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# An Historical Analysis of the Relationship Between Organized Religion and Dramatic Theory

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A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORGANIZED  
RELIGION AND DRAMATIC THEORY

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## **Abstract**

Theatre artists and organized religion both use the same tactics and strategies in order to connect to their audiences. This isn't a coincidence: Over the course of human history organized religion and performance traditions developed, grew and evolved together. Performance practices grew out of religious traditions and often incorporated elements of spiritual celebration and religious ritual into their practices. In ancient Greece dramatic practices developed as a celebration of the god Dionysus, Sanskrit theatre of Ancient India evolved as a means of communicating Hindu myths to the masses and Noh theatre of ancient Japan started as shamanistic dance traditions. During the Late Renaissance exterior political forces felt the need to censor both religion and theatre because of the widespread influence these institutions had on the public. We see examples of this in the strict Puritan government lead by Oliver Cromwell in England, in Post Moliere France and in the Tokugawa shogunate of Japan. In the twentieth century dramatic theorists and theatre practitioners began to speculate and act on the idea that performance was an inherently spiritual act. Artists like Peter Brook, Gerzy Grotowski and Tadashi Suzuki have all published their thoughts on the innate spiritual quality of the art form. There are even performative threads that can be found in our modern religious ceremonies. I was able to observe a Catholic Mass, a Jewish Shabbat service, a Buddhist Temple service, a Hindu Puja and a Muslim Jum'ah in order to analyze the performative qualities of these common religious ceremonies.

The relationship between dramatic practice and organized religion suggests that they both use similar methods to reach their goals and spread their messages. This long and involved history suggests that the relationship between theatre and religion is more important than what

we as theatre artists are ready to admit. This relationship suggests that we, as theatre artists, have a spiritual responsibility to our audiences. This responsibility, along with our individual morals and ethics, should guide us in our decisions as artists. We should ensure that the art we are creating serves our audiences and our communities in ways that we can be proud of.

## Introduction

“Suddenly I'm in the cockpit  
Suddenly I've got my wings  
Suddenly all of those pilots protested me  
Well, they can get their own drinks  
Suddenly there's no one saying, "Stay grounded"  
Looking down passing them by  
Suddenly there's nothing in between me and the sky”

I've never been interested in airplanes, flying makes me queasy and I never heard the post 9-11 story of Gander, Newfoundland before I entered the Gerald Schoenfeld Theater this February. But, when I saw *Come From Away* and I heard Jen Colella sing “*Me and the Sky*” I was moved beyond words. The performance touched me in such a deep, visceral way. During that song I felt what I can only describe as a spiritual connection between me, the performers and my fellow audience members. The sense of community fostered within the narrative of the piece, the way these artists brought joy and resilience to their characters and the plot that spoke to all of us in a post 9-11 America brought everyone in that theatre together during the performance. We wept together, we laughed together and at the end we all took to our feet in exuberant applause.

As a young theatre practitioner and aspiring director most of my time in college has been spent reading contemporary dramatic theory. Peter Brook's *The Empty Space* being the first book I read that helped me understand why we make theatre and what we make theatre for. As I read more dramatic literature I began to find a common thread; many theorists from all over the

world that came from various cultures tied their thoughts on dramatic practice to spirituality. As a lifelong member of the Catholic church I have always felt that our weekly religious celebration, the Mass, was incredibly performative in nature. I began to wonder what the source of this connection was, and did this connection exist outside of a Christian context? What was the history of the relationship between our theatre practices and our religious traditions? If these institutions are connected and have been for millenia, then what does that imply about our work as theater artists and facilitators?

There is a historical relationship in many cultures between their dramatic traditions and their religious practices. There is a clear and distinct link between these two institutions cross culturally dating back thousands of years. Theatre and religion grew out of similar origins, out of the same need for community, guidance and storytelling that we face as human beings. The relationship between these two institutions is multidimensional and multifaceted. One does not rely on the other, nor is the relationship only historical in nature. It's important to analyze the different ways in which these institutions interact, borrow, and at times rely on one another and to recognize the historical, theoretical and anthropological relationships.

