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Review of Angela M. Yarber, *Embodying the Feminine in the Dances of the World's Religions* (Liturgical Studies Vol. 1), Peter Lang: New York etc. 2011, xiv + 150 pages, ISBN 978-1-4331-1544-8.

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What can we learn from religious dance performances from non-Christian cultures? Can understanding these performances help us engage in a knowledgeable interfaith dialogue? Angela Yarber, dancer and feminist Baptist minister, ran into these questions while attending non-Christian religious dance events in San Francisco such as Indian Bharatanatyam dances, Japanese Kabuki Onnagata performances, Turkish Whirling Dervishes' dances and Israeli Folk Dance-events. Her dissertation is a search for an answer. As a feminist dancer Yarber is aware that 'her own faith tradition lacks dances empowering women and valuing the body as a conduit for divine grace' (p ix). Therefore she is particularly curious about the experiences of women performing these dances. She relates to one of Paul Knitter's concepts underlying interfaith dialogue: global responsibility, that is, acknowledging human and ecological suffering in the world. So she asks: do the dances empower these women? She uses Linda Alcoff's concept of positionality as a medium between an essential and a constructivist vision on women and the feminine. Femininity is not defined by a particular set of 'feminine' attributes, nor is it understood as an

external construct. It is the result of a particular position in which internal and external, biological and social aspects meet. Yarber prefers 'feminine' to 'women' in order to explore the positionality of men dancing women's roles as in Japanese Kabuki Onnagata and to make clear that the dancers embody a stylized and constructed version of the feminine. She leans heavily on anthropologist Judith Lynne Hanna's observation that dance has the power to change attitudes and opinions with respect to gender and sexuality.

The aim of Yarber's book is 'to experience and historically recreate the relationships that allow a phenomenon to appear to dancers and audiences as both religion and dance simultaneously' (p 3). She chooses the concept of the feminine as a point of entry into her sources. After presenting her aim, methodology and definitions in chapter 1, in chapter 2, 'Contemporary Entry Points', Yarber gives a formal analysis of dance performances she witnessed in San Francisco. In chapter 3, 'Dance and the Dancer who Performs the Feminine', she wants to uncover the experiences, expressions and understandings of the dancing women. In chapter 4, 'Dance and the Observer within the Faith Tradition', she focuses on what the dances teach audiences who are of the same faith. In chapter 5, 'Dance and the Outside Observer', she stresses what outside observers need to take into account in order to understand the dances. In the concluding chapter she articulates what she found about the relation of dance, faith and the feminine in each of the dances. The contribution of Bharatanatyam is the concept of *shringara*, the deep sensual power of lusting after the divine. It shows the passionate, dancing body as a conduit of grace and divinity. The primary lesson from the Kabuki Onnagata is *yugen*, the aesthetic ideal of mystery, darkness, obscurity. It teaches a subversive beauty that is not confined to men or women, but puts the binary system of man/woman, beautiful/ugly out of order. The Whirling Dervishes teach dedication to service and humility and invite an audience to compassion. Israeli Folk Dance challenges the audience to give up its bystander position and become part of a community where men and women are considered equal.

In chapter 2 the sources for her interpretation are the performance itself, written personal testimonies, interviews and biographical information. In chapter 3 she explains the sociohistorical location of each dance and how it influences the faith of the dancer. To uncover the experiences, expressions and understanding of the dancing women, she turns to dance historians and anthropologists who interpreted historical sources, books such as the *Natya Shastra*, *Ayamegusa*, *Shebi Arus* and the

biography of Gurit Kadman. Yarber's conclusion is that the position of female dancers was constructed in a rather paradoxical way, and that the dance forms had an ambiguous role in empowering them. They made it possible to do things that were otherwise unavailable to them, but at the same time undermined this empowerment by relegating them to stereotypical female roles. In Bharatanatyam, for instance, the temple dances were performed by *devadasis*, women who were dedicated to the temple to be married to the godhead. Their dances embodied erotic and sensual stories from Hindu mythology and taught them *shringara rasa*, the divine erotic love. The devadasis did not give up economic and sexual activity or childbearing. However, their marriage to the godhead went together with concubinage with a wealthy patron as a means to support the temple financially.

Informed by literature on dance history, in chapter 4 Yarber describes the sociohistorical developments of the dance traditions to clarify the changing impact of the dances on audiences within the faith tradition of the dances. She learned that globalization and westernization had a strong effect on the performance of the dancers and how they were received by the audiences. Influenced by colonizers and missionaries afraid of the sensual, the homo-erotic and the subversive spirituality and communality associated with the dances, governments took measures to 'civilize' them. The dance forms were relocated: from a rural to an urban setting, from ritual spaces to stages, from strong female influence to male influence. The dancing women were restricted to traditional positions and behaviour. The audience were no longer participants in a ritual but were put into the position of theatre spectators. English colonizers for example found the sexual connotations of the devadasis' dances disgusting, considered the patronage and concubinage as prostitution and banned the devadasi system. To save the dance tradition performers re-interpreted the sexuality celebrated in the dance as a metaphor for devotion. They started performing the dances on urban stages for a class of urban elite who would enroll their daughters in dance classes, much in the same way that the Western elite enrolled their daughters in ballet.

In chapter 5 Yarber paints the relocation of the dances to the venues of the Western world before an audience that does not take part in the particular faith tradition and is not familiar with the dance vocabulary. To form these audiences into knowledgeable interlocutors she summarizes the findings of the earlier chapters and stresses her central thesis, namely that the dances are both enhancing and subverting women's roles within the faith tradition. Whereas the original dances allowed ambiguity in the

position of the dancing women, influenced by colonialization and globalization they steered women dancers back to their stereotypical cultural roles. This complexity should be taken into account while regarding the dances.

Embodying the Feminine in the Dances of the World's Religions is a charming book. Its language is accessible for non-dancers and dancers, academics and non-academics. It deserves a broad audience but particularly readers interested in dance, women's studies, art and religion. The book is a comprehensive synthesis of a wealth of material, ordered to get clear what meaning dancers, audiences in the respective faith traditions and audiences from outside can get from the dances. It contributes to knowledgeable interreligious contacts. At the same time it points at the complexity of the positionality of the women dancing.

The book made me aware of one of my presuppositions when I am watching non-Christian religious dance events: that through attending them I could get a glimpse of 'authentic' religious experience. Yarber explains my recurrent disappointment by pointing at the ongoing relocations and re-interpretations of the dances. And Yarber's research asks for a follow-up: what happens if the dance forms are relocated to Western feminist women practising them? Practising Bharatanatyam for several years allowed me to discover divine love as playfully erotic but not patriarchal.

The richness of information seems to overshadow the theoretical aspects of this dissertation: ten pages are dedicated to theoretical considerations and 130 to the results of the research. In the concluding chapter I would have liked to see a more precise reflection on her theoretical starting points. For instance, Yarber finds that the influence of colonization and globalization made the dances more male-dominated. So she in fact says that political and economic forces are stronger than the dance and thus complicates Hanna's thesis that dance has the power to change attitudes and opinions on religion and gender. She does not mention this, however, but clings on to the thesis. Alcoff's concept of positionality does not come into full bloom. The use of historical sources in which the ideas of the feminine are constructed does not give insight into real women's experiences: the internal side of the concept is left out. Clearly, Yarber's wish to form audiences into knowledgeable interreligious interlocutors took over more theoretical considerations. I am awaiting a symposium in which this interreligious dialogue will be practised through both dancing and theoretical reflections.