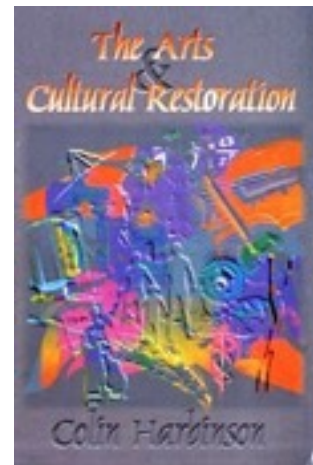




Recovering & Redeeming our Culture

by Mary Jones

One definition of culture is "The sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings, which is transmitted from one generation to another" (Macquarie 1981). H. R. Niebuhr in "Christ and culture" outlines five ways of looking at the relationship of Christianity to culture - where Christianity is seen as separate and opposed to culture; where it has been absorbed into the culture and lost its distinctiveness; where Christianity is seen as being superior to the culture; where there is integration with tension; and, lastly, where Christ is seen as the transformer of culture. Colin Harbinson in his lectures and booklet "The Arts and Cultural Restoration" suggests a way of approaching this transformation. He outlines God's original intention that human beings in relationship



with him and his word would develop "cultural expressions that would reflect truth and beauty, while exercising his loving rulership in the earth" (p.4). But with the introduction of sin where the truth of God was exchanged for a lie and his glory for an image (Romans 1:23,25) culture became distorted. Harbinson, in diagrammatic form, suggests a way of categorising spiritual dynamics that are there in every culture but in differing proportions. He identifies these dynamics as Natural, Redemptive, Demonic and Distorted (p6). Natural expressions are aspects of the culture that are amoral; Redemptive are ones that contain understanding or demonstration of Biblical truth whether people are conscious of this or not; Demonic expressions are those that have been affected by involvement with demonic powers; and Distorted expressions "no longer reflect God's original intention of His Creation (p6). He contends that in Cultural Restoration we should celebrate the Natural, affirm the Redemptive, oppose the Demonic and restore the Distorted (p. 7)

Attitudes to cultural heritage

However, as we come to look at cultures in this or similar ways we need to exercise care in our analysis as it is easy to come with our own cultural bias and distortion. The early missionaries often brought the Christian faith embedded in Western culture. Before the days of anthropology and sociology it was not generally understood how much of the way that Christianity was lived out in the West was mixed with values and habits deriving as much from that culture as Biblical principles. Seth Newman describes the setting up of Salems in Ghana which were residential areas set aside for Christians around the church where new converts were encouraged to look down on and leave behind traditional culture and adopt Western dress, music etc (Nicholls 1991 p.72) Meeyun Chung in a paper Gospel and Culture discusses the significance of this in Asia under three categories: Orientalism which is approaching the East with Western eyes and a sense of superiority; Occidentalism which is the opposite, using Eastern ways of thinking again with an assumption of superiority; and a third way of Post Colonialism which advocates a meeting between subject-subject rather than subject-object and each cultural expression interpreted by its own cognitive perspective. She is concerned with developing a unique Korean liturgical dance using traditional dance which will be informed by an understanding of the Bible from an Asian perspective.

These days there is more awareness of needing to allow each culture and people to apply Biblical principles themselves under the direction of the Holy Spirit, discerning what is valuable to retain from the culture and what needs to be modified or rejected. God has created enormous variety in the world around us. He loves variety and the many ways in which His eternal truths and commandments can be applied and expressed. What He desires is a unity of spirit and relationship not conformity of style.

Research also suggests that God has revealed himself in the origins of many peoples. If you go far enough back you usually find evidence of the One Creator God and in some cases there has been a tradition of stories that parallel many of the early biblical stories and prophecies that have prepared the people to receive the gospel (Richardson 1981).

