

DANCING IN GOD:
THE RELEVANCE OF RITUAL FOR CONCEIVING THE DIVINE TODAY¹

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I. Preliminaries

I find “Dancing in God” to be a captivating theme. I am dealing with it as a theologian wanting to investigate the broadest spectrum of cultures and religions while operating out of a particular religious tradition. The focus on dancing gestures toward a larger concern about the Christian religion, namely, that it has been too restricted in its affirmation of religious experience and God’s revelatory activity. Christians have been slow to acknowledge the profound experiences that take place outside of the church. So dancing, yes, as an activity in relation to which we experience God. But not just dancing. Other quarters of meaning—music, theater, film and television, social media, play including sports, work, and food and eating—need to be included with dance as places where meaningful experiences worthy of being considered religious are taking place. The goal is to lift up a God who embraces the creation in all its variegated particularity and to regard creation’s fulfillment as taking place within the God-enveloped network of connectedness. In affirming a down-to earth, non-supernatural God there is no need for a flight up and away from the world because God is present in the world’s entanglements, and these bodily interrelationships and interdependencies are the very elements of God’s salvific activity. A major task of our time is to move beyond disparaging the body in order to function comfortably as fully embodied creatures. My hope is that this dis-ease with the body might be treated in part by a medicinal dose of dance.

The concern for embodiment also involves honoring the evolutionary nature of the reality in which we live. My dancing research has grown out of a book written with a molecular biologist that

¹ This is a shortened form of a lecture of the same title given at the University of Chicago Divinity School on March 10, 2011, as part of my responsibilities as a Martin Marty Center Fellow during the 2010-2011 academic year.

gives an account of the cosmos in its elusive fullness and explains why the human experience of wonder and awe over nature's unfolding life finds its final referent in the work of God the Creator.² In *God and Nature*, we forge a philosophical theology of nature centering on the notion of possibility. My work here in beginning to develop a theology of culture presupposes and advances the effort made there to recover an appreciation for the natural as the locus for experiencing God.

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil* about the need to translate the human back into nature.³ I think part of doing that is also translating the divine back into nature. Many in our time of secularity have lost God and become unbelievers, not because they are so full of themselves, but because they can no longer relate to the distant deity or to the dogmatic certainties and moral inflexibilities of too many believers. What these seekers need is a divine reality closer to home that calls us into relationship while leaving room aplenty for mystery, uncertainty, and ambiguity. God needs to be translated back into our everyday world and to be rediscovered as a dynamic event rather than a dead name. The big supernatural God beyond the realm of nature needs to be conceived within the network of interrelationships that we know as the natural world. This doesn't mean denying the place of speculative creativity, but it does mean formulating thoughts and words about the divine that grow out of our bodily becoming and our vital expectation to encounter in such becoming the event ensconced in the divine name.

If we open our eyes and look for it a little, we see the reality of dance being manifested many places in our culture. There are books, such as Morris Dickstein's *Dancing in the Dark*, Kristin Luker's *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences*, and Anton Zeilinger's *The Dance of the Photon*; there are theatrical productions, such as *Riverdance* and *Billy Elliot*; there are movies, such as *Burlesque* and *Black*

² Joyce M. Cuff and Curtis L. Thompson, *God and Nature: A Scientist and a Theologian Conversing on the Divine Promise of Possibility* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), #230, 161-162.

Swan; there are television programs, such as *Dancing with the Stars* and *Live to Dance*; there are news stories, such as can be found daily with eyes looking for reports on dance.

The claim I set forth at the outset is that deep down we desire to dance in God. We've got a longing for this dancing that runs through the deepest dimensions of our being, and it's possible to sense that this longing comes from God. In this desire to dance in the divine, God offers us the highest good, the gift of Godself. Our longing to dance is our yearning to live harmoniously within God. Created to dance, we are made by our Maker to flourish in the orchestrated movement of interrelational activity. This dancing is most intense, passionate, beautiful, meaningful, when it takes place in God. For then the freedom of the activity gives itself fully to the love being created in the corporate sharing, and this embodies among and within the dancers the divine life of freedom giving itself in love.

We are created to dance. However, even though we are created in the image of the dancing God, we do not arrive at the likeness of that dancing God apart from engaging in the task of becoming. We are equipped with what we need to dance in God, but the dancing doesn't come as naturally as it should. Dancing calls for a certain abandoning of self so that one can freely get caught up in the movement. But for various reasons, we hesitate to dance. And when we do dance, we often engage in dance forms that serve ourselves more than they serve life and the good. Too often, our dancing is not dancing in God. The universal creaturely longing to dance, therefore, is too routinely left unfulfilled. Countless people are in despair, living with little hope of dancing in God. While so many of us fall short of realizing our longing to dance, we nevertheless are given signals that life's highest calling of dancing in God is a real possibility for us, both as individuals and as communities.

An essential factor in dancing more fully in God is ritual. I am here taking ritual in the broadest sense of the word as the structuring of life that nurtures bodily becoming and sponsors advancement on the journey to participating in the divine. We can quickly identify the rituals of explicit religion that nurture bodily becoming in this way. But also interesting are those rituals of everyday life that function

sacramentally in more implicit ways. Rituals develop in our daily endeavors such as working, eating, playing, sleeping, and celebrating, and they help us negotiate life and create meaning that is shared by those participating in the rituals. Rituals of the world are basic to life, and rituals of the church have emerged from them, although over time this dependence is forgotten. Our everyday rituals assist us on the road to dancing in God by giving a sense for what is most important in life, and this means rituals are at once religious and cosmological in nature. Rituals draw those who engage in them into a world of meaning that simultaneously gives expression to ultimacy or the sacred and orients to reality or the cosmos. Ritual is *the* basic social act.⁴ Therefore, rituals call for engaging with others in activity that participates in life's ultimate dimension.