In Chapter 1: *Early Theatre and Religious Practices* I will discuss the way theatrical practices developed as a tool for religious ritual and worship in ancient Greece, ancient India and Japan. I observed these civilizations because each of them developed stylistically distinct performance traditions and each developed or adopted different religious practices. Chapter 2: *The Regulation of Theatre During the Late Renaissance* will discuss the way theatre specifically, but also religion was censored or controlled by Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan control over England, King Louis XIV in France and the Tokugawa shogunate of sixteenth century Japan. It

is important to analyze this specific historical period because this is the start of the Colonial Era. Civilizations were increasing their imperialistic control all over the world and, in doing so, influencing other cultures religious structure and performance traditions. In Chapter 3: *The Decline of Religion and the Rise of Spirituality in Dramatic Theory* I aim to analyze the way in which religiosity begins to decline internationally in the twentieth while dramatic theorists begin to argue for a resurgence of spirituality in our theatre practices. Chapter 4: *Modern Religious Rituals and Practices* will discuss performative elements of modern religious ceremonies that I was able to identify through my own, first person research and investigation.

## Chapter 1: Early Theatre and Religious Practices

We see a reliance between the three systems of religion, myth and performance cross culturally and it is this interdependency that has shaped some of the longest lasting theatrical traditions known in the modern world. As distinct cultures and traditions were forming many early civilizations across the world incorporated similar developments: different civilizations were developing regionally and culturally specific clothing, forms of writing and documenting their culture, as well as larger governing systems. For many ancient cultures all of the distinct elements of their culture were interconnected, at least loosely, to one another. Almost all ancient civilizations formed a some kind of organized religion, a myth system commonly used to explain this religious system, and some form of integrated performance that allowed them to communicate this religion and myth system to the illiterate masses. This interconnection, this reliance, between these three specific systems continues into our present moment and has shaped the way we view and use theatre, storytelling and religion in our own societies. The following traditions, Indian, Greek and Japanese, have been analyzed because they are distinct performative traditions that are still practiced in their traditional context. There is a great deal of information preserved about each of these traditions, and each of these civilizations has developed or adopted different world religions.

Indian theatrical tradition, commonly referred to as the Sanskrit drama, was first documented in the Natya Shastra. “Attributed to the [sage] Bharata [the Natya Shastra] is believed to have been written during the period between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E.” (“Natya Shastra”). It was written as a ‘fifth Veda’ after “the gods approached [Bharata] and bade him produce something to give pleasure to the ears and eyes alike” (Keith, 12). The four initial Vedas

make up the Vedic texts or the sacred documents of Hinduism and are written in the traditional Indian language of Sanskrit(Keith, 13). These texts were part of the oral tradition of the Brahmins (or priest caste) in India and can be traced as far back as 1500 B.C.E.(“Natya Shastra”). These texts were not distributed to the masses, rather they were rehearsed, recited and performed exclusively by the selective Brahmin caste. This ‘fifth Veda’ referred to as the Natya Shastra is not a sacred text the way the preceding four are; rather it is the combination of elements from the various Vedas transformed into a new art form, a new oral tradition that was accessible to the masses, not just the Brahmin caste(Keith, 12). The performances of this new Sanskrit theatre, as described in the ‘fifth Veda’ were able to communicate the Hindu myths to those of the lower castes.

While the Natya Shastra is the first Indian text describing dramatic theory and composition we cannot assume that Indian theatrical practices have a common origin with the text between the years of 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E.(Keith, 49). It is very possible that the Natya Shastra was committed to text in an effort to explain the existing performative traditions of the area and connect them more concretely to the religious traditions of the culture(Keith, 49).

This newer sacred text merged religious elements from the previous Vedas to create a new artform: the Sanskrit theatre. The Natya Shastra combines “from the Rig-Veda the element of recitation, from the Sama-Veda song, from the Yajur-Veda the mimetic art, and from the Atharva-Veda sentiment”(Keith, 12). The Natya Shastra blends these four components from the original holy texts and further discusses all elements of performative art(“Natya Shastra”). “From issues of literary construction, to the structure of the stage(called the *mandapa*), to the detailed analysis of musical scales and movements(*murchhanas*), to an analysis of dance forms