Dance styles

Each culture has its own styles of dance. The origin of dance is a spiritual one with dance being used along with other forms such as music, word and symbol to communicate with the gods. The ceremonies sought to invoke or appease the supernatural powers in the search for meeting the needs of life (Davies 1984 p.3; Wosien 1974) . Most dance in the western world has become secularised and has been imported around the world. In turn the western world has been influenced by the sacred dance of especially eastern cultures. Many of the early Modern Dance pioneers such as Ruth St. Dennis looked to the East for inspiration for their dances. Christians are usually concerned about using dance styles that have strong spiritual ties with non-Christian religions but there are Christians who have taken

these dance forms and redeemed them by changing the music or words or certain movements and by praying over them. Many dancers are not aware that secular dance styles also need to be redeemed as even when used with Christian material they may impart through the choreography or performance more of worldly than Christian values or atmosphere.

Australian Aboriginees

As I have travelled around the world I have been excited to see the great variety of groups that have vision or are developing vision in the area of redeeming culture. My first contact with was in 1979 when I was researching for a paper that was later printed as "Growth of a Dance Movement" and recorded some of the history of sacred dance in Australia before 1978 when the Christian Dance Fellowship of Australia was formed. In "Dust for the Dancers" Beth Dean records a conversation in 1953 with the white minister at Yuendumu in Central Australia in which he admitted that he didn't believe there were any Christians among the Walpiri people at Yuendumu (p.118). Some 25 years later a Christian corroboree was initiated by some of the middle aged men who had become believers and wanted to share the gospel with the older people in a way they would understand. They used the elements of a traditional ceremony including the dance steps, music, body painting and costumes to present the story of the crucifixion and resurrection (Jones, p. 13).

Island Breeze International - Pacific Islands to the World

Island Breeze was founded by Sosene Le'au in 1979 after he had trained with Youth with a Mission (YWAM). He was invited to a luau (Polynesian feast) at a major hotel in Honolulu and was upset at the way the dances were trivialized and presented in a very sensual way. He



felt God challenging him not to criticize unless he was willing to provide an alternative (Le-au, 1997 p.82). This program ran for many years and was very successful as both an outreach into the community and as a way of providing funds for Island Breeze. Sosene and his wife with a team worked as a part of YWAM in Fiji and then in New Zealand developing the concepts of Island Breeze and saw many attracted to their cultural approach and turn to the Lord. Many became excited by the vision of working within their culture.

In 1989, their 10th anniversary, they were sacked by the hotel in preference for a purely Hawaiian show and one that was more sensual. As they prayed together about what the changes meant they received a prophetic call in the words and movement of a Haka dance (Maori war dance) to expand into the nations (p.110ff). Since then, as an independent

ministry under the umbrella of YWAM, they have established ministries in many nations among indigenous peoples. They are now developing training schools in redeeming culture out of their first school that was established in Florida by Sosene as the International Center for Cultural Studies and Development. They teach that God speaks through every culture and through scripture calls us to the task of cultural redemption. They feel it is helpful to focus on the strengths of the culture overcoming evil with good. In establishing a group, prayer and team building are essential - praying for each other and against idols in the lives of members in the group; praying for the culture, taking authority against evil spirits and claiming the land for God, dealing with unforgiveness and prejudice, emphasising unity and diversity.

Christian Communications Institute - Thailand

Allan and Joan Eubank from Texas, USA, served as missionaries in Thailand from 1961. After eight years in church planting and rural development Allan began teaching New Testament at Payap Univeristy in Chiang Mai. In 1981 ,he founded CCI which uses many art forms, both traditional and contemporary, to communicate the gospel and to provide models for positive social and family life. Joan who had had a successful career in singing and acting before she was married wrote dramas and songs for the students and trained singers, actors and directors. The Eubanks are still active in CCI though officially retired. The Institute continues to lead more than 1000 students to Christ each year and performs evangelistic folk dramas in about 25 villages every year.

Traditional Media Unit of the International Christian Media Commission

This ministry was established by New Zealand born Kathleen Nicholls who worked with her husband for Interserve in India for many years teaching in the area of Drama, English, Speech and Communication at the Union biblical Seminary in Yavatmal, central India, and the Theological Research and Communication Institute in New Delhi. ICMC is headquartered in London and the Traditional Media Unit that was pioneered by Kathleen Nicholls encourages the use of traditional arts as an expression of the Christian faith. She has organised Consultations for artists of all kinds in Bali, Indonesia, in 1989 and 1994 and has initiated and supported Consultations in several other countries in Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe. She and her husband have travelled extensively teaching, encouraging and networking artists. A regular newsletter is produced and their publication "Voices at the Watering Places" includes papers presented at some of the Consultations.