Dance, as I've come to think about it, includes five elements. First, there's movement. Without movement, there's no dance. Second, dance involves the body. Dance is bodily, and this refers to both the individual and corporate aspects of dance's bodiliness. A third element of dance is rhythm. Dance's movement includes pattern and within the pattern can be discerned rhythm, or what Schelling calls "the music within music."⁵ Another element of dance is passion. Dance gives expression to deep feeling, whether great joy, intense sorrow, or anything in-between. The fifth fundamental feature of dance, and possibly its most important feature, is its responsiveness. This response-element opens the door for considering dance as a dancing in God, if one views dance as a response to the divine reality coming to bear on the dancer in, with, and under the finite forces at play in the dancer's life. Dance can be described, then, as responsive, passionate, rhythmic bodily movement.

In speaking of dancing in God, I am affirming the Christian trinitarian God who dances. I suggest that we think of the first person of the Trinity as a dancer, as the Cosmic Dancer. There is in Hinduism Shiva, the Cosmic Dancer, and Judaism's Wisdom of Solomon says of Sophia that "She is more mobile

⁴ Tom F. Driver, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991, 1998), 154.

⁵ F.W.J. Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, edited, translated, and introduced by Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 111-112.

than any motion" (9:24)—Sophia, the great Cosmic Dancer.⁶ But Christianity too has embraced this image of God the Cosmic Dancer. Johannes Eriugena of the ninth century writes about the word "theos" or "God" as likely deriving from the verb "theo" or "run," in which case God could be understood as a Runner, which is close to a Dancer. God the Runner is a plausible image because "God runs into all things and does not stand still at all, but fills everything by running."⁷

Dance requires a dancer; it requires, secondly, a dance. Dancer and dance go together, but they are to be distinguished. The trinity of God includes as the second person, Dance, the Christic Dance. In Dance, the Dancer provides structure for the movement. Dance is the pattern conceived by the Dancer together with its actualization. The Christic Dance is the pattern of life, light, and love climactically presented in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but also manifested anywhere and everywhere that upbuilding dance is taking place. Jesus compares his own ministry to one of piping and dancing (Luke 7:32). Jesus, the Galilean flicker of love, through his words and actions carried out the dance and rhythm of the kingdom. The apocryphal writing "The Acts of John" incorporates the older Gnostic piece, "The Hymn of Jesus," in which Jesus says: "If you want to know what I was: In a word I am the Word who danced all things, and was not shamed at all. It was I who leaped and danced."⁸ The Hymn presents the living Christ as coming to people so that they might come into the general dance. Jesus embodies the Christic Dance that is danced everywhere by creatures who are participating in the Cosmic Dancer.

The dancer and dance are needed, but so also, thirdly, is the dancing. The third person of the Trinity is Dancing, Communal Dancing. Here Dancer and Dance join together, and the two do the tango, bringing about the magic of Dancing. The trinitarian God of Dance is dancing the dance of love. Scottish theologian Richard of St. Victor of the twelfth century recognized that the very notion of love calls for

⁶ Bruce Sanguin, *Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos: An Ecological Christianity* (Incline Village, NV: Copperhouse Publishing Company, 2007), 216.

⁷ John the Scot, *Periphyseon: On the Division of Nature*, edited and translated by Myra L. Uhlfelder with summaries by Jean A. Potter (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1976), 14.

⁸ James Miller, *Measures of Wisdom: The Cosmic Dance in Classical and Christian Antiquity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), especially 81-87.

relationship rather than singularity. Divine love requires a plurality of persons, otherwise there is only self-love. Two persons make possible mutual love; however, Richard contends that higher than this mutual love is shared love, for which we need a third person. He writes that shared love exists “when a third person is loved by two persons harmoniously and in community, and the affection of the two persons is fused into one affection by the flame of love for the third.”⁹ The Cosmic Dancer and the Christic Dance share their love with the third person, Communal Dancing. The triune God as Dance is a social reality whose eternal being is that continual becoming, manifested as the dance of love, which desires other creatures to share in it as well. The interior life of God dances with shared love, and as oriented to the exterior world, the universe, this divine life is an open rather than a closed reality. God’s future is open, desiring hospitably to draw the whole cosmos into its orbit so that it too might participate in the communal dance of love. If God is Dance, then the human as created in the image and likeness of God, is made to dance. The human as *imago dei* carries deep within her being the longing to dance in God.

