
The Olé in Dance and Religion: The Cultural and Theological Implications of Dance in the Hispanic Culture

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In my research I have been looking specifically at the Hispanic community and how it is impacted by religion and dance, which at times intersect and at other times conflict with each other. Survey of the church geography within the Hispanic district of Oklahoma City has shown that very few churches engage with Hispanic language and culture, and it is my proposal that more work should be done in this respect. Dance, I argue, is one way that churches could engage more with the Hispanic community. With Hispanic dance, particularly flamenco, as my guide, I look at how the lives of people are affected by Hispanic culture and religion both positively and negatively and how digital media has allowed for connection and spreading of culture and religion. Tying this ethnographic research together, I consider how churches in the United States can open their doors to other cultures, and make people of different cultures feel more welcomed. I look at the emotional connection that dance can create both to those around us and to the Lord. In conclusion, the aim of this article is to consider the implications of both dance and religion on Hispanic culture and how they work both apart and together to guide the daily lives of those living in the Hispanic district in Oklahoma City.

Introduction

As I drive to my first Flamenco class I am racked with nerves, for a few different reasons. The first is that while the dance studio is on a safe street, the same cannot be said about the next street over where I need to park my car. That street is primarily homes and rental houses with broken windows that are known for car and home break-ins and attacks by gang members who target shoppers and restaurant goers on the next street. After locking my car and quickly getting to the street with the studio I am greeted by bright sounds, colors, and smells of the Plaza District in Oklahoma City. These are then mirrored in the studio where I am greeted with a hug from the instructor, whose Flamenco name¹ is Carmen.² The Studio breathes Hispanic culture with brightly colored walls, traditional

music playing, and most people speaking Spanish. Before the class even starts, everyone can feel the *Olé* in the room.

The *Olé* in Hispanic culture is about passion, joy, and love, it is the feeling of strong emotion. One cannot say *Olé* without a smile on one's face. That is what dance and religion should be, about the emotion, the passion, love, and joy that one gets in praising the Lord and being able to move. Two of my informants spoke about the emotion that they feel during worship and when they dance: the joy they get and the ability to express emotions that they cannot always express with words. Mia stated, "I never went to school. . . I'm not the best, but I had the passion that's so much of what it is and what so few dancers unfortunately have these days." This passion that she speaks of, that so few people have nowadays, is the *Olé*.

¹ A flamenco name expresses an alternative side or personality. During the day while she is at work and with her children she is her given name. At night when she is dancing she is the sassy and spectacular Carmen.

² All individuals and churches have been anonymized with pseudonyms.

I want to note that while typically Hispanic and Latino/Latina are not the same (Hispanic refers to coming from a Spanish-speaking country, and Latino/Latina refers to Latin America), in this area I have learned that Hispanic and Latino/Latina all pertain to the same aspects of culture. I would also like to note that while people of Hispanic descent follow many different religions, I have chosen to primarily focus my research on Catholicism because Catholicism is the primary religion in Mexico. According to one of my informants, whom I will call Mia, “In Colombia, you [are] pretty much Catholic . . . that's what you do.” This is also true of Hispanic culture in Oklahoma City. In less than a three-mile radius, four Catholic churches offer primarily, or only, Spanish services. There are only two other Spanish-speaking churches in the area (Assemblies of God and Baptist).

In my research I have been looking specifically at the Hispanic community and how it is impacted by religion and dance, which at times intersect and at other times conflict with each other. With flamenco dance as my lens, I look at how digital media affects Hispanic culture and religion. I then broaden my perspective to consider the role of language in the Hispanic culture in Oklahoma City. Taking a theological perspective, I consider how churches of the United States can open their doors to other cultures, and make people of different cultures feel more welcomed, allowing for a greater spread of Christianity.

The Petal Catholic Church

Before I started this project I had never been to a Catholic Church. I grew up Christian and would still consider myself to be Christian as I hold to central teachings of the faith, such as that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. But I do not affiliate myself with a specific denomination. Going to church while growing up, and still to this day, the churches I visit are usually old warehouse buildings that have been converted into sanctuaries. Still, I grew up in an area where most of my friends were Catholic, and now as a teacher, the majority of my students are Catholic. As a result I have been surrounded by those who follow the Catholic faith my whole life and have always been curious about the cathedrals and mass, as they seem significantly different from the churches I have attended. This project gave me the opportunity to explore Catholicism with its beautiful buildings and people always dressed their best. It opened up a world of

church experience different from my own of meeting in warehouses or coffee shops, often dressed in whatever feels most comfortable that day.