that considers several categories of body movements, and their effect on the viewer”(“Natya Shastra”). It establishes the drama outside of the realm of religious ritual; the purpose of the drama according to the Natya Shastra is not religious in nature, rather to entertain the audience(“Natya Shastra”). “The joy (*harsa*) and solace experienced by the audience is induced very deliberately by the actors through special acting techniques”(“Natya Shastra”). The physical act of the drama consists of two elements, *bhavas* (“the imitations of emotions that the actors perform(“Natya Shastra”)) and the *rasas* (emotional responses from the audience)(“Natya Shastra”). More simply the entertainers perform their narrative and it has an emotional effect on the audience. The text not only serves as one of the foundational documents on dramatic theory (overshadowed only by Aristotle’s *Poetics* in the West, which will be discussed later in this chapter) but also ties the drama and performative art intrinsically to the religious texts and myths of the region in which it was developed(“Natya Shastra”).

In Ancient Greece we see a similar connection between the dominating religion, the myths of the general public and the development of dramatic art and theory. Comparable to the belief that Sanskrit drama was being practiced before it was documented in the Natya Shastra; Greek (specifically Athenian) religious festivals honoring Dionysus included dramatic recitations can be dated multiple centuries before the writing of Aristotle’s *Poetics*(384-322 B.C.E.); the foundational Greek text on dramatic theory and practice(Zarrilli, “Religious and Civic Festivals,” 60). The earliest documented festival of this nature is “the Lenaea festival(from 440 B.C.E.), named after the Lenai or maenads who danced ecstatically under the influence of Dionysus”(Zarrilli, “Religious and Civic Festivals,” 61). The drama in Athenian culture can be traced to multiple origins with these religious festivals, the oral nature of their literature

traditions and the development “of the art of rhetoric, originally known as *techné rhetoriké*”(Zarrilli, “Religious and Civic Festivals,” 59).

Similar to the Natya Shastra’s description of the literary composition of the drama and the elements that give the drama merit; Aristotle lists in *Poetics* the essential components of the drama within his cultural context(Zarrilli, “Religious and Civic Festivals,” 62). They are “namely, plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle [and] song”(Aristotle). We can see direct parallels between Aristotle’s approach to dramatic hypothesis and the elements present in the Natya Shastra that were borrowed from the Vedas. Both cultures relied explicitly on song in their performances, Aristotle’s need for thought correlates to Bharata’s need for sentiment, diction relates directly to recitation and the need for plot and spectacle can be connected to the mimetic art mentioned in the Yajur-Veda. Aristotle differs from the Natya Shastra in his distinction between Comedy and Tragedy(Zarrilli, “Religious and Civic Festivals,” 60). He goes on to describe the effect theatre(specifically tragedy) has on its audience; that is “through pity and fear affecting the proper purgation [catharsis] of these emotions”(Aristotle). These connect specifically to the rasa’s of pity and terror described in the Natya Shastra(“Natya Shastra”).

The purpose of the Greek tradition is more complex than the Sanskrit drama due to the cultural context of the performance. Whereas the Natya Shastra outlines the purpose of the drama as entertainment and the communication of ancient myth to the illiterate masses; the dramatic festivals of Ancient Greece posed the pieces of literature in direct competition with one another(Zarrilli, “Religious and Civic Festivals,” 61). While the dramas were written with the intent to entertain the audience(in the case of the comedy) and teach the audience about human nature(in the case of tragedy), their main function was to compete with and ultimately beat the

other literature at the festival(Zarrilli, “Religious and Civic Festivals,” 62). Additionally, this competition was all in an effort to celebrate and pay homage to their god, Dionysus(Zarrilli, “Religious and Civic Festivals,” 61). Though the cultural context differs there is still a link to religious ritual in both of these practices.

Japanese ritual and performative tradition, like that of Ancient India and Greece, developed out of multiple origins including the religion of the region(Zarrilli, “Early Theatre in Court...,” 121). Japan, however, did not have a “system of writing prior to the fourth century” common era(Zarrilli, “Early Theatre in Court...,” 120). Because of the later development of a writing system there is no concrete text in the Japanese tradition that outlines the dramatic theory of the culture as it relates to their common performance practices. Instead, the performances of the island-nation can be studied through their interaction with other Asiatic traditions and in the preservation of their native religious rituals(Zarrilli, “Early Theatre in Court...,” 120-121).

