

Embodying the Feminine in the Dances of the World's Religions



ANGELA M. YARBER

LITURGICAL STUDIES

Dances that embody the “feminine” teach the dancer and the observers inside and outside the faith tradition about women’s experiences, expressions, and understandings within their respective faith traditions. In *Embodying the Feminine in the Dances of the World’s Religions*, the author immerses herself in four dance traditions and explores what their dance teaches about women’s experiences in their faith tradition. Bharatanatyam is a classical Indian dance stemming from the devadasi system; kabuki onnagata are Japanese male enactors of “female-likeness”; the Mevlevi Order of America allows women to train as “whirling dervishes”; and Gurit Kadman created folk dances for Jewish women and men.

Rev. Dr. ANGELA M. YARBER holds a Ph.D. in art and religion from the Graduate Theological Union at University of California, Berkeley. She has been a professional dancer, artist, and clergywoman since 1999. Currently, she is Pastor for Preaching and Worship at Wake Forest Baptist Church at Wake Forest University. She is author of several articles about the intersections between dance, arts, and religions. For more of her research, artwork, or ministry, visit www.angelayarber.com.

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

Embodying the Feminine in the Dances of the World's Religions

"Angela M. Yarber is asking questions about the role of dance in religious life that have never been more important. Beginning with descriptive accounts of four performances of traditional dance that she witnessed in the San Francisco area, Yarber proceeds to investigate the social and historical roots of these transplanted forms, focusing on the messages each dance conveys about the experiences of women in these traditions. Weighing the effects of globalization and the possibilities for interfaith communication, Yarber cautiously celebrates the transgressive power of dancing the 'feminine.'"

*Kimerer L. LaMothe, Author of Nietzsche's Dancers:
Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values*

"Angela M. Yarber creatively reimagines the language of dance as a vehicle for women to articulate the essential insights of four spiritual traditions. By giving form to the rarefied reaches of her tradition, the dancer embodies the spiritual and historical truths of her faith, and in so doing shares its highest aspiration and most cherished beliefs. Yarber's experience as a dancer adds depth to her insightful multidisciplinary and cross comparative study. She has succeeded in expanding our academic and spiritual horizons."

*Ronald Nakasone, Professor of Buddhist Art and Aesthetics, Center for Art,
Religion, and Education at Graduate Theological Union*

"Angela M. Yarber's insightful and inspiring book engages the idea that the major world religions do not only provide systems of thought about the Holy. Rather it is in the practices that a knowing of the Divine emerges. By engaging dance traditions such as Bharatanatyam, kabuki onnagata, Israeli folk dance, and the dances of women in the Mevlevi order, Yarber shows how women touch holy ground. I recommend this book to everyone who is interested in learning more about dance and religion."

Andrea Bieler, Professor of Christian Worship, Pacific School of Religion

"This fascinating study probes an array of religious faiths through the lens of dance. Both interreligious and interdisciplinary, this book should have wide appeal for all those interested in the role of dance for performer and audience, the faith that these dances communicate and evoke, and the complicated and tragic roles gender can occupy in religious traditions. The author concludes by offering important feminist analysis of what the dance reveals about women, their experience of faith, and her own involvement in this process as minister, dancer, and feminist. A truly original and provocative study."

John N. Sheveland, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Gonzaga University

"I have known in my bones how a dance empowers, shapes new understandings and plumbs emotions affecting the dancer and those who see it. Articulating cultural, philosophical, and interfaith dimensions of this process in the service of sacred women dancers of four diverse cultures is timely and significant. Thus I endorse and recommend this book to stimulate our imagination and deepen our perspectives, especially for faculty and students in the fields of dance, women studies, and art and religion."