My first opportunity to visit a Catholic Church in Oklahoma City was The Petal Catholic Church. There are actually two churches by this name in Oklahoma City. One is right in the middle of downtown, next to the Oklahoma City Bombing Memorial, and is surrounded by a bunch of corporate buildings. It is about a three to five minute drive outside of the Hispanic District. The Petal Catholic Church that I went to is right in the middle of the Hispanic District, and I had to take back roads of the city to get to it. The church is surrounded by homes that have seen better days, most have windows that are either boarded up or have bars over them. It is located in an area of the city where it is best to not be caught walking alone at night and where your car doors should be locked at all times. Once, as I was leaving, I noticed that the church had a fence around the perimeter with barbed wire at the top. However, the fence was not the first thing that I noticed (this may be because I have worked in Oklahoma City on and off for the last five years and barbed wire had become a common sight to me). Rather, the first thing I noticed was the amazing red brick work that created this building. The second thing I noticed was the moms sitting outside in the late August heat selling homemade lunch, and giving away food to those they knew were in need of a meal.

I attended both an English mass and a Spanish one. For the sake of brevity, I focus here only on the Spanish mass. It is of note that the English mass was more solemn than the Spanish mass, with less music and less engagement from the congregation. The biggest difference between the two masses, however, was that the Spanish mass had a happier mood. People greeted me with a smile, even when they realized my understanding of Spanish was minimal. Everyone acted like they were there because they wanted to be, not because it was a chore they had to do. Almost all of the seats were packed by the time worship was over. The crowd was about 98% Hispanic and 2% other ethnicities. I also noticed a lack of people in the age of fifteen to twenty-five. The worship music was much more upbeat and had a band of at least ten people crowded at the front with everyone grooving to the worship music. This crowd did not have hymn books (other than a few select people who owned them) or words on a screen to follow, but they knew all the words and could follow whichever song was sung. While this service was slightly less ritualistic than the

English one, it was still very ritual based: everyone knew what to do on the invisible cues that as a stranger I did not know and was unable to pick up on. The English and Spanish masses were led by different priests, with the Spanish mass having a larger group of altar boys and nuns to help with the service. While both groups wore their “Sunday best,” in the Spanish mass people seemed to dress up more, with women in colorful dresses and men in suits rather than nice tops with clean pants. There was also far more participation from the crowd in the Spanish mass. In general, music and movement were much more entwined in the Hispanic service. One person would start singing their prayers, then others would join in. As they would sing they would start swaying to the movement, their bodies automatically reacting to the music.

The worship that was practiced, especially in the Spanish mass during the time of prayer, was ritual, but was also from the heart. In his ethnography of Black Pentecostal churches, *Fire in my Bones: Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American Gospel*, Glenn Hinson discusses how “experience suggests, song is but one of many possible vehicles of invitation. Preaching, praying, testifying, witnessing, and praising can all invoke the same invitational frame” (Hinson 2000, 3). The outburst of song during prayer may have been a way people from Hispanic heritage feel most connected to the Lord. A person can sing and pray at the same time, and for a culture where music and movement play an important role in people’s daily lives, this could help them move from ritual practice to speaking from their souls.

Time, Memory, and History

Time, memory, and history are the foundation of Hispanic culture. This can be seen in their religion, dance performances, and the efforts that people put into the spreading of knowledge through digital media. People in the Hispanic culture in Oklahoma City do their best to share and spread knowledge of their culture and history, while preserving the memory of their loved ones and where they have come from.

Flamenco Performance to Celebrate Memory and History

“The doors are locked right?” my mom asks me as she clicks the lock button again while we drive past a homeless camp less than three minutes away from the ReVoZo performance at Spark Creative Lab. As I

drive my mom to our first Flamenco performance on Mother’s Day weekend I am reminded by her that even though this performance is technically in the Asian District, which is widely seen as safer than the Hispanic District and allows for a larger variety of people to come watch the performance, the area still is not considered to be safe and has a large population of homeless people that have been known to jump cars when stopped at intersections. Carmen chose the Asian District for the performance despite concerns about safety, the sharing of cultures, and some gangs in the area that have stirred up violence in the past. However, there is another reason for Carmen’s choice of this location to host the performance. The area has a history of hosting Hispanic community performances, mostly because the streets tend to be cleaner, but also because before it was a part of the Asian District this street was a part of the Hispanic District before they were priced out. As a result the street still has a place in the Hispanic community’s memory of what it used to be and of the performances that were right outside their door. Memories such as this one are what drives their culture, memories of their loved ones and of where they came from.