World Christian Gathering on Indigenous People

The inaugural WCGIP was held in Rotarua, New Zealand, in 1996, organised predominantly by New Zealand's indigenous people, the Maories, who hosted representatives of indigenous cultures around the world as well as other people who were interested or involved in indigenous culture in some way. Each people group presented their culture in relation to the Christian faith, often through music and dance, and explained many of the problems they faced as indigenous people. There were times of worship, celebration, prayer, workshops and consultations together. Similar gatherings were held in USA in 1998 and in Australia in 2000.

India - Kalai Kaviri and Christu Dance Centre

India is another country with many different styles of both classical and folk dance and where dance has traditionally been a widely used and popular means of telling stories mostly associated with Hinduism. The Christian community, however, has mostly rejected the use of dance because of its association with Hinduism. In 1999 I was able to visit Kalai Kaviri, a Catholic college in Tiruchirappalli, Southern India, where hundreds of students have studied classical and folk styles of dance and where their dance troupe has used these styles to tell stories from the Bible, to teach the gospel and Christian values and to discuss social problems.

Kalai Kaviri was established in 1975 starting with an extensive radio broadcasting department, recording studio, film unit, cassette department and communications unit mostly to reach the rural areas. The Dance Troupe was formed in 1978 as part of the vision to bring the Gospel and human values to the people through the cultural art forms of India, showing that Christianity could be a part of India as Christians were often viewed as strangers in their own land. It started with two Hindu girls as Christian families and communities were very negative about dance because of its associations. By 1984 the Troupe had grown to be a professional group of eighteen performing in several classical and folk forms.



The twenty-five or so members of the Troupe today [in 2001] are mostly students studying for University Diplomas and Degrees. The first Degree students will graduate this year. The Troupe is asked to travel extensively both in India and overseas. They are invited to Christian churches and celebrations, Hindu temples and community events. Because of their use of indigenous dance and music they are welcomed by different

classes of society, Hindu as well as Christian. For Hindu occasions they will perform dances that show social problems and values together with a few that present bible stories and the gospel message. There are seventy-five full-time dance students and several hundred part-time. 60% of the full-time students are Christian and 35% are Hindu. About half of the students are from rural areas as one of the visions of the College is to train teachers from the lower strata of society who do not have many opportunities for further education and to send them back as teachers.

Another exciting development, this time in the Protestant church, is a Christian dance school, Christu Dance Centre, in Chennai - the dance centre of Southern India. The Centre was started by Dr Anjala Richard as a development from a student group at the Madras Women's Christian College in 1985 where she was Vice-Principal. She was convinced that Bharata Natyam and the folk dances of India provided a rich source for presenting Christian themes and concepts. A number of dance dramas were presented on Biblical and Indian Christian personalities. (Nicholls 1991 p.89). In the previous generation of Dr Angela's family one of the women had presented her Arangetram (a public graduation performance) in Bharata Natyam, the main classical dance of Southern India, and in the traditional way with Hindu themes. Then her sister started composing music using Christian themes and three girls in the present generation have completed their Arangetram for the first time using Christian themes, the first one being Dayamani Sajini in 1990 (Nicholls p.90). The Centre puts on a presentation each year, usually at Christmas, but it is hard to get most students and their parents to set regular time aside for classes because dance is still not acceptable or valued in churches.