Carla DeSola, Pioneer of Liturgical Dance, Author of The Spirit Moves, and Adjunct Professor of Dance and Religion at the Center for Art, Religion, and Education at Graduate Theological Union

"Among her many innovations in the world of modern dance, Martha Graham fused the distinctions of East and West, and of ritual and performance as she revisioned Classical mythology and Christian legends from the perspective of the heroine. Angela M. Yarber expands these frontiers in new ways as she weaves together her own experiences as dancer and choreographer with her theological studies—all through a feminist lens. Through the narrative of *Embodying the Feminine in the Dances of the World's Religions* she enables her readers to see the religious power of dance from Japan and India to Turkey and Israel, and then returns 'home' with a new way of seeing and being gender, religion, and dance."

Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, Adjunct Professor of Religious Art and Cultural History, ACMCU Georgetown University

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Sylvia A. Sweeney
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PETER LANG

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To Elizabeth,
a woman who embodies peace, justice, and wonder,
and to all those women who have taught us to dance,
and therefore, to have faith.

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FOREWORD

A variety of scholars in world religions highlight the importance of clearly stating your “starting point” when beginning a book such as this.¹ Like them, I think it is only fair to explain what brought me to this research and why it is important to me personally. I cannot claim complete objectivity when explaining dances and faiths so vastly different than my own, no matter how hard I try. As much as I aim to be an objective observer and removed scholar, I find it also essential to name what I bring to the texts, research, and dances consciously and unconsciously. Taking a cue from Paul Knitter, Huston Smith, and Linda Alcoff, I aim to be a globally responsible scholar by stating my positionality.

My starting points are three: minister, dancer, and woman. First, I am an ordained Baptist minister who has served in local churches since 1999. I am both unapologetically Baptist and feminist. Accordingly, my entry point into religious studies was through my own Christian tradition. Though I was raised in a home that did not ascribe to any particular faith tradition, my own ordination and study is clearly in Christianity. My entry point into faith traditions outside of my own came through my work as a dancer.

I have danced for over twenty-five years and professionally for over ten. While my own bodily training stems from a fusion of contemporary Western styles, my interest in global dances piqued while I traveled throughout the Middle East with other scholars, clergy, and artists interested in interfaith dialogue. There I witnessed the whirling dervishes, Israeli folk dance, and the transformative power of dance in bringing diverse people together when their words otherwise divided them. Upon my return, I dedicated most of my studies to exploring the role of dance in faith traditions outside of Christianity. While I had solid and in-depth background in dance in the history of the Christian church, I discovered that my own faith tradition lacked dances created specifically for women, aimed at empowering women and valuing the body as a conduit for divine grace, rather than an object of shame. In my search I discovered rich,

beautiful, complex dances within every major world religion, many of which valued women's bodies. Accordingly, I learned about many of the faith traditions of the world through the dances of their faithful followers. They each taught me unique truths about their faiths—and about my own faith—that traditional Christianity lacked. I say this not to imply that I appropriated these dances for my own personal use. Rather, I say this simply to acknowledge the truth, beauty, and grace that these dances offered me personally.

Finally, I approach this project—not only as a Christian minister and dancer—but as a Western woman. Women are often marginalized in scholarship, religion, and society. But my own status as a woman from the United States who grew up poor in a family where no one received higher education pales in comparison to the socioeconomic statuses of the women in the chapters to come. So, I acknowledge the privilege I bring to this project. I acknowledge that there is no way for me to grasp the suffering and oppression these myriad dancing women have faced in India, Japan, Turkey, and Israel. I acknowledge that my status as a white Christian minister is one of privilege in the United States. But I also acknowledge that my own background is enmeshed in poverty and lack of formal education as my family was not afforded the same luxury I have in writing these very words and theorizing about these seemingly esoteric concepts. So, I write this on their behalf and on the behalf of all those women who were not taught to read and write, but were taught to dance. Their dances have taught me profound truths about liberation, sensuality, subversion, compassion, community, and mostly, faith; it is my hope that writing about their dancing traditions can be my way of giving them a voice and saying, “thank you.”