Phillip Zarrilli describes the earliest forms of Japanese performance that are free of Buddhist and Chinese influence:

“The earliest pre-Buddhist/pre-Chinese forms of Japanese performance are Shinto-inspired forms of shamanistic propitiatory ceremonies and dances. Shinto is a set of utilitarian ritual practices intended to harness the natural forces of the environment in which it is assumed that everything -- trees, birds, seas, animals, mountains, wind and thunder, etc. -- has its own soul or spirit (kami). Kami are the natural energies and agents understood to animate matter and influence human behavior, and are sometimes identified as gods or goddesses.”

-Zarrilli, “Early Theatre in Court...,” 120

It is important to examine early Japanese drama within the context of Shinto ritual as these early religious practices informed the physical space and the physical performance of the actor within Japanese tradition. The Sanskrit theatre tradition places importance on specific movements and the analysis of dance techniques in order to communicate the myths of Indian culture. Similarly, early Japanese ritual performance consisted of “the act of stamping and pounding” the ground with very meticulous technique, calling forth beneficial Kami and driving “away evil spirits”(Suzuki, “The Grammar of the Feet,” 14). This vocabulary of physical movement is believed to derive from “the Shinto goddess Ame Uzumi no Kami, who danced on an overturned bucket... the dance is often considered to represent the mythological beginnings of the kagura, the sacred Shinto dances”(Suzuki, “The Grammar of the Feet,” 13). Because of their geographic isolation and their delayed development of a written tradition the dramatic theory and practice of Japan did not develop past the stage of religious ritual until much later.

The sixth century common era saw “the introduction of proto-theatrical court performances” in Japan, but it was not until “the leadership of Kan’ami (1333-1384) ... that Noh evolved into a unique form of Japanese theatre and drama”(Zarrilli, “Early Theatre in Court...,” 120). This new form of drama, like the Sanskrit and ancient Greek dramas, can be traced to multiple sources. There is clear influence on Noh from Buddhist religious traditions, Chinese culture, as well as ancient Shinto rituals and myths(Zarrilli, “Early Theatre in Court...,” 120).

Noh theater was developed during the Morumachi period by a man named Zeami(Zarrilli, “Early Theatre in Court...,” 120). Song and dance were integral to the artform with slow movements that center near to the ground(Suzuki, “The Grammar of the Feet,” 18). The costumes are elaborate, and large masks are used to portray specific characters(Zarrilli, “Early

Theatre in Court...,” 120). The shamanic Shinto influence (specifically the influence of the goddess Ame Uzumi no Kami) on Noh theatre can be seen in the architecture of the performance setting(Suzuki, “The Grammar of the Feet, 13-14).

“It is for such reasons that the classic Japanese dramas were often set in spots where such spirits were thought to dwell, the site of a burial, for example, or a raised grave mound. The construction of the Noh stage, even as it exists today, includes empty jars implanted underneath the floor: the bottom of the stage is hollowed out. The purpose of this is not only the artistic effect of having greater reverberations when the actors stamp their feet. These sounds can also be understood as a means to help in the calling forth of the spiritual energy of the place, a summoning of the ancestral spirits to come and possess the body of the performer in a kind of hallucination. The very echoes produced stand as proof of the existence, through physical sensation, of a mutual response between actor and spirit.”

- Suzuki, “The Grammar of the Feet,” 14

In this culture we see a different relationship between their dramatic theory and their religious practices than we did in Ancient India or Ancient Greece. Noh focuses specifically on the relationship of the actor to the spiritual world(Suzuki, “The Grammar of the Feet,” 15). There is specific power and spiritual responsibility put on the actor that we do not see in traditions like the Greeks, who performed in competition as part of their civic duties. With the development of a writing system in the 11th century Zeami Motokiyo(1363-1443) was able to compose a “set of treatises... in which he considers both the practical and philosophical ‘secrets’ of his evolving artistry.(Zarrilli, “Early Theatre in Court...,” 123). Like Aristotle and Bharata he hypothesizes on the best ways to please audiences and elicit emotional responses from them(Zarrilli, “Early Theatre in Court...,” 123).