The ReVoZo performance took place in a very small performance space called Spark Creative Lab. ReVoZo is the dance company’s name, meaning to “overflow”, overflow with culture, pride, and love for their heritage. The performance itself was sold out with all sixty seats filled. In the front was a very small stage, approximately four feet by six feet, just barely large enough to fit all five performers (one student, two dancers, one singer and one guitar player). There was a table where they were selling drinks in an attempt to raise money for future performances. The entrance was a garage door that was thankfully left open the entire time as there was no AC in the building. The performance space itself had a cool industrial vibe that had the whole audience talking, even though it did not have any features that most people have come to associate with the Hispanic culture; instead of having colorful walls covered in artwork telling their history, there were concrete walls and exposed beams and ductwork. As we entered the space there was a check-in table to be sure that everyone who came had one of the reserved seats that had been sold out several weeks in advance. In the back right corner there was a door to the green room where I stood for the majority of the performance. Though this location made it slightly difficult to see, it did provide the best view of both the stage and the audience.

The audience was primarily Hispanic, along with some White attendees and a few African Americans.³ Also, based on conversations I was able to overhear, about half of the audience spoke Spanish, while the remainder spoke English, although many seemed to speak both languages. The singer sang in Spanish, but spoke of the meaning of the specific songs and dances in English after he was requested to speak English by the host. This performance was primarily run by people in the local dance community; many of us met each other while attending the University of Central Oklahoma. The audience also had a significant number of people in the local dance community. It is a demonstration of how tightly knit and supportive this community is that, even though most knew nothing about Flamenco, they were still willing to come and watch the performance and show their support.

The performance itself was beautiful, and the singer had an amazing ability to tell the stories and history of the Mexican-American community through folk songs in the most heartbreaking and soul-filled way. As the singer sang the stories of their history, the guitarist added a reminiscent sound that took the audience to the hills and streets of Mexico. The dancers, though, were the real stars of the show. Flamenco is almost all improvisation (meaning that choreography is not created in advance); dancers hear the music and know the stories in advance, but they create the dance movements live. Before one song, the singer commented that these dances range from traditional Gypsy dances, coming from the hills of Mexico and South America to modern times, and were created to celebrate their ancestry and where they came from. This particularly caught my interest as previously I did not know that Gypsies had made their way to Mexico. I discovered that they have come as street performers and travelers from Spain who were chased out due to their supposed tendency to thieving. This gave them the opportunity to spread their culture and combine other cultures with their own. According to Barbara Thiel-Cramer, the author of *Flamenco: The Art of Flamenco, Its History and Development Until Our Days* (1991), Gypsies were able to take and combine music from India to Europe. This new form went with them then to other countries such as Mexico where they continued to influence and be influenced by new cultures, including tribal cultures as well. The singer went on to say that while Mexico is their mother, Flamenco is their grandmother, demonstrating the

importance of Flamenco to their culture and the impact it has made on their lives.

Gypsies have had a significant impact on cultures far and wide thanks to their traveler lifestyle and due to the laws (such as the laws in Spain) that have forced them to live a nomadic lifestyle. Likewise Flamenco has had an impact, and been impacted by, travel across cultures and around the globe. For example, the majority of Flamenco dancers from Oklahoma City can trace their roots to Mexico and from there they can trace their roots to Spain. Along the way they have picked up new techniques in both dance and music. This global experience is what adds to the beauty of Flamenco, which has been described as, “a glorious experience. Later it is difficult to try to express in words what it is you have seen and heard. That there are so many types of dances and songs from the heavy, serious, introverted to the light, happy, humorous and burlesque types, remains to be discovered” (Thiel-Cramér 1991, 71). Metaphorically, the Gypsy tradition is a tree with many branches of music and dance, with its roots in Spain, the trunk extending through different families/bands in different directions, and its leaves in the cultures where they have settled.

