

WHERE THE DANCER MEETS HER DIVINE:
DANCE AS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE LIVES OF
LOIE FULLER AND ISADORA DUNCAN

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ABSTRACT

This thesis begins with a simple question: Can seemingly-secular dance be a religious experience for an individual dancer? I investigate this question through specifically examining the lives of dancers Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, both creators of influential new styles of dance in the late nineteenth century. I begin with a study of the religio-cultural atmosphere of modern society from which Fuller's and Duncan's dances emerged. With a sense of the religio-cultural atmosphere established, I then turn my attention to Fuller and Duncan. In order to understand how dance might be a religious experience for both, I focus my attention on those encounters that Fuller and Duncan viewed as especially important, crucial to their understandings of the relationship between the world and their selves—meaningful, religious, and/or spiritual.

Finally, I turn to the idea of dance as religious experience. Here, I engage with both dance theory (José Gil's paradoxical body) and religious studies scholarship (William James' definition of religion and Catherine Bell's ritualization) in order to situate a religious experience within a dancing body. Ultimately, I conclude that dance was indeed a site of religious experience for Fuller and Duncan—an experience created through their dynamic processes of embedding and disembedding in the religious ideas and institutions of modern society.