II. Pantheism’s Dancing Heart

Since the emergence of our human species, we have experienced wonder, or that overpowering sense of awe in the face of life’s mystery that makes our heart dance. The sensed mystery is often differentiated into the two realities of the world and God, cosmos and theos, the universe and ultimacy. We now begin considering this relation between God and the world, looking at three forms the relationship can assume. Examining the three models of the God-world relation will carry us along three stages of life’s journey that comprise at the same time a journey along the pathway of religion. From our

⁹ *Richard of St. Victor: The Twelve Patriarchs, The Mystical Ark, Book Three of the Trinity*, translated and introduced by Grover A. Zinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), Book III, Chapter XIX, 391-392. See also discussions of these thoughts in Zinn’s Introduction, 47-48, Steven Chase, *Contemplation and Compassion: The Victorine Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 118-119; and Anastasios Bozikis, “Dancing the Trinity: A Patristic Perspective Today,” in *God Down Under: Theology in the Antipodes*, edited by Winifred Wing Han Lamb and Ian Barns, vol. 10 in the Australian Theological Forum Series (Adelaide, Australia: ATF Press, 2003), 9-10.

journeying a threefold perspectival treatment on religion will emerge and constitute an overview of religion. A central claim will be identified for each religious stage.

We begin with the pantheism model. The claim relevant to this model is that *the religious person wants to affirm that God is present in or immanent within the world, so that there is a unity between God and the world*. Pantheism's model is an organic one which focuses on the dancing heart. This first of three vantage points means "the belief that all things are God or that God is all things." Schelling wrote in his 1809 essay on human freedom, *Præter deum nihil*, "There is nothing beside or outside of God."¹⁰ Beyond God there is nothing. Pantheism clings to this claim, and so do I throughout my dealings with dancing in God because it contributes to the vision of all things residing in God.

Pantheism was given expression in the ancient world in Stoicism.¹¹ In wanting to shape philosophy into a whole, the Stoics identified God and nature, viewing the natural world as divine and inseparable from God. In their pantheism they understood God as reason or *logos*, and for them, this *logos* contained the germ of all things (God is *logos spermatikos* [reason-containing-the-germ-of-all-things]). In Stoicism, reason (God) is present in objective nature as law, natural law, and it is present in subjective nature as a spark of the divine given to each human being's soul, so humans possess both rationality and intimacy with divinity. Insofar as the objective world and our subjective existence have a share in reason, the perceived gap between object and subject can be bridged as one discovers the underlying rational law in all things. Reason or *logos* is the ruling, all-productive substance and activity that is extended through all things and constitutes their basis, and this all-prevailing rational substance, the immanent principle of all things, is God. Stoic pantheism made a distinction concerning the God-world relation, for it claimed—as would Spinoza later—that within nature there is *natura naturans* and

¹⁰ *Schelling: Of Human Freedom*, translated by James Gutmann (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1936), 32.

¹¹ This account of pantheism within Stoicism summarizes Hegel's depiction of it in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 3 volumes, translated by E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), vol. 2, 236-276.

natura naturata. The difference here is between “nature naturing” and “nature natured.” Stoicism’s *natura naturans* or nature naturing is nature’s active side that has the capacity to transcend the old, reach out to the new, and produce novelty. *Natura naturata*, on the other hand, is nature’s passive side that is merely the resulting products of nature’s productivity. Later, in the early modern European context, pantheism was reaffirmed by the philosopher Baruch Spinoza. While Spinoza’s pantheistic motto is “*Deus sive Natura*” (“God or Nature”), he too, like the Stoics before him, did not affirm a simple identity of God and all things. Rather, he affirmed God as “the Substance” which grounds and unites the world, with this Substance being understood as the divine power present in all things.

In pantheism the person’s heart dances because feeling prevails. Religiously, with pantheism, one should think of a primitive religious feeling of oneness with the universe, a feeling that brings to the heart a deep, immediate, inner certainty of the reality of the divine. The image at the center of this vision is that of “undergirding”: God is the reality that undergirds personal existence and all reality. The Christian religion includes a long tradition of mystics who have insisted on distinguishing between God and what they call “the Godhead.” “God,” they say, is the personal revelation of the divine; the “Godhead” is the divine substance and power of all things. The heart dances because of the immediate certainty of this primitive pantheistic feeling of the divine; it is this feeling that lies at the foundation of religion. Religion’s dancing in God involves a pilgrimage that progresses toward participation in the divine, but it’s a slow process. The journey into life *in* God, brings us *in*-tuition, *in*-sight, and *in*-spiration,¹² with *in*-tuition receiving the focus in this model.

Relevant here is the Latin notion of *conatus*, meaning “striving” or “endeavor.” It is related to “movement,” which we have identified as the first element of dance. Its Greek root is likely *kinesis*, meaning movement or motion and *kinoun*, meaning active agent or efficient cause. Lucretius used

¹² Frithjof Schuon, *Art from the Sacred to the Profane: East and West*, edited by Catherine Schuon (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007), writes: “When reason and faith have achieved a marriage in the story of mankind, great works have been achieved. It is within this marriage that logical reasoning is transcended by *in*-sight, *in*-tuition, and *in*-spiration.... Art is ‘doing’—that is, manifesting the outpourings of insight, intuition, and inspiration” (vii).

conatus to refer to that intentional movement by which we maintain ourselves in existence. In the early modern period Spinoza utilized this notion of *conatus* as striving for self-preservation. He had learned from Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) who used the concept of *conatus* to refer to what initiates motion. For Spinoza, *conatus* is the essence of our individual being, for as self-preservation it calls us to survive; yet, the *conatus* is a natural drive that “can have the infinite and the divine as its true and ultimate object while remaining a strictly natural drive.”¹³ In Spinoza’s thought, mind and body go hand-in-hand, for the mind (thought) is the idea of the body (deed); thus, in considering the *conatus* these two are best not set over against each other because it embraces the striving of both mind and body and “cognitive content is inseparable from an affective event in which it resonates.”¹⁴ Thinking things and extended things, thoughts and deeds, are to be considered together. The mind as the idea of the body means that it represents each bodily state.¹⁵