This metaphor works as well for religion and how they think about and view the world around them. Flamenco dancers have added their movement and music to Catholicism, Catholicism has impacted the soul of Flamenco dancers, and both have impacted the stories of Hispanic culture. If religion and movement seem to us like disparate things, it is because, according to Palmié, we are subject to “the epistemological ethnocentrism that our discipline inherited from a larger discursive field within which ‘religion’ began to emerge as a seemingly discrete sphere of human agency and experience in the aftermath of the Reformation and the rise of secular forms of political legitimization during the Enlightenment” (Palmié 2010, 88). Our studies of theology often seem restricted to specific aspects of religion. Rarely do we see research on how culture has impacted the music and movements that are done within the church. However, there is much that can be learned from studying this field. The worship service of a church should be (and often is) impacted by the culture of the people that attend that church. An example of this is the Spanish service in The Petal Catholic Church that I have described above and that had music that was

³ This estimation is based on observation rather than survey, and certainly not exact.

lively and upbeat, with people dancing in their seats, celebrating Catholicism and their culture.

Podcasts Discussing Time, Memory, and History

As I sit in my office at the front of my house looking out the front window into my neighborhood, I reflect on how amazing it would have been to be at the taping for the ReVoZo: Flamenco Fantastico interview podcast hosted by *The Cross Curricular Dance Teacher Conversations for K-12 Public Educators* by Maria Krey Gibson. I had been invited to the interview, however I had a family emergency pop up and had not been able to attend. That did not take away from the joy of being able to hear what they had to say about Flamenco and their culture. From what I could tell, the interview was a very relaxed environment with three of the six members (many of whom are in other Flamenco groups as well, demonstrating how close knit this community is) speaking about their experiences and flamenco.

From the interview I learned that while the majority of the group are originally from Mexico, they immigrated at a very young age and all currently live within the Albuquerque, New Mexico area. This area is thought by many to be the twin to Oklahoma City, especially since many people have family in both areas or will move from one area to another for a variety of reasons including work, school, or family. I also discovered that the majority of the people in the group are teachers in their local public schools, working with students that are of similar cultural makeup to Oklahoma City Schools.

An aspect of the conversation that I really found interesting was the idea of Manicos. According to Vicente Griego (the singer in ReVoZo) this is a line of people who identify as being part of different Latin American countries. Griego said that the point of ReVoZo and flamenco is to give a voice to those with none. It gives them a home in a land where they are trying to create one. He also mentioned the importance of *Chicano*, “the voice of the downcast people” and how this is what makes art a contradiction. Art is for the rich to consume, but is for the poor to speak. It is diversity, accepting all different cultures. It is how cultures heal from transgressions—“how Mexico healed its relationship with Spain,” as Griego says on the podcast. It creates a place where *manicos*—“the line of people who identify as different Latin American countries”—can feel power, voice, and strength. He went on to say that art and flamenco is something

more; it is where a person is not just their race, it is a spiritual experience in itself, acknowledging both past and present. It finds its life in the drumbeat, its heart beat, leading the dancers into a circle that brings them together.

While flamenco has always been willing to be adopted by any culture, not every culture has accepted it for a variety of reasons. The primary reason is that wherever Gypsies went, crime and theft seemed to follow, and “Gypsy” in turn was considered synonymous with “flamenco”. This unfortunately meant that countries such as Spain began to ban both flamenco and Gypsies for a variety of reasons. “The stereotypical constructions of flamenco lead to an imaginary with very powerful associations, among which are aspects such as a defined geographical origin (Andalusia) and a prototype of performers (the Gypsies) Consequently, music associated with a specific country—and a racial idea—if produced outside of it, is most likely to be received with certain prejudices, valued with lesser attributes in terms of its quality and even perceived as less ‘authentic’ in comparison to that produced within its space of identification” (Macia Osorno 2024, 2). Thus flamenco, though welcoming of all cultures, has not been welcomed. In fact it has often been looked down upon due to the type of performers it used to have. This was especially true within countries where the government wanted everyone to celebrate one type of religion in a specific way.