While there are specific nuances between these three approaches to dramatic theory they do have a common thread: a reliance on religious traditions and the myth systems that accompany them. This is manifested in multiple ways, in the dependence on religious texts that we see in India, in the setting of a religious festival that we see in Greece, and in the physical work of the actor that we see in Japan. All three of these civilizations depended on drama in order to relate and communicate their religious traditions, practices and common cultural myths. Without the use of drama and performance these systems of religion could not have been nearly as effective or widespread as they have become.

## Chapter 2: The Regulation of Theatre During the Late Renaissance

During the 17th century large, centralized governments became increasingly interested not only in regulating the religious practices of their citizens, but also in regulating these religious institutions (McConachie, 199). The 17th century also ushers in the height of the Colonialist period. People were no longer being grouped together based on their common culture, community and heritage. Rather large governments were now taking the opportunity to extend their reach of power to people who had different religious practices and deities. In order to maintain some kind of homogeneity these rulers believed it to be necessary to regulate their citizens beliefs, as well as the means by which those beliefs were communicated. Governments in France, England and Japan, increased their control over organized religion (McConachie, 200). In turn they needed to censor the theatrical practices of their country (McConachie, 200). Both theatre and religion had (and still have) the ability to effectively spread messages and ideals to the public, something that could easily come in the way of these ruler's political agendas.

In the 1630's Cardinal Richelieu, a duke, nobleman, statesman and ordained Catholic bishop, "established power of the French monarchy in cultural matters" (McConachie, 200). His intentions were not to suppress the theatrical (or other cultural) movements in France; rather, he recognized the impact these art forms had on the morals and ethics of his country (McConachie, 200). He was able to convince the French court to subsidize the Theatre du Marais and, just before his death, he "removed some legal restrictions from acting companies and forthrightly stated the king's desire that acting as a 'profession' be accorded respectably" (McConachie, 200). In this case it is important to note that the conflict was not one triggered by the relationship between the religious traditions and theatrical practices.

After Richelieu's death in 1642 King Louis XIV "took advantage of the monarchy's position in French culture... to tie theatre to the power of the crown" in the same way he tied the catholic church to the power of the crown(McConachie, 200). "Louis XIV was particularly fond of taking a hand in doctrinal matters" of the church, legislating the assembly of the clergy, denying the Pope's power over the church, and taking the liberty to appoint bishops(Steingrad). In the late 17th century he began to take control of France's theatre in the same way(McConachie, 201). After Moliere's death in 1673 there was increased "rivalry among the Paris acting troupes [that] lead to a period of flux, with several actors leaving one company to join another"(McConachie, 201). Louis XIV sought to end this conflict and unite the Paris theatre scene under crown subsidy and, of course, crown control(McConachie, 201).

"In 1679, the crown forced an end to the conflicts by ordering the two major Parisian acting troupes to combine into one -- the Comedie Francaise. As he had already done with musical drama and the opera, Louis granted a monopoly over spoken drama in French to the new company."

-McConachie, 201

As if this wasn't enough Louis XIV "took control of the internal affairs" of the theatre, establishing a member of his court as the "arbiter of disputes within" the Comedie Francaise(McConachie, 201). Needing to further his control he "imposed censorship in 1701 and reinforced it with another edict in 1706: these mandated that all scripts be read and approved by a censor in the police department before a public performance in paris would be allowed"(McConachie, 201). Cardinal Richelieu's influence in the first half of the 17th century

allowed neoclassical theatre in France to flourish and grow into its own; but with the absolutist control that Louis XIV exerted over both the church and the theatre in the late 17th century they were restricted to serve the wants and needs of the monarchy(McConachie, 202).

The relationship of the church, state and theatre in England during the 17th century is even more complicated than that of France. In 1642(the same year as Richelieu's death) Oliver Cromwell rose to power in England, and with him came the Puritan church and years of civil imbalance(McConachie, 206). The Puritans were a "group of Protestants that arose in the 16th century within the Church of England, demanding the simplification of doctrine and worship, and greater strictness in religious discipline"(“puritans”). With their newfound political power the Puritans realized, like Richelieu and Louis XIV, that the theatre had an impact on the morality of the English people. However, instead of harnessing the influence of theatre the way the French were able to, the Puritans banned professional theatre during Cromwell's rule(McConachie, 206). There were multiple factors that went into the ban:

“First, they associated the stage with the expensive and lavish masques that Charles I had enjoyed at court. To oppose the theatre was to oppose royal absolutism in the eyes of many Puritans. Second, they voiced religious objections, partly linked to the rise of print culture. Believing that the Word of God as printed in the Bible revealed truth, the Puritans feared that mimicry and spectacle would corrupt people's reason, teach them to delight in illusion and debauchery, and turn them away from the biblical path to salvation. Second, the Bible specifically forbade transvestism, a

regular part of the pre-1642 theatre. Boy actors played all of the female roles. And many plot and character devices of the stage involved varieties of gender bending. Third, and finally the Puritans believed that the theatre incited immoral and illegal behavior. Ordinary people, already inherently depraved (according to the Puritans), would be tempted to robbery, sodomy, and even murder if they watched such behavior or even heard it discussed on the stage.”

-McConachie, 207

Earlier rulers in England also put regulations on theatre, however the Puritans were the first to identify theatre as a threat and not as an entity that can be manipulated to the advantage of the monarchy(McConachie, 207). They did not wish to censor the theatre, they wanted it abolished.

In France we were able to see both religion and the theatre being placed under scrutiny and regulations by the nation’s government; whereas in the case of 17th century England the Puritans rose to power and almost total control over the government and then regulated, banned and censored the drama because it undermined the authority of God’s word(McConachie, 209). Both situations have very specific and very different implications. The proximity of the church to the monarchy and centralized government gave them power over the institution of theatre, specifically in this time period.

In France the Catholic Church and its representatives, namely Cardinal Richelieu, created an almost codependent relationship between church and theatre(McConachie, 200). The Catholic Church had financial resources and ordained priests and bishops held prominent

positions in court during the early 17th century; and both of these factors allowed them to grant subsidies to prominent theatres in Paris(McConachie, 200). While the Theatre du Marais and other theatre companies were happy to take these subsidies they had something that the church was eager to have: the ability to influence mass amounts of civilians and indoctrinate them through their performance(McConachie, 200). It was not until Louis XIV came to power and began controlling both the church and the theatre that Moliere began to question and attack clergymen(McConachie, 200). They were no longer able to provide for his work monetarily so he was able to be critical of them in his dramas.

The relationship between church and theatre in England during this time is far from the codependency we see in France. As an extremist religious group took control of the English government they saw theatre as a threat to their morals and their ways of life(McConachie, 207). The theatre was truly at the mercy of the religious institution that dominated England in this time period(McConachie, 207). This one sided dependence combined with the Puritans' strict interpretation of the Bible were contributing factors in the regulation and ultimate ban of theatre in England during this period(McConachie, 207).

The desire to keep religion and theatre practices homogenous wasn't reserved to Western Europe. After over a century of civil wars the Samurai claimed power over Japan in 1590(McConachie, 203). They ushered in the 17th century by appointing Tokugawa Ieyasu to the position of Shogun(the supreme military ruler) in 1603; establishing the Tokugawa shogunate(McConachie, 203). The religious climate of Japan was nowhere near as unified as it was in France or England during this time period. The native religion of Shinto was still present in many areas but Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity were all being practiced in Japan

during this time(Woods). During the early 17th century another form of theatre was developed outside of the Noh tradition(McConachie, 203). Called Kabuki, the art form initially consisted of “female prostitutes who danced and enacted satirical playlets and bawdy sideshows”(McConachie, 203). As the new shogunate rose to power they, like Louis XIV, desired absolute control over all aspects of their citizens lives, including that of religion and theatre(McConachie, 203). Wishing to unify Japan under a common religion “Tokugawa Ieyasu ordered every Japanese family to register at a Buddhist temple, in essence becoming part of the Buddhist sangha (church)” in 1614(Woods). The shogunate’s desire to regulate the theatrical practices of Japan had less to do with the content of the productions(as was the case in France), rather the emphasis was placed more on class politics and the elite’s “disdain for merchants and city culture,” the very people participating in the creation and consumption of Kabuki theatre(McConachie, 203). The Shogunate did not have a disdain for theatre, just the lower class people performing in kabuki(McConachie, 205). These governing officials often watched and enjoyed Noh performance(McConachie, 205). In addition to the general disdain that the elite and ruling class felt towards kabuki performer they feared that “if completely unregulated, [kabuki] would corrupt the soldiers and young men of their own class”(McConachie, 203). They did not, however, ban kabuki as Cromwell banned theatre in Britain. Kabuki, like the neo-classical theatre of France, was regulated with increasing scrutiny as time passed(McConachie, 206).

