible to assume a purist's view of any description of any feature of religious thought and practise, and it is simply foolish to generalize across too many concepts. However, one would want to draw attention to the fact that there are definite similarities in the Greek notion of 'logos', for example, as expressed through the Stoics (i.e., 'logos' as the 'seed-word' or 'logos spermatikos' and the Chinese notion of 'Tao', i.e., the pattern or paradigm, so to speak, in the universe. This is a central idea in the first chapter of John, as I understand it; thus the justification for saying that the word is made flesh, in the sense that it was the Logos or paradigm which in Jesus's case was manifest, crucified and all the rest (see Williams, 1975, for further discussion). I say these things because I do not take the position that religious concepts cannot usefully be compared or

contrasted. They can. The point at issue is that there are scholarly and conceptual limits beyond which it is not permissible to go, unless we want to end up with conceptual chaos. One simply wants to know what Hanna is on about and why?

Although she states at the outset that ideology is something for which 'dance' provides a barometer, it seems clear that to her, ideologies themselves are little more than abstract talk which makes it unnecessary for her to confront individual issues about dances, dancing or religion on their individual merits. Instead, with the question, "What characteristics of dance make it an attractive religious behavior?", which appears near the top of p. 284, we are launched into a none-too-subtle hard-sell for the activity (or the subject; I am never sure which).

But then, one is never really sure of what Hanna's arguments consist because, as one critic of her first book so succinctly put it,

In the first three chapters, and sporadically thereafter, an almost indigestible array of main courses is piled one upon the other. Everyone is referred to, but the ideas are not sufficiently developed ... it is unnecessary to convince us that she has read everything, and the attempt to throw light on all aspects of human movement from every perspective can only lead to confusion (Kaepler, 1981:186).

Her theory of writing has not changed. Moreover, it seems to comprise putting a bit of everything into the pot to ensure that nothing is ever left out. As another critic said,

In general, much of what is arrogantly passed off as semiotics is an uncritical assortment of theories in physical anthropology, archeology, socio-linguistics, cultural anthropology, communications theory, structuralism, symbolic analysis, etc., ad infinitum. Dance is simply stuck onto these existing inter-disciplinary theories as if it were a self-conscious appendage. Furthermore, there is a rather naive assumption that all these "theories" -- if they are that -- are somehow accepted by their respective disciplines as absolute, and that there is an agreement on just what "semiotics" is (Powers, 1984:51).

From a standpoint of theory or praxis, the major defect of Hanna's style of writing is that the dance (including dances, dancing and dancers) is ultimately shuffled out of the discussion. The constant shift of viewpoints, the negligence with which terms are defined, the lack of focus and the double-think all combine to make each dance, each "system of signs" that is mentioned banalized to an immediate set of cliched expressions. The author actually

quotes with approval an author who talks of an alleged "dance" of a priest, "... described as 'a kind of religious symbolic dance' that uses twisting, turning, bobbing, bowing, and hand gestures'" (Knox, 1948, quoted by Hanna on p. 284). But this is merely one out of an entire catalogue of unexamined, indiscriminating, uncritical remarks, the total value of which remains incomprehensible. One wonders what the readership of the Journal of the American Academy of Religion is to make of it all?

Dance conveys meaning through such spheres as the event of the dance or ritual of which it is a part, the body itself being highlighted through dance, the impact of the whole performance, performance segments as they unfold as in a story, specific movements or style that reflect religious values, the intermesh of dance with other communication modes such as song or dance as a vehicle for it, and presence (charisma, energy) (Hanna, 1988:285).

This paragraph consists of a single garbled sentence comprised of one tautology after another, which isn't even grammatically correct! Again, the point is not only that Hanna's formulations about the dance are misguided and wrong, but that such crookedness must finally be rejected out of hand.

Although everyone can, and has been, included in the author's grab-bag of "dance anthropology" (I note with dismay that an early, pre-anthropology article of mine is cited on p. 293), I should like to draw attention to my own stringent criticisms of this and other articles I wrote when I was innocent of anthropological theory, methods or styles of descriptive writing (see Williams, 1976a). Further to the point: there are significant differences between 'art' and 'aesthetic' models of the dance and religion and social anthropological models of the relationships represented therein. One would not like to think that JAAR's readership is led to believe that Hanna's contribution speaks for all of us in the field of study.