Hispanic culture includes worshipping in a variety of ways, some of which stem from flamenco such as the music and movement, and specific key traits of spirituality. According to Martínez “the following key traits of Hispanic spirituality are essential for a truly inculturated Hispanic worship: the sacred, the symbolic, the personal, the communal, and as well as the oral traditions (Martínez 1993, 87). Flamenco and movement plays a large part in this, just as was said in the podcast. They have sacred locations and scriptures they hold close to their hearts. The Hispanic culture in Oklahoma City uses a variety of symbols (one of the primary ones being a circle) that can be seen in worship and spiritual practices, along with their daily lives such as on storefront signs. They are very communal, known for sharing everything and having a very different definition of personal space from the white American population. Many Hispanic homes are multigenerational in Oklahoma City, as they try to keep their family close and protected. They also have a variety of oral traditions, whether it be singing songs

from Mexico or as worship music, or telling stories that are religiously based or based in heritage.

From a theological perspective the Hispanic community in Oklahoma City is a rich community that has brought their heritage and Catholic traditions, with unique worship music and movements from Mexico to Oklahoma. From an anthropological perspective the Hispanic Community is full of diverse history. They get their worship style and dance from Mexican and Gypsy cultures and then bring it to America, where they can share their rich mix of traditions. It is by watching, asking questions, and listening to them and their stories that we learn just how much they have impacted our lives and how our identities interconnect with each other in Oklahoma.

Body, Movement, and Ritual

Learning About Body, Movement, and Ritual Through Flamenco Classes

As I walk up to Carmen's dance studio I am extremely nervous. On the outside the studio looks somewhat like a gas station, only lacking the actual gas pumps. However, as I walk into the studio I am greeted with a completely different scene. The studio itself has bright yellow walls with costumes hanging on racks all over the lobby, and smells like a dance studio (dance studios tend to smell like feet). The people inside are speaking a mix of Spanish and English and the music playing reflects this as it is a variety of instrumental music from Mexico and the United States. In the studio I am greeted with a hug from the instructor, Carmen. This is also Carmen's home studio, which her aunt started about thirty years ago and which Carmen grew up attending. This studio has been a big part of the city for the last thirty years, bringing cultural dances to the scene, celebrating all types of cultures from Scotland to Mexico. Carmen's goal is to use dance to teach students about their own culture and others.

This was a bubble of excitement in the class, which had a variety of dance levels from first time flamenco dancers (such as myself) to advanced students who have been doing this for multiple years.⁴ Most of the students were adults ranging in age from eighteen to about sixty-five. About half of the class was Hispanic

and the other half was white. Most of the students were in contemporary American dance attire, wearing leggings and sweatshirts or leotards and flamenco skirts; a few also had flowy dresses on so they could utilize the skirt. While there were nerves, there was also much excitement in the air, with everyone ready to start class.

The diversity of the class did not stop at appearance; half of the class was taught in Spanish and the other half in English. The class was otherwise done in a traditional Euro-American class style. We started with stretching. From there we reviewed the seven basic positions (in western styles there are five basic positions, in Mexican flamenco two are added specifically for the arms). After we warmed up, we learned two combinations, one beginner level and one advanced. Carmen used this time to teach us new terminology such as "*muneas*" which is a specific movement of the wrist, along with a way of showing emotions, and "*goupe*" which is a brushed stomp of the foot.

Along with teaching us the basics of flamenco, Carmen also taught us some of the history of the dance and where it came from, creating a space that included classical dance elements and historical elements. She taught us that flamenco was started in Spain by Gypsies and then spread into other parts of the world when they were chased out of Spain. She explained how a large part of the reason they were evicted from Spain was because they had a change in laws due to religion. The impact of the Crusades on the Gypsies resulted in the spread of both Flamenco and Catholicism. Flamenco spread to cities, districts, and families. Hearing this combination of history and technique created one of the most exciting dance classes I have been to in a long time, and as a result I also went to the next community class a month later.

The second community class was also taught by Carmen, though this class was in the school where she teaches rather than her home studio. She teaches at a school in Northside Oklahoma City; the area is significantly wealthier than Southside, is more suburban, and has a much smaller population. The studio in the school is much less colorful than her home studio, but she has decorated it with posters and pictures on the wall in a tasteful way to add personality to the walls. She had a very similar class set up to the

⁴ Dance leveling is done in a variety of ways, however in this case we are looking at the number of years spent studying this specific style. A student could have spent twenty or more years studying ballet, making them an advanced ballet dancer, but spent less than a year studying flamenco, making them a beginner flamenco dancer.