In Spinoza, the *conatus* is oriented toward survival; but as it matures through its striving for understanding it incorporates a striving for eternity, while the notion of survival takes shape as a social phenomenon that necessarily includes rather than excludes others.¹⁶ We are called to use our reason to preserve ourselves, but the reality to be saved is the whole of humanity and nature. For Spinoza, by preserving oneself one also contributes to the preservation of the universe of which one is a part. According to the Spinoza scholar Yirmiyahu Yovel, once the *conatus* embraces reason and adopts a rational standpoint, allowing higher forms of striving, it is able to progress to these higher levels because built into it is a striving for indefinite existence, so that it finally “entails the quest for infinity.”¹⁷ Spinoza affirms three types of knowledge: an imaginative kind of knowledge, that often goes astray and creates

¹³ *Desire and Affect: Spinoza as Psychologist*, edited by Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Papers Presented at the third Jerusalem Conference (Ethica III)* (New York: Little Room Press, 1999), Yovel’s Preface and Acknowledgements, xiii.

¹⁴ Michael Mack, *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity: The Hidden Enlightenment of Diversity from Spinoza to Freud* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 157, and *Desire and Affect*, xiii.

¹⁵ Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 157.

¹⁶ Yirmiyahu Yovel, “Transcending Mere Survival From Conatus to Conatus Intelligendi,” in *Desire and Affect*, 46-47.

¹⁷ Yovel, “Transcending Mere Survival,” 50.

false knowledge; a rational kind of knowledge, that serves universality and more dependably creates true knowledge; and an intuitive kind of knowledge, that is the basis for the intellectual love of God, which is “the love and joy that have the universe-God as their object.”¹⁸ The deep structure of the human *conatus*, especially as concerns its third, intuitive type of knowledge, gives us a potent apparatus for interpreting pantheism’s dancing heart as serving our theme of dancing in God.

The ancient Greeks can serve as an example for the passionate dancing heart. The Greeks combined the philosophical idea of a rationally ordered world with the poetic image of a divinely harmonious chorus in the spectacle of the cosmic dance as a radiant vision of life to be beheld by impartial observers.¹⁹ In the *Timaeus* of Plato we read how the planets and other bodies in the heavens revolve around a common center in a cosmic dance.²⁰ It was then commonplace to think of the stars as one’s co-dancers (*synchoreutiai*) and to regard the person uneducated in dance as basically one without culture and not a genuine citizen.²¹ Dance was very important to Plato. Especially in Books 2 and 7 of the *Laws*, he discusses dance and music as they relate to religious festivals;²² he uses the term “*choreia*” for the choral activity that combined singing and dancing. The chorus was the high school of early Greece, much like is depicted in the television program *Glee* in our time; and the influence of this instruction sprang ultimately from the two heavenly divine dancers, Apollo and Dionysus, the supreme “dance-instructors” of the Olympian universe.²³ From these two gods come the two types of dance: the Apollonian type, considered an ordering force, and the Dionysian type, a disruptive force.²⁴ Both dance types played their role in the Athenian tragic chorus that wove together drama, song, and dance into a

¹⁸ Yovel, “Transcending Mere Survival,” 53.

¹⁹ Miller, *Measures of Wisdom*, 4.

²⁰ Steven H. Lonsdale, *Dance and Ritual Play in Greek Religion* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 45. This refers to the *Timaeus*, 40c.

²¹ Miller, *Measures of Wisdom*, 13-14 and Lonsdale, *Dance and Ritual Play in Greek Religion*, 24.

²² Lonsdale, *Dance and Ritual Play in Greek Religion*, xvi and 8.

²³ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, translated by Gilbert Highet, 2 volumes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939, 1945), vol. I, 248 and cited in Miller, *Measures of Wisdom*, 14.

²⁴ Lonsdale, *Dance and Ritual Play in Greek Religion*, treats these two dance types respectively in his chapters two and three.

single art in the spring Dionysian festival, held on the circular dance floor or orchestra (from the verb “*orcheisthai*,” meaning “to dance”) of the theater.²⁵ Here the Greeks experienced their culture at its height.²⁶

III. Panentheism’s Dancing Mind

The second vantage point on the relation of God and the world is panentheism. The claim relevant to the panentheism model is that *the religious person wants to affirm that God is beyond or transcendent of the world, so that there is a difference between God and the world.* Panentheism simply adds the two letters “en,” the preposition for “in,” to “pantheism,” and means “the belief that all things are in God” or “that God is in all things.” In this view of the God-world relation, God is free over against the world and the creation is genuinely free over against God. But here there is a sharpening of the concept of God with the emphasis on mediation through thinking. Here God is “sacramentally embodied.”²⁷ This dialogical model of the God-world relation focuses on panentheism’s dancing mind.

Hegel was the first to give an elaborate articulation of panentheism. He placed the negative or the finite into the very self of God. Hegel grasped negativity or finitude as a moment in God, as the eternal *Other* through which God mediates God’s continuous transition from possibility to actuality. The life of the world takes place, then, within the life of God, which is marked by the transition into difference and the return to unity. In more recent times, process theology, drawing on the philosophical envisioning of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, has been the major theological perspective popularizing this panentheistic form of faith. Whitehead affirms a dipolar God. God’s primordial nature as the Divine Eros or Evocator sponsors the differentiation of creation, and God’s consequent nature as the Divine Agape or Embracer sponsors its unification.