"Hanna does not present basic data in detail and the reader must simply accept her conclusions about world view principles and values" (Kaeppler, 1981:187). As her own writing in the past has not ventured into the field of religion to any large extent, confining itself mainly to functionalist political and economic modes of explanation, it is possibly only natural that she condemns herself to an additional lack of clarity when writing about religion and the dance, although she seems to depend heavily upon Adams (1971 and 1986) for inspiration.

In a chapter entitled "Religious and Quasi-Religious Explanations of Dancing", in a forthcoming book (Williams, 1991), I make the point that religious eschatology has been replaced, by

some authors, with an eschatology of art. Had I been familiar with Adams's work at the time, I would have used his work and that of one of his students (see Adams, 1971 and 1986; and Rock, 1978) as pristine examples of that kind of shift.

But, I would have to have dug even deeper, to find the source of what I conceive to be a serious problem with regard to studies of the kind Adams suggests. In his introduction to Rock's booklet, I believe that we can find a statement of that source:

Judith's [Rock's, not Hanna's] definition of theology shows that all of us are theologians ... "Theology is a person saying, "in this time and place, under these circumstances, I experienced God, and God moves in these ways'" (Rock, 1978:3).

No. It may be the case that prophecy or charismatic leadership consists in a person saying such a thing, but it is not theology by any stretch of the imagination; no more than anthropology consists of an individual knowing something about his or her own kinship system or political structure. Yet, there are people who would say that everyone is an anthropologist simply because we are all alive and are members of the human race, or because we happen to be interested in studying people in some way.

In other words, Adams and Rock lose any possible support they might have gained from this reviewer (and I suspect, a host of others) by indicating at the outset that (1) they are obvious anti-intellectuals; they wish to discredit education, scholarship, qualifications or any other form of systematic study, even though their academic 'pedigrees' are carefully listed; and (2) they apparently espouse the position that the final arbiter of knowledge and the chief warrant for insinuating their views into the public record is 'experience' writ large.

No, again. If theology and social anthropology are nothing but "lived experience[s] in all its roughness", then we have all been wasting our time and money on formal education, haven't we? I would have to argue with the statement on other grounds as well: (a) it is made as a universal generalization, and (b) it tells me (as a member of 'all of us') that I am a theologian. I am not a theologian, and I doubt seriously if Ms. Rock is a theologian because she has moved (or danced), or that anyone who chooses to say that they experienced God whilst dancing automatically considers him or herself to be a theologian. Even when I was doing religious dancing in Wisconsin during the years 1961-1963, when I was the founder of a movement choir called Experience Anonyme which toured throughout the American midwest, I did not, because of this, flatter myself that I was a theologian; nor did any of the people who danced with me so consider themselves.

The upshot of all this is that one cannot really take Ms. Rock or Prof. Adams seriously. They cannot have it both ways, although the attempt to do so seems to form the whole thrust of their writings. I, for one, am neither interested in Rock's re-writing of theology, i.e., "... theology is closer to aesthetics than to philosophy" (1978:6) or her blatant functionalism (1978:12-13), and I wonder how Hanna conceives of her inclusion in this company? More important, I wonder how the American Academy of Religion justifies it all? But, I shall give the last word to Kaepler:

All of the things that Hanna says dance does, and all of the values it expresses, are difficult to visualize on the ground. It is exasperating that the reader is not given the necessary information so as to use his own thinking or at least to be able to follow the abstracting process. ... As it is, her "communicative theory of dance" is a series of statements that one can only accept on faith (Kaepler, 1981:187).

These remarks apply equally to her theories about "the representation and reality of religion in dance", and no one is to be blamed if they experience a crisis of faith about how well 'dance' or Dr. Hanna communicate!