last one, and with the same people, although in the second class she spent more time on working vocabulary. She taught us the vocab in both English and Spanish, because even though they are Spanish words, they are Spanish dance words which many do not use in their everyday lives. For example she taught us that when addressing a class the instructor refers to “*liestros*” (for men, or men and women), or “*liestras*” (only women). She also taught the elements of the flamenco dance, intermixing the information with technical dance information, such as the “*marcaje*” or marking/travel steps, “*taconeo*” or percussive footwork (a personal favorite of mine), “*brazo*” or “*braceo*” for upper body/arm work, “*floreo*” for hand movements, “*vueltas*” or turns, “*palmas*” or hand clapping (one of the most used skills in flamenco), and “*compas*” for staying in rhythm. We also learned and participated in a “*tongo*”, which refers to historical flamenco street performances when people circle around the musicians and dancers who perform in hopes of getting money. Carmen used the *tongo* as an opportunity to teach us about the different types of music. The *tongo* is done to a four count beat, with the accent on the second beat, and without clapping on the first. Other music in flamenco can vary in count of either four, five, six, eight, or twelve. Carmen identified the elements of flamenco as the “*cante*” or singing, the “*guitarra*” or guitar, the “*baile*” or the dance, and sometimes (and this is my personal favorite) the “*cajon*”, which is a wooden percussion instrument. Getting all of these together can create an almost hypnotic experience for the performer and the audience.

Through these dances young people have learned rituals that have helped to mold their identity outside of sitting in a classroom or church, allowing culture to be passed on to the next generation through rhythms and movements, many of which have been modified over the years to incorporate modern day culture with traditional culture. We live in a world with digital technology that allows us to learn information faster than ever before, including traditional ritual movements and rhythms. Young people are no longer “entrapped by structural factors as they strategically mold their identities, which are ever changing, never static, but they are not oblivious to such factors either. Rather they use . . . social group[s] . . . for molding

identity as a resource to express a deeply felt embodied, socio-economic, historic positioning” (Mendoza-Denton 2008, 285). Dance classes have the potential to create such a social group and assist young people in forming their cultural identity. In addition to classes, performances, and dance companies⁵ such as those Carmen is facilitating, the use of digital media can also help students merge their traditions, language, and culture with modern elements, combining Oklahoma City and Mexico, encouraging them to celebrate their heritage in creative ways.

Views on body, movement, and ritual are varied within the Hispanic community in Oklahoma City. As with members of any culture, these deep-seated beliefs and values did not always seem obvious to the Hispanic individuals with whom I spoke. For example, when speaking with my students about movement and ritual in the church, their response was, “we don’t dance in the church.” However, when I went to the Catholic churches, not only was there dancing during worship, with small almost flamenco-like movements, I observed a lot of ritual action, as congregants stand up, sit down, and go to their knees throughout the service. “This framing places belief in a dynamic relationship with experience and knowledge . . . Belief does not *decree* the interpretation of experience; nor does it *define* the meaning of granted knowledge” (Hinson 2000, 10). This is a type of worship as it demonstrates ritual behavior that is praising the Lord, allowing them to connect to the Lord in bodily as well as spiritual ways, and the Spanish services allow them to worship in a language they understand.

The style of worship in Catholic Hispanic Oklahoma City is important because it tells us a lot about the culture. We are able to trace back current day rituals to rituals during earlier times, which can answer many questions about historic Hispanic culture, like the type of rituals they found most important. Their worship tells us even more about their views on religion. “*Personalismo*, as appreciation of God’s gift of life, a sense of pride and dignity and the expression of affection and solidarity, is strong in traditional Hispanic culture” (Martinez 1993, 88). The *personalismo*, the fact that they have their own words for celebrating the Lord, speaks volumes about the importance of religion in their culture. It tells everyone that Mexican culture holds religion to be of the utmost

⁵ A dance company is a collection of dancers who regularly have classes and do performances together. Companies can range from students who perform for class credit, dancers who volunteer their time, and professional dancers who are paid to perform with specific groups.

importance. This has followed people of Mexican heritage to Oklahoma City, where people are not shy to say they are Catholic. It is common to see statues of Mary in people's yards, and to see rosaries around students' necks. They make it very clear they have *personalismo*.