Ghana - Seth Newman

A strong advocate for the redemption and use of indigenous dance and music in Africa is Seth Newman, Co-ordinator of the Christian Dance Fellowship of Ghana. Seth holds degrees in dance from Ghana and California and is a lecturer in African dance at the University of Ghana. He has been pioneering in this area for many years and has slowly seen the resistance to dance, which came from the teaching of the early missionaries, breaking down. This has happened more easily in independent African churches and most of them use drums and free-style dance which includes steps found in traditional dance forms (Nicholls 1991 p.74). There are many different tribes in Ghana each with their own dances and Seth has found that when he takes a dance and puts it to Christian music it communicates powerfully, especially to people from that tribal group. With his troupe of young people Seth has found these dances to be a very effective form of



outreach as well as a way to indigenise worship. If the tribal dance is one of praise to the tribal chief he will put it to a song about Christ as King. If it is a war dance it will suit a Christian song of spiritual warfare. The dances themselves rarely involve worship of the spirits - this will mostly be in ritual surrounding the dance.

Philippines - Kaloob

The Philippines is a country rich in the folk dances of many tribal peoples. Many of the dances and music were being neglected or lost and Christians tended to use Western music almost entirely because of the association of traditional culture with paganism. Ed Lapiz, founder and head pastor of Day by Day Christian Ministries established Kaloob (gift/revelation), a cultural praise and worship team committed to the research, study, preservation, reinterpretation and promotion of indigenous Filipino music and dance for Christian worship and outreach. In their theological basis for the ministry (Lapiz paper) they state the following four principles:

- Created arts, especially music and dance, come from God and must be used for God's glory. Deut.10:14 states "To the Lord your God belong the heavens..the earth and everything in it."
- Satan does not own anything. He is not a creator but only a thief and a destroyer". As Jesus said (John10:10) "the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."
- Creative arts, like most of creation, were only grabbed, distorted, and misappropriated for himself by the evil one.
- God's people, who were themselves redeemed by the blood of Christ and who are inheritors of the earth, must repossess such arts for Christian use and God's glory". Paul exhorts us (1 Cor.10:31) whether we eat or drink or whatever we do to do it all for the glory of God; and to make the most of every opportunity because the days are evil (Eph.5:16).
- Philippine music and dance forms are neither "pagan" nor "evil". As non-living things, they are incapable of morality or immorality. It is the heart of the musician or dancer and the object of worship that define the morality of the art form.

In the process of this redemption Kaloob thoroughly researches and documents the music and dance, going to the tribal owners wherever possible to be taught first-hand and to get permission to use the music and dance. They study not only the material itself but the context in which it is used and the correct costumes, props and instruments. This is fully documented on video, audio and print. The results of this research are then passed on through lectures, seminars and training sessions. A new dance is first "prayformed" in church by the Kaloob dance troupe and is prayed over for its dedication to God's glory.



Programmes are presented in Christian events and gatherings and community events. In 1998 the government appointed Kaloob as the official dance company for the Expo. to celebrate the Centenary of the Philippines' independence from Spain.

Through their work with the tribal dances Kaloob aims to help return to the tribes what was lost, including their sense of self, personhood and dignity and restore credibility to the church which has unwittingly robbed them of their self-worth by rejecting and destroying their cultural heritage. Their economic recovery will also be assisted through the increased demand for traditional arts. Kaloob's vision is also to see indigenous music, dance and other arts integrated into the worship of the Filipino church as a whole so it takes on a Filipino character and is not just a copy of the West.

Latin dance

When the first Christian Dance Fellowships started in Latin America in Mexico and Puerto Rico in 1992 most of the dance was western or Hebrew inspired worship dance. The Coordinators had been exposed to Seth Newman's teaching at the 1991 International Conference in Jerusalem but had felt that the Latin dances were too sensual and were not acceptable as a dance form in churches. There were a few rather hesitant experiments but on the whole they were rejected as not being suitable. Several years later at the CDF conference in Puerto Rico in 1998 there were several examples from Colombia and other countries that were using Latin style and heritage in their dances. The times of worship and presentation each evening were described as Fiestas of worship and celebration and people were asked to dress for a Fiesta to the King of Kings. It was exciting to see this redemption of a Latin festival time.

I found it interesting that when I was in Italy this year which is at the very beginning stages of introducing dance in worship that in a church with quite a large Brazilian membership I found a similar hesitancy. I suggested to the newly-formed dance group that had asked for help in choreographing a Brazilian worship song that we take one of the Latin dances that fitted the rhythm and adapt it. At first I met quite strong resistance but when I persuaded them to try and we had taken time to adapt and redeem it, taking out the sexual innuendos and emphasising the celebratory and worship potential, they decided to try it. In the end they were surprised and pleased with the result.