In all three of these examples the relationship between theatre and organized religion were complicated by centralized governments. In the case of Japan and France performance and religion were both regulated and manipulated to the advantage of the government. These

political entities were able to identify the power and influence that theatre and religion had over its citizens and, rather than getting rid of that power, they wanted to use it to push their own agenda. England had used this strategy for quite some time, Queen Elizabeth censored and sponsored Shakespeare and his company, but with the rise of Puritanical power this extremist religious group wanted political control and did not want compete with as large and powerful an entity the as theater. It's important to specifically observe the regulation of theater during this time period as it was during this time that colonialism really became widespread. The ways in which England and France regulated their theatre practices and religious organizations would come to determine how these organizations were regulated in their colonies. Japan, however, will not have the imperialistic control over far away nations that England and France will come to know over the next few centuries. Their attempt at regulating religion and theatre comes from a place of wanting to preserve their traditions in the face of these colonialist empires.

### Chapter 3: The Decline of Religion and the Rise of Spirituality in Dramatic Theory

“According to a 2013 survey of 14,000 people in 13 nations (Germany, France, Sweden, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, Israel, Canada, Brazil, India, South Korea, the U.K. and the U.S.) that was conducted by the German Bertelsmann Foundation for its Religion Monitor, there is both widespread approval for the separation of church and state, as well as a decline in religiosity over time and across generations.”

- Shermer, *Is God Dying?*

Over the past century there has been a clear and cross cultural decline in religiosity(Shermer). This trend was specifically noticeable after the end of World War II, but is more generational in nature than concentrated in specific moments of history(Crockett). This recent decline in religious participation has been mirrored by an interesting trend in our modern theatre and the theory that dictates how we approach our art form. In this section I will address the work of three dramatic theorists; Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook and Tadashi Suzuki. Each theatre artist has tied their theories on the dramatic arts with spirituality, and each has worked predominantly in the second half of the 20th century. These three particular dramatic theorists were chosen because they come from different countries with varying performance and religious traditions and because of their huge influence on 20th and 21st century theatrical practices.

Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999) founded an experimental theatre laboratory in Opole, Poland in 1959(Grotowski). His theories and speculations that resulted from his lab work have had immense influence on theatre practitioners of all kinds (Grotowski). He details his theory,

approach and technique in a 1965 article: “Towards a Poor Theatre” (Grotowski). He spends the majority of the article making an argument for poverty in theatre, for a lack of visual spectacle and a return to the relationship between actor and audience. Grotowski considers the actor as the core of all work in the theatre and his work has centered around “detailed investigations of the actor-audience relationship”(Grotowski, 15). His work focuses on stripping the actor “from the time lapse between inner impulse and outer reaction in such a way that the impulse is already an outer reaction. Impulse and action are concurrent: the body vanishes, burns and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses” (Grotowski, 16). The actors “do not concentrate on the spiritual technique but on the composition of the role, on the construction of the form”(Grotowski, 17). Grotowski believes that this “artificial composition not only doesn’t limit the spiritual but actually leads to it”(Grotowski, 17). In practice Grotowski’s work spends little time on the outwardly theatrical and instead focuses on on the actor and the relationship the actor has with the audience. He attempts to make the invisible visible through this human connection.

In his description of the technique and its results Grotowski does not shy away from overtly religious language: specifically Catholic terminology. He describes theatre as being unable to “exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, live communion”(Grotowski, 19). He goes on to describe the actor who has deconstructed the wall between inner impulse and outer reaction as going through “transubstantiation”(Grotowski, 21); a term used by the Catholic church to describe the miracle that occurs when bread and wine is turned into the body and blood of Christ. He goes on to explain his dependence on religion with historical context:

“The theatre, when it was still part of religion, was already theatre: it liberated the spiritual energy of the congregation or tribe by incorporating myth and profaning or rather transcending it. The spectator thus had a renewed awareness of his personal truth in the truth of the myth, and through fright and a sense of the sacred he came to catharsis... As social groupings are less and less defined by religion, traditional mythic forms are in flux, disappearing and being reincarnated.”