Cross-Cultural Practices Impact on Body, Movement, and Ritual

The worship services and dance classes are great examples of the cross-cultural experience that is Oklahoma City. It is a place where a variety of cultures come together and intermingle. For example, although almost everyone present at the Spanish masses I attended was Hispanic, I could hear a variety of languages being spoken along with Spanish, especially by the children. In dance classes, people took the time afterwards to share about our daily lives. These social settings offer the opportunity to connect with people from different communities and learn about different work, education, and cultural backgrounds. These cross-cultural activities help us to understand different cultures' views of body, movement, and ritual. For example, in Hispanic culture the body is seen as an outward expression of the soul. Movement, then, can be a form of nonverbal communication of what the soul is feeling. The rituals in church allow people a place to worship, while rituals in dance teach a safe way to learn movements while stretching and conditioning the body.

The Hispanic notion of viewing the body as the expression of the soul allows for movements made both in and out of the church to take on a deeper meaning, especially when it comes into contact with the world around. This is very much a Catholic idea, and is discussed in John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, which states that, "the critical relationship between embodiment and dual comprehensions of one's selfhood and one's relationship to the world is central. Embodiment is a state of being for material creatures that both limits and enables them to act within a wider experience of the world. The body is a particular form of materiality that distinguishes one person from another; limited to what a human person can achieve as a body and enabling it to live and die like others" (John Paul II, in Zimmermann 2015, 70). The body allows us to communicate with those around us, both verbally and non-verbally. The body is a means for us to distinguish between ourselves and others, while being able to communicate both culturally and

religiously with one another. One way people in the Hispanic community in Oklahoma City do this is by adorning themselves with a rosary or other religious decorations, allowing the world to see by their body what they believe.

In the Hispanic community in Oklahoma City it is very important to be seen going to church. The ritual of going to weekly service is viewed not only as time spent with community and family, but also as a social acknowledgement and a sign of honoring one's family. "Honor is the positive value of a person in his or her own eyes plus the positive appreciation of that person in the eyes of his or her social group. In this perspective honor is a claim to positive worth along with the social acknowledgement of that worth by others . . . At stake is how others see us, and so, how we see ourselves" (Malina and Neyrey 1991, 25-26). Sometimes people attending service seemed to be going as a matter of course, not necessarily because they were excited about it, but because they were expected to go. However, regular attendance allows for elders to teach the younger generations by explaining the importance of these rituals in hopes of their continuing to practice the traditions.

So, there are a variety of ways in which body, movement, and ritual are used to teach people about culture and dance, and religiously to create connections to historical practices cross-culturally. These allow for people to connect with each other and their ancestors while living in a community that is surrounded by other cultures and traditions. It is through body, movement, and ritual presented to people both in religion and in traditional practices, such as dances, that people are able to feel connected to their home culture even though they are hundreds of miles away, allowing them to follow the beliefs and traditions of their ancestors.

Implications for Christian Practice

The information I have gathered has implications for Christian practice and demonstrates the relevance of this research. It tells us that other cultures are frequently excluded or ignored in American churches and that we need to create more of a culture of inclusion. There are various types of worship that are not currently being used in mainstream American churches, but could be employed as a means of connecting with more people. One example of this is utilizing movement more in the church, not just the small movements that people do in their seats, but

actual dancing as they would in streets. Perhaps if we utilize movement in worship to make an impact on young people we would see more growth in these churches. Also, by focusing on increased cultural inclusion, incorporating new forms of physical worship, and adopting a more diverse body of symbolism, we could see a greater understanding of cultures in a greater variety of Christian denominational churches.

Cultural Inclusion

The fastest way to get a person to leave Christianity, no matter the denomination, is to make them feel outcast. The fastest way to make someone feel welcomed and get them to join Christianity is to make them feel like they matter, and this includes their cultural background. People are far more likely to go to a church that speaks their language and that other people of the same culture attend. By focusing cultural inclusion on engagement with a greater diversity of language and music, as well as dance and food, churches could connect to more people and create more inclusion. This tends to be a large issue in Oklahoma City, where there are so many different cultures. In the Hispanic district there are four Catholic churches, one Baptist, and one Assemblies of God that demonstrate an effort to engage with the local Hispanic culture. There are few other denominational churches that are willing to offer a Spanish service. A lack of a church in one's own language may even lead to people leaving Christianity altogether.

When someone goes to church, language is a key part of their understanding of the message being taught. Language is also a huge part of culture. This does not mean that churches need to offer a service in every language to reach every possible audience. But it would be helpful to include people of different cultural backgrounds by, for example, having closed captions on the bottom of a screen, or having a room set aside so a small group of people that speak a different language can gather and worship in their language with closed captions on the screen or with a translator in the room (such as a church volunteer).