²⁵ Miller, *Measures of Wisdom*, 22.

²⁶ To shorten the essay, I am not dealing with the whirling dervishes of Islam’s Sufi movement as a second example of the dancing heart.

²⁷ McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 149-150.

The dialogical panentheistic view affirms God as the power of creation but understands that power as the power of love. The art of power is to make free, and that is precisely what the Creator God lovingly does. God's power of love can give itself away while at the same time taking itself back, and this Kierkegaard sees as the height of God's almighty love: to be able to give power to the creature but to do it in such a way that God is taken out of the picture and the creature can be genuinely independent, free over against God.

Dancing with an open mind is a matter of choice, a choice we need not decide to make. As Einstein suggested, there are the two ways to live our lives—as though everything is a miracle, or as though nothing is. We can live out of a universe story that is stilted, scientific prose, or imaginative, sacred poetry. I would suggest that maybe if we take seriously the rhythm of the cosmic dance we'll be able to appreciate the need for heeding both the prose and the poetic stories.²⁸ Panentheism finds place for science and religion alike in its understanding of the God-world relation, but it likes to see these complement one another and move toward a synthesis. It concerns itself less with the undergirding of reality and more with its understanding, just as its focus is less on *in*-tuition and more on *in*-sight.

Hegel's philosophy is an effort to give an account of the dancing mind. His logic is the basis of his philosophical system and at the heart of his logic is movement, the movement from category to category through the dialectical process of mediation. The mind progresses on its conceptual journey, but this, for Hegel, is not an unfolding of cold abstractions, or what Whitehead has called "a bloodless dance of categories."²⁹ For Hegel, the march of the concept is the march of the dancing mind, because by means of its rhythmic or dialectical movement it is garnering more and more of actuality in its conceptualizing of reality. Hegel incorporates a tragic chorus, ala that of the ancient Greeks, into his philosophy. His commonsensical philosophical point concerning dialectical movement is simply the affirmation that "the more contexts and perspectives one is able to consciously bring to bear on an

²⁸ See Sanguin, *Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos*, 78, for the cited suggestion of Einstein.

²⁹ Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), 144.

event the closer one is to the truth.”³⁰ Hegel’s chorus gives voice to multiple perspectives. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* systematizes the choral voices by presenting serially the various imaginative models of experience and demonstrating why in each case the model or choral voice falls short of being fully convincing.³¹ Hegel insists, as Robert Pippin reminds us, “that philosophy must not study mere concepts, but concepts *in their ‘actuality,’*” as tested experientially.³² “The entire *Phenomenology* is a meditation on ... a kind of collective subject coming to collective self-consciousness,”³³ and to that extent it can be regarded as a grand try out for choral participants, a competition ala “Dancing with the Stars” or “American Idol” in which each contestant is evaluated, with the perspectives and performances of each making its contribution to the whole.

Kierkegaard, of course, disagrees completely with Hegel on this central and critical matter of movement. It is interesting, however, that he too has a choral group, namely, his choir of pseudonyms, and these serve a function very similar to that served by the multiple perspectives of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* with its dialectical method. Each pseudonymous author presents a different voice or perspective along the spectrum of positions or stages on life’s way. So the form of method is somewhat compatible with Hegel, although the content is starkly different. Kierkegaard’s standpoint is that movement from quantity to quality cannot take place without a volitional act, a decision, an expression of freedom, a production of passion. It requires, in short, a dance move, a leap. Kierkegaard thinks that the notion of a “leap” rather nicely captures what has to occur existentially for the transition to take place and he makes use of this notion at many points in his authorship. The most well-known is in *Fear*

³⁰ Sanguin, *Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos*, 66. The author makes this point, however, independently and with no mentioning of Hegel.

³¹ Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1-2.

³² Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness*, 2.

³³ Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness*, p. 3.

and Trembling, where the focus is on Abraham as the knight of faith who makes this leap.³⁴ The leap of faith involves a double movement. Abraham's first move is giving up his beloved son, Isaac. The pseudonym Johannes de Silentio presents this first movement as requiring courage to go against oneself and give up what is so dear. Abraham does this. The knight of infinite resignation is capable of making this first move too, but does not do it with the expectation of recovering the loss. Decisive is the second move. "Abraham had faith that Isaac, once surrendered to God, would also be restored. God would be true to his promise and Abraham would be able to receive Isaac back joyfully even after giving him up."³⁵ With God all things are possible, and to trust the God of possibility even when the situation is impossible, and to do that with all one's mind and strength—is to have a dancing mind, and that's what faith provides.³⁶

Quite intriguing is the sacred healing medicine dance of the Bushmen of the Kalahari, as an example for this model.³⁷ The Bushmen's worldview includes a Big God who is the Big Power. Dance enables individuals to receive the Big Power from the Big God. In this ecstatic experience, the concentrated divine power is depicted as nails or arrows, and in conjunction with the song of the Big God these can be made to enter into a person's stomach. The nails and arrows come from the Big God, who, out of love, gives special songs to doctors, who squeeze them until they become a nail or an arrow.

³⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 41, where his pseudonym writes: "It is supposed to be the most difficult feat for a ballet dancer to leap into a specific posture in such a way that he never once strains for the posture but in the very leap assumes the posture. Perhaps there is no ballet dancer who can do it—but this knight does it.... The knights of infinity are ballet dancers."