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NOTES

1. I first met Hanna at a Committee on Research in Dance/Society of Ethnomusicology conference in San Francisco in 1974. She is also a colleague and peer in terms of subject interests in social/cultural anthropology (see Williams, 1986:174).
2. The reason for the quotation marks lies in the ambiguities of this word used by itself with no qualifiers. One simply doesn't know what this author (or anyone who indiscriminately uses the word) means by it. Are we meant to understand that the dance (construed to mean all the dances in the world) or some dances (not specified) or dancing (the act) is under discussion, or what? Or does the author mean for her reader to attach whatever definitions, denotations or connotations to the word that he or she chooses, thereby shifting the burden of argument from herself to the reader, in which case we are faced at the outset with a fallacy of amphiboly (one of the fallacies of ambiguity).

3. The fallacy of ignoratio elenchi (irrelevant conclusion). An argument that is irrelevant; that argues for something other than that which is to be proved and thereby in no way refutes (or supports) the points at issue.
4. I say "finally", because I have deliberately withheld critical commentary on Hanna's work in the past, on the grounds that (a) one does not shoot down colleagues who are 'in the same corner' so to speak, and because (b) the field of study variously known as the anthropology of the dance or the anthropology of the dance and human movement is relatively fragile both in terms of numbers of practitioners and a body of relevant literature; however, this article is an insult to the field which cannot be ignored.
5. For example; Comte, Spencer, Veblen, Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, Weber, Freud, and many others.
6. According to Jacoby, and I agree, "all reification is a forgetting" (1975:4).
7. The phrase "family resemblance" was used by Wittgenstein and refers to an approach to definition that opposes the traditional method of searching for the defining characteristic of a thing. Meanings in this type of discourse are associated by a number of elements (i.e., features that have family resemblances, each of which is possessed by several things. The phrase can also refer to a type of definition which offers discrete elements, several of which are possessed by each thing without there being any one element (or definite set of elements) possessed by all of the things defined in the same way. Hanna offends by defining the three major terms of her essay, i.e., "religion", "dance", "divinity" in the second of these modes.
8. For the sake of convenience, I will reproduce the list given in Angeles (1981;110-111). 1. Polytheism (The belief in the existence of many gods); 2. Kathenotheism (A form of polytheism, or, depending on the perspective, a form of monotheism, or monism. Of the many gods named and believed in, each in turn at a designated time of the year is worshiped and given the allegiance and respect customary to a supreme deity, in the realization that each god symbolizes only one of the innumerable facets of a more complex and fundamental reality or God that is the source of all things); 3. Henotheism (A form of polytheism. Of the many gods that exist, one is their supreme ruler to whom the others must give their loyalty and obedience); 4. Dualism (The belief that two gods exist, one a force for good, the other a force for evil, vying for control of the universe); 5. Monotheism (The

belief that there is one-and-only-one God); 6. Pantheism (The belief that God is identical with the universe. All is God and God is all. The universe taken as a whole is God. God and Nature [universe, the totality of all that there is] are synonymous, or two words for the same thing); 7. Panentheism (All things are imbued with God's being in the sense that all things are in God. God is more than all that there is. He is a consciousness and the highest unity possible); 8. Panpsychism (The belief that God is completely immanent in all things in the universe as a psychic force (mind, consciousness, spirit, soul)); 9. Theism (One most interpretations: God is partly immanent in the universe and partly transcendent); 10. Deism (On most interpretations: God is totally transcendent, "wholly other" to the universe and none of his being is immanent in the universe). Clearly, each of these types of theism would involve different notions of embodiment.

A tangential point, but an important one is contained in the question, "Is Dr. Hanna's notion of 'God', which is 'A term variously conceived but used to apply to that which is considered to be a (or the) fundamental source of one's existence and/or values' (Angeles, 1981:110) consistent with or contrary to those of her informants?"

9. 'Kathak', the north Indian form of dancing which was a result of the amalgamation of Muslim and Hindu cultures, should not be confused with Kathakali, a south Indian form of dancing, originally danced by men only, and concerned with other incarnations and deities. Also, one would want to say that the ghats are only one of four parts of the Kathak idiom. The other sections of the whole dance form are called Tatkar (bell-work), Tukras, and Parans. Of these, only the Parans contain momentary images of Radha and Krishna, as it must be remembered how this dance form developed. That is, the older sections consisted of displays of technique and virtuosity because images of the Hindu godhead, or any of the incarnations, were not welcome in a Muslim dominated culture.

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