According to Martinez, "inculturation demands a critical integration of peoples' symbolic thinking, profound values, common language and traditions into the liturgical life of the Church" (Martinez 1993, 83-83). With the integration of other languages into a church, we will begin to see integration of other parts of people's cultures, such as values and traditions. This

type of inculturation into other denominations of churches could result in growth in church attendance and could help reach others outside of the Hispanic community. It may even attract people who speak only English who wish to start learning Spanish, or to become closer with the Hispanic culture. It would also provide a larger variety of denominations to Spanish speaking people. By creating a way for Spanish speakers to attend different churches we would create a more welcoming culture that connects to more people and brings more people to Christ.

Worship

People worship in different ways. However, in many churches in the United States, or at least those I have experienced, there are only two ways to worship: by singing and dancing with small movements and by listening to the message. This does not connect to all people, and many people go home feeling more as if they were in school than as if they were in church worshipping the Lord. This is not how worship should be. Worship should be an expression of joy and love for the Lord. Worship allows people to connect and build a relationship to the Lord in their own way. Once this relationship is established it is far less likely that a person will leave Christianity. However, if we do not allow people to worship in church in a way that connects to them and their culture then they are far more likely to leave Christianity than if we give them ways to worship.

Encouraging people to worship the Lord in movements as large as they feel comfortable making would help make churches more welcoming. One way to do this is to have liturgical dance performances. Liturgical dance can be used not only as worship but as ways to tell stories of the Bible. In children's services, the children could learn dances that go with songs or Bible stories, helping to keep their minds from wandering and create a deeper understanding. I have seen this practiced at Christian sleep away camps where it has been very successful. Such dance could be a part of a regular children's ministry. Priests or pastors and worship teams could also encourage more movement, not having them hold back to the small personal movements in their seats, but allowing the movements that are already being done to expand.

Movement

Dance can tell us things about religion and people

that words simply cannot express. For dance and movement are ways to express emotions and some emotions, such as love for the Lord and pain, are best illustrated through movement, not words. Thus dance can give us deeper insight into what people are feeling and how they process religion. Some elements of certain dances may originate in the worship of other gods. For example, the circle dances that I discussed previously were originally fertility rituals to pre-Christian gods. Still, these can be and have been redirected to Christian meanings and uses. We live such sedentary lifestyles as a society that praying and worshipping through our movement would seem to please Him as part of treating our bodies as temples. David in the Bible danced for the Lord. Why do we not dance for Him now? We can utilize movement as a way to connect with the Lord and as a way to reinvigorate religious rituals that are common in a variety of denominations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, studying dance and religion is very relevant to understanding the Hispanic community in Oklahoma City as both are an integral part of the culture. By studying dance and religion together, we are able to view two different but interrelated parts of the culture, and to see how they can be used to grow Christianity. This is significant especially when we consider how religiously and ethnically diverse Oklahoma City is. It is remarkable and inspiring to see a community that has kept its cultures and traditions as alive and thriving as the majority of the Hispanic community has. Of course, I give this praise while also acknowledging that my informants have expressed concern that young people of their community are being influenced by digital media to leave religion and to divorce themselves from Hispanic culture. My hope is that my research can help develop ways to keep young people in the church, such as by combining their culture with religion through language and dance, and by allowing for a feeling of acceptance in different denominations through offering more freedom to express themselves. I believe that by becoming multi-lingual and incorporating dance, more churches can bring the Olé back into their worship services.

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Jessica Linn Altz received her BA in Dance Education from the University of Central Oklahoma in 2020 and MA in Theological and Cultural Anthropology in 2024. She has been dancing for the past 25 years and has trained in a variety of dance styles and teaching techniques. She has lived in the Oklahoma City area for 13 years and still lives there with her three cats and a dog, where she is constantly being inspired by the art, music, and cultural scene. She is supported by her family, boyfriend, friends, and mentors (one of which was interviewed for this article). She has a passion for religion, dance, culture, learning, helping others, animals, reading and dancing. She hopes that this article can help people to understand the importance of different styles of worship to help reach different cultures and varieties of people. She also hopes that people learn to praise the Lord by dancing like David in 2 Samuel.

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