³⁵ John D. Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 49.

³⁶ Nietzsche is another good resource on the dancing mind. He reminds us that nurturing the dancing mind calls for developing our consciousness to be in rhythm with our bodily instincts, so that we can become more transparent with and to ourselves. Nietzsche shows how the dancing mind penetrates into the self's double consciousness, working to resolve the tension and to own the most fitting interpretation of the situation at hand, which is one that includes an honest assessment of one's real motives that are at play. See the discussion by Robert B. Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology and First Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), Chapter Five, entitled "The Psychological Problem of Self-Deception," 85-104.

³⁷ *Ropes to God: Experiencing the Bushman Spiritual Universe*, edited by Bradford Keeney (Philadelphia: Ringing Rocks Press, in association with Leete's Island Books, *Profiles of Healing*, vol. 8, 2003). My account of this group's dancing draws exclusively on this book's gathered statements from medicine doctors who have recounted their experiences, 29-58.

Therefore, a nail or arrow is a condensed song conveying God's love. These nails and arrows become hot when awakened, and as they become very hot they move up the body until they turn into steam and leave through the top of the head. Once cooled off, the nails or arrows can become engaged in the process once again. If one's nails and arrows are not heated up regularly, they become dirty and the person gets sick. The Bushmen doctors, once transformed through dancing, can take out nails and arrows and clean them and can put new nails and arrows into a person. Sometimes the doctor's eyes become "new eyes" that can see the world differently. This second set of eyes sees light and a different world, even when the physical eyes are closed—the dancing mind indeed gaining in-sight. When very strong with the Big Power that has come through intense singing and dancing, the Bushman is able to see lines or ropes of light—horizontal ropes connecting every creature to every other creature, and vertical ropes that go up to the sky. It is possible for the doctor to go up the sky rope to the place where the ancestors live, there to receive messages from the special village in the sky, and to bring the entire sky village along with him back to the earthly dance taking place, so that the ancestors can assist the doctor with healing the sick. The Bushmen of the Kalahari say that this religious ritual and experience is the most important part of their lives: they "live to dance."

We can learn much about religion from the Bushmen's imagery of ropes to God. The ropes to God are there to see; everyone has one. But one must dance in order for the power of the divine to be unleashed and for the new eyes to appear to the dancing mind so that the ropes connecting people to God and to one another can be seen.³⁸

IV. Pantransentheism's Dancing Soul

The third vantage point on the God-world relation and the attending viewpoint on religion is that of pantransentheism. The claim relevant to the pantransentheism model is that *the religious person wants*

³⁸ I bypass the dancing in God manifested in the Candomblé ceremonies of Salvador, Bahia in northeast Brazil as influenced by Yoruban religion of West Africa as a second example of the dancing mind.

to affirm that God is transforming the world, so that God is bringing the world to fuller participation in God and thus establishing a deeper unity on the other side of difference. Pantransentheism refers to the belief that all things are being transformed in God. I have coined the term pantransentheism, and yet what the pantransentheistic vision is offering is not so new. Greek theologians of the ancient Eastern world gave expression to its ideas and many right up to our time, including some theologians of liberation, have done the same. The emphasis in this view is on the theme of the transformation of the whole creation. The dancing God is a liberating God and the source of reality's transformation. But humans are dignified by God to be co-creators in helping to move the world into greater fullness of life. On this view, God and humans work as dance partners to move the natural world and its ensconced historical creations toward their final destination. The emphasis here is on actualization through willing. God, the comprehensive reality, promises to be about the work of transforming the world, and this God calls us to participate in the divine adventure and to undertake the holy renovative task. This agential model of the God-world relation focuses on pantransentheism's dancing soul. Theologically, pantransentheism's dancing God of promise demands remaining open to new religious manifestations of the mystery and meaning of God and bolstering theology's eschatological dimension out of a concern for transformation. The Marxist's vision of a classless society and Christianity's heavenly vision of a better world remain relevant for transforming this world. Imagery of dancing in God can lend its power to envisioning a new creation in which all things are being brought to fullness of life in God.

To dance is to participate, and being aware of the participative dimension of reality is important for engaging in the work of transformative praxis. It has been said that "the secret of Gandhi's success in bringing down the British Empire was his understanding of the participative nature of the universe."³⁹ Ritual at its best empowers us to "dance," and in the dancing we experience the divine dancing through us. Nietzsche says that he could only believe in a God who knows how to dance, but he also says that

³⁹ Sanguin, *Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos*, 220.

“now a God dances through me.”⁴⁰ This is language of “theopraxis,” that highest form of action undertaken only by souls that dance.⁴¹ Christians too have spoken of the dancing triune God by means of the term “*perichoresis*,” which expresses the interpenetration of the Trinity’s three persons. The verb “*chorein*” means “to make space for” and is the root for “*choreia*,” meaning “dance.” The 8th century theologian John of Damascus (and Jürgen Moltmann and William Placher of our own times) depicted the Trinity as three persons going around as in a dance, becoming united in that single activity while maintaining their distinctive personas, which I have suggested imagining as the Cosmic Dancer, the Christic Dance, and the Communal Dancing. Eastern Christianity with regard to *perichoresis* has emphasized how redeemed human beings are drawn into the divine circle and benefit fully from the rich interrelating love of the divine persons. The dancing God, open to the world, in love draws the world into Godself, empowering it to dance. This signifies a live drama being enacted in every moment, with possibilities abounding for participating as co-creators in the divine choreographic work of creative transformation.