Note

- 1 Two such scholars are Paul Knitter, *One Earth many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995) and Huston Smith, *World's Religions: A Guide to Our Wisdom Traditions* (San Francisco: HarperSan-Francisco, 1986) and *Tales of Wonder: Adventures Chasing the Divine* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For me, writing a book truly takes a village. For this reason, there are many people I must thank. Primarily, I owe a tremendous amount of gratitude to the dissertation committee who helped start this book, each of whom has gone above and beyond the call of duty in advising and mentoring me throughout my academic career. Foremost, is Dr. Ronald Nakasone, who took a chance in working with a dancing Baptist feminist. Thank you for fusing East and West in your approach to teaching, for helping me become a better scholar and person, and for *living* what it means to engage in interfaith dialogue. I am also profoundly grateful for Dr. Andrea Bieler who also took a chance by working with someone outside of her field; thank you for allowing me teach along side of you for four years and for endless encouragement and support. And I am deeply thankful for Dr. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona who provided guidance and support despite our distance and differing institutions. You have laid the groundwork for so much of this interdisciplinary field of Arts and Religion and I feel honored to have worked with you.

In addition to these scholars, I must also acknowledge the foundational work, dedication, and inspiration of my late doctoral advisor, Dr. Doug Adams. He was the reason I began this research; Ron and Andrea are most of the reason I continued after his passing. I am grateful for the enthusiasm, support, and encouragement Doug offered me by providing me with opportunities to teach, research, and flourish. Like Diane, he is instrumental in our field and without his work, I don't think I would have been able to even conceptualize this book.

Additional scholars have laid the groundwork for this book. I am tremendously thankful for Judith Ingber who provided me with Hebrew and English translations of her work on Israeli folk dance, including some work that has yet to be published.

Further, I am grateful for two communities of faith who helped keep me grounded during the theory-bound process of research. I am tremendously grateful for the community of faith at Shell Ridge Community Church where I served as Associate Pastor of Arts and

Education while I researched and wrote during my doctoral work in Berkeley, CA. In this beloved community, my research found grounding and practical application. Thank you, Shell Ridge, for dancing, painting, and walking along side of me during this process, and for giving me the privilege of ministering *with* you. I am also thankful for the people at Wake Forest Baptist Church. These kind souls call me their pastor and have offered me much encouragement and grace during the editing and publishing part of this process.

To the kind people at Peter Lang, I am grateful. I am thankful for Andrea Bieler who pointed me in your direction, and for Sylvia Sweeny who offered helpful editorial advice along the way. As always, I am grateful for my supportive family, and especially for a mother who is a life-long learner. And finally, I would be remiss if I did not thank Elizabeth Lee for proof reading and copy editing everything—twice. Not only did you do this, but you listened to me talk about it relentlessly since 2009. Thank you for this and thank you for being you.

CONVENTIONS, ROMANIZATION, AND PRELIMINARY NOTES

The Romanization systems used in this book are those generally considered standard in the English speaking world, based primarily on the transliterations provided by the reputable scholars referenced throughout this work; any diacritic markings utilized in non-English terms are those widely accepted by scholars within their field. Except for the case of a few minor Hebrew translations, the translation and subsequent transliteration of Tamil, Sanskrit, Japanese, Turkish, and Arabic texts is not my own, but the work of the scholars referenced throughout this book. In the rare case that the translation is mine, it is clearly referenced with an endnote. If there was a disparity in transliteration spelling in non-English words, I consulted a variety of reference books and chose the transliteration that was most widely accepted; in some rare cases, I asked the author or another person fluent in the language in question.

For the sake of consistency and referencing, I have italicized every non-English term throughout the dissertation, while also providing a glossary of these terms at the end of the book. The glossary includes only brief definitions for points of reference. Further, I also chose to italicize major reforms, movements, and bills (*Madras Devadasi Bill*, *Meiji Restoration*, *Balfour Declaration*, etc.) to illustrate importance. As these reforms and movements are referenced multiple times throughout this work, I do not include them in the glossary. Another convention worth noting is the use of surnames. In keeping with East Asian tradition, I place the surname before the given name when referencing a Japanese scholar, actor, or dancer (for example, Nakamura Kyozo because Nakamura is his surname).