Christian Dance Fellowship Conferences

Since the first international CDF conference in 1988 held in Australia there has been a steady increase of national styles represented at conferences. CDFMalaysia formed in 1999 has recently held a seminar where they invited two specialists in Asian dance styles to teach participants with one of the aims being to use Asian dance styles in preparing for a large international Christian conference they had been invited to participate in. At the formation of CDFKorea in 2000 the meeting was held in the context of a seminar, workshops and concert at Ewha Women's University. Many of the founding members come out of this University and speakers included professors from Dance Departments at several different universities in Seoul. One of the subjects addressed at the seminar was enculturation and several dances at the concert showed the use and adaptation of Korean dance styles to a Christian context.

Jewish Heritage

As well as the cultural heritage we have from our natural background we also have the heritage of our Christian family. This not only involves Christian but Jewish history and tradition. Many Christians have not taken this into account and may not even be fully aware of how much of the Christian faith is based on the Old Testament and that Jesus and all the early Christians were Jews. There has been much anti-Semitism in the church and holding of Replacement theology which teaches that Christians are the new Israel and inherit all the promises given to the Jewish people who have now lost their covenant rights. There have always been those in the church who have stood up strongly for the Jewish people and have been in the forefront of helping them recover the land of Israel and their nationhood and over the last twenty years or so there has been an increase of interest in rediscovering our ties with Israel and the Jewish people. This is seen as a sign that we are in the Last Days and the time is drawing closer when Jesus will come again reign over the earth from Jerusalem and the Jews will recognise him as their Messiah. There are many passages in scripture which talk about the irrevocable nature of God's covenant with Israel. One of the clearest in this context is in Romans where Paul writes about the grafting in again of the natural branches and warns the Gentiles not to be proud about their present position (Rom. 11:23-24).



There have been a growing number of Messianic assemblies around the world in which both Jews and Gentiles worship Jesus/Yeshua with a strong Hebrew flavour. The feasts that were instituted by God during Moses' time are again being celebrated by Christians. Two of the pilgrim feasts have already been fulfilled - Passover with the death and resurrection of Christ and Shavuot/Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church. The origin of the Lord's Supper in the Jewish Passover is being explored and many Christians take part in Seders during Passover time. There are also Christian versions of the Seder and the Shabbat meal. The third pilgrim feast - Sukkot or the Feast of Tabernacles has not yet been fulfilled - it is the final harvest ingathering and has always been understood in Jewish tradition and ritual as including prayer for the gentile nations to be gathered in. Thousands of Christians have been going to Jerusalem over the last twenty years to celebrate the Feast of the Tabernacles and it has spread around the world so that there are now celebrations in many different countries. These celebrations have the purpose of introducing Christians to the Feast and our Jewish heritage, in making contact with Jewish people, and as a prophetic forward look to the final harvest and our coming King.

Dance is an important part of these Tabernacle celebrations and there are many different expressions of it from very professional presentations to processions and congregational participation. Different styles of dance are used in the presentations including Israeli folk dance. Messianic and Israeli dance have become very popular and many church dance groups use steps and whole dances in their worship especially to songs that have an Israeli flavour to them or are Hebrew songs or Hebrew melodies with Christian words. Messianic congregations in particular have made this a feature of their worship and the congregation as well as dance groups may take part (Siberling 1995 p.49).

Conclusion

Many see this resurgence of redeeming dance for the Lord as part of the preparation for the bride getting ready for the wedding and the great Marriage Supper of the Lamb described in Revelation (Rev. 19:7-9) when people of all nations, tribes and tongues will gather around the throne in worship and when Jew and Gentile will be brought together as the Lord's bride. In the meantime it is a powerful way of expressing the gospel and our love of Jesus in a way which communicates with our culture. It emphasises that Jesus is not a product of the West but speaks to people in their own language and in their own culture. He made and enjoys our differences but longs that we find unity of spirit around his throne.

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