Pantransentheism is all about transformation and that calls for the dancing soul, which is expected to withstand the pain that is often involved in transformation. One thinks of the First Nations’ Sun Dance festival, which involves ritual sweat lodges, vision quests, chanting, and ecstatic dance. It is a sacred ordeal that one participates in with the goal of readying one’s soul to be more open to the Great Spirit and to move further ahead on the dancing-in-God journey. At the end of the Sun Dance week of intense activity, singing, fasting, prayer, and sleep deprivation, participants are exhausted, dead tired, and worn down, but in the case of most, their eyes are on fire, because transformation has taken place. They have gone through the ordeal, they have danced in God; and they have come through the ordeal stronger, with a sense of resolve and a fortified soul, more in tune with the world, and ready to allow

⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954, 1978), 41.

⁴¹ On the notion of “theopraxis,” see Kimerer LaMothe, *Nietzsche’s Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 63.

that experience to shape their everyday dancing.⁴² Pantransentheism concerns itself less with the undergirding of reality and its understanding and more with the undertaking of transforming reality, just as the focus is less on *in*-tuition and *in*-sight and more on *in*-spiration.

If pantheism brought us into *conatus* and panentheism into consciousness, pantransentheism carries us into conscience. Without conscience, there is no dancing soul. There is much wisdom in the claim, “Hearing is at the root of all transformation.”⁴³ This is especially the case when we are talking about a hearing that is close to the earth and close to the body, a hearing that dances because it is in tune with the cosmic dancing of its world. The good conscience hears in a way that resonates with cosmic dancing; the bad conscience, in Nietzsche’s sense, is rightly to be criticized because it involves a hearing that is out of tune with the world’s cosmic dancing, so that it makes us feel guilty for things we shouldn’t feel guilty about. Call and response is the form assumed by many dances. Situated at the center of what we are designating the responsiveness-element of dance, call and response is also constitutive of life itself.

The fundamental reality of call and response necessitates distinguishing between the vocative and existential orders of life. The vocative side of things has to do with events, while the existential traffics in names. We get then the “distinction between events—something that has already happened but is still arriving—and the names or things in which events are expressed.”⁴⁴ The task is to discern the event that is harbored by the name. The name of God, for instance, bears testimony to an event, an event that calls us into it if we are to be able to experience what the reality being named is all about. There’s a self-involving quality implied in gaining access to the event-full nature of certain names, like “justice,” “gift,” “Christianity,” “democracy,” and “God.”⁴⁵ In or under the name of God, the event of

⁴² An account by sanguine, *Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos*, 177-178, inspired this paragraph.

⁴³ Harvey, *The Way of Passion*, 230.

⁴⁴ John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 58.

⁴⁵ Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct*, 71.

God calls upon us, and the decisive issue concerns our responding to the call; so the question becomes, What is my testimony to the call going to be?⁴⁶ As Kierkegaard humorously quips, from a “worldly point of view, a much more certain way of deciding and being altogether sure that a God exists would be to have a picture of God hung up—then we would see that God exists.”⁴⁷ That’s humorous because it’s ludicrous: we know that God is not an objective reality to be hammered onto the wall; God is rather the event harbored in, with, and under the divine name. “It also belongs to the vocativeness of the event,” suggests John Caputo, “to be addressed, to be called on, *here and now*, in the present, to be made responsible, to be asked to respond, to what this name calls for.”⁴⁸ The “vocative order,” therefore, refers to that “order of what is calling, what is called for, what is recalled, and who is called on,” just as the “existential order” refers to “the order of what actually exists, of natural languages and real things.”⁴⁹ Of course, life’s call is not an easily categorizable reality, as Caputo reminds us: “For a call, to be is to be heard.... It is a condition of our hearing it that we cannot identify it further. The condition that we cannot identify it is *constitutive* of it. For as soon as we would be able to identify it, as soon as we could say who and what is calling, we would have begun to master it and make it our own and put ourselves into the nominative. We would no longer be in the accusative, put on the spot, de-posed by what it poses to us.”⁵⁰

The conscience designates this reality of call and response that expands our world beyond the confining boundaries of finitude. That is why Kierkegaard can write, in discussing Socrates in relation to the conscience, that “in conscience the finite subject makes itself infinite,”⁵¹ and state in another context through a pseudonym that “the more definitely conscience is developed in a person the more

⁴⁶ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 97.

⁴⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 145-146.

⁴⁸ Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct*, 60.

⁴⁹ Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct*, 59.

⁵⁰ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 130.

⁵¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: With Continual Reference to Socrates*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 224-225.

expanded he is, even though in other respects he closes himself off from the whole world.”⁵² Of course, when one starts listening, when one starts to take the conscience seriously and starts heeding the call, then one begins to become a genuine individual, a dancing soul, who is going to be capable of engaging significantly in transformative work. And Nietzsche agreed with Kierkegaard on this. Nietzsche wrote in his “Schopenhauer as Educator”: “The man who does not want to belong to the mass needs only to cease taking himself easily; let him follow his conscience, which calls to him: ‘Be your self! All you are now doing, thinking, desiring, is not you yourself.’”⁵³ On Nietzsche’s view, the answer to what he calls the “granite question” “What does your conscience say?” is “You shall become the person you are.”⁵⁴

As an example of pantransentheistic religion, I want to look at *The Dance of Divine Love: The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which is India’s classic love story.⁵⁵ The total work is 335 chapters, but the five-chapter dramatic poem, which some have called “the most enchanting poem ever written,” tells of the dance of Krishna with his female devotees.⁵⁶ The poem exemplifies religion embracing eroticism, as the highest levels of divine life here accommodate the play of eros. This is “Sanskrit poetry of Krishna-centered Vaishnavism,” and its erotic overtones serve to temper the more typical ascetic tendencies of Krishna worship.⁵⁷ “This masterpiece of world literature” about young maidens joining their ideal beloved in performing the Rāsa or “circle dance of love” provides the listener or viewer a peak into the interior life of the divine and celebrates the fact that one there finds a God

⁵² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, edited and translated by Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 134.

⁵³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, edited by Daniel Breazeale and translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 127.

⁵⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book Three, # 270, 219.

⁵⁵ *Dance of Divine Love: The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, India’s Classic Sacred Love Story*, introduced, translated, and illuminated by Graham M. Schweig (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁵⁶ Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love*, xi.

⁵⁷ Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love*, xvi.

romantically engaged in the playful making of music and dance and intensely involved in the intimacy of divine love.⁵⁸

At the climax of the dramatic story, the Gopīs, the cowherd maidens, forget their sorrow, while their desires are filled simply by touching Krishna’s thighs.⁵⁹ As the ancient circular dance begins, the maidens join together in love, linking their arms, with Krishna entering between each pair in such a way that each thought she alone was at his side as he placed his arms around their necks.⁶⁰ Then, with waists bending and garments rhythmically moving, the wives of Krishna sang while dancing, and they were overjoyed by the touch of Krishna, who delighted in loving them in this divine play.⁶¹ As a beautiful dramatic manifestation of communal dancing, the poem demonstrates the bhakti belief “that love is stronger than death” and “carries the soul beyond death, even while the soul is in the embodied state prior to death.” In this sense, “the very practice of bhakti [or devotion] is both intrinsically the means to liberation and itself constitutes liberation.”⁶² The poem powerfully presents the joyful reality of humans and the divine joining in communal dancing.⁶³

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In assessing these three models for understanding both the relation of God to the world and the reality of religion, we can conclude that the three examined views differ from one another and yet they each have their contribution to make to conceiving and experiencing God today. A form of spirituality could be fleshed out for each view. There is a natural progression from the first to the second to the third view. But as one moves out of one view and into the next, there is no need to leave the previous

⁵⁸ Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love*, 3-5.

⁵⁹ Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love*, 65.

⁶⁰ Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love*, 66.

⁶¹ Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love*, 70.

⁶² Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love*, 157.

⁶³ To decrease the essay’s length, I skip the dancing soul’s second example, which was an account of the viewpoint of Maximus the Confessor (580-662), a theologian of the transfigured cosmos, for whom the first element of dance—movement—functions as the basis of his cosmic teleology, which features alluring thoughts on “*theosis*” or “deification,” a notion that, since the early church, has been used to express the union between God and creatures.

moment behind. Hegel endorsed an *aufheben* or a sublation which allows one to move ahead into a new phase of life while carrying with one the riches of the previous phase. Kierkegaard likewise understood his stages of life in that way. The moves from the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage and on through the stages of religiousness do not leave behind the concerns and commitments of the previous stages but rather relativize them and recontextualize them within the perspective of the next stage. So too with these three views: each has its contribution to make. Even in the pantransentheistic form of theism, one does not leave behind the beneficial deliverances of pantheism and panentheism but incorporates them into the new theological perspective.

If not all concepts of God are equal, we ask about the payoff of pantransentheism: What commends pantransentheism as a religious perspective that is appropriate for consideration in our imperiled time? Three quick reasons can be offered by way of response. First, the God of pantransentheism needs humans' care. The pantransentheistic model of God underscores the profoundly interrelational character of God and the world. We and the rest of the world are utterly dependent on God. God is not dependent on humans in the same way for God's life, but God is dependent upon humans for the divine purpose to be brought about in the world. God designates human beings to be co-creators with God. God the Cosmic Dancer dignifies human beings by calling them through their dancing hearts to share in the divine work of creating a richer, more fulfilled universe. Second, the God of pantransentheism elicits humans' care. The pantransentheistic model of God means that religion assesses the world ultimately in a positive manner, for the world is within God or ultimacy. To be ultimately concerned about God as Christic Dance is to be ultimately concerned about the world. To love or care for God is to love or care for the world, for the dancing mind comes to see that the world is in God and can be understood as God's body. Stirring human beings' desire for ultimacy, God desires through our religious questing to draw humans into caring. Third, the God of pantransentheism empowers humans' care. Although human beings are co-creators with God, God is

the spiritual source that empowers all of reality including humans. God is the Spirit of Life and Communal Dancing that breathes vitality into all existing reality and sustains it over time. The divine spiritual energy works in the world through cultural creations of all sorts, including such a meager effort as an essay on "Dancing in God," to call and empower the dancing soul of human beings to care by prophetically acting on behalf of others. Such caring protest and response to particular situations at hand are of God. To allow the dancing heart and the dancing mind and the dancing soul to coalesce in a full-bodied dancing in God is to join in the sacred dance of the cosmos.