- Grotowski, 22-23

Grotowski sees theatre not as inherently religious, but as dependent on the same techniques that religion utilizes. The concepts of communion is specifically fascinating, especially when put into theatrical context. The idea that the actor is making of himself, in the same way that Jesus and other deities did, a self-sacrifice in order to provide their followers, spectators, audience members some kind of redemption, some kind of lasting salvation, ties our present theatre to its ritual roots(Grotowski). Grotowski acknowledges that religion has been declining cross-generationally and addresses the human being’s tendency and need for community in the sharing of myths, even if the form has been “reincarnated” from a specific religion to a spiritual theatre setting(Grotowski, 23). If theatre has the potential to transform and influence people the way that religion has for millenia then, as theatre artists, we must ask ourselves what kind of impact we wish to make with our artistic, spiritual communities.

Peter Brook(1925-), a British director and dramatic theorist whose work was deeply influenced by Grotowski, founded the International Centre of Theatre Research in Paris in 1960

where he was able to create a cross cultural dialogue about the purposes and functions of theatre(Brook). His 1968 book, *The Empty Space*, is divided into four sections where he analyzes theatre as deadly, holy, rough and immediate(Brook). For our purposes we will examine his investigation of the “Holy Theatre”(Brook, 42). Brook believes that the theatre is of holy function “because its purpose is holy; it has a clearly defined place in the community and it responds to a need the churches can no longer fill”(Brook, 60). Again, like Grotowski, he addresses the decline of religion and the need for theatre to fill its place in our communities.

His analysis of the similarities between the “ritual” of the theatre and the constructs of the church are staggering and simply cannot be ignored or dismissed. Brook agrees with Grotowski that “the theatre... cannot be an end in itself... the theatre is a vehicle. A means for self-study, self-exploration; a possibility of salvation”(Brook, 59). Similarly, religious ritual is not an end in itself. Rituals are performed in order to accomplish something; they are performed in order to celebrate, to worship, to maintain balance, etc. Brook continues to support Grotowski’s theories:

“The actor does not hesitate to show himself exactly as he is, for he realizes that the secret of the role demands his opening himself up, disclosing his own secrets. So that the act of the performance is an act of sacrifice, or sacrificing what most men prefer to hide -- this sacrifice is his gift to the spectator. Here there is a similar relation between actor and audience to the one between priest and worshipper.”

- Brook, 59-60

In the same way that priest and worshipper are united by their need and search for salvation, the holy theatre exists where “the activity of the actor and the activity of the spectator are driven by the same desperate need”(Brook, 54).

Brooks continues his analysis by examining the Living Theatre; a group led by Julian Beck and Judith Malina. The company is a nomadic community “that provides a complete way of life for every one of its members”(Brook, 62). “Above all they are a community; but they are only a community because they have a special function which gives their communal existence meaning”(Brook, 62). Religious communities form to perform functions; to spread the good word of their God, to perform rituals that allow our universe to stay functioning, etc. In this way communities in the theatre(i.e. repertory groups like the Living Theatre) and religious communities are fundamentally the same. Brook even alludes to a sacred and holy element being present in the relationship between the actor and audience(Brook). One of the questions he sought to answer at his International Centre of Theatre Research was “can the invisible be made visible through the performer’s presence?”(Brook, 52). He describes his findings in *The Empty Space*:

“All religions assert that the invisible is visible all the time. But here’s the crunch. Religious teaching -- including Zen -- asserts that this visible-invisible cannot be seen automatically -- it can only be seen given certain conditions. The conditions can relate to certain states of to a certain understanding. In any event, to comprehend the visibility of the invisible is a life’s work. Holy art is an aid to this, and so we arrive at a definition of the holy theatre.

A holy theatre not only presents the invisible, but also offers conditions that make its perception possible.”

- Brook, 56

In this search to make in the invisible palpable, in our very human need for community and our desire for larger function and purpose, “Why theatre at all?”(Brook, 61). We come to the theatre, as performers and consumers, out of great hunger, great need. Our specific reasons for coming to the theatre are as varied as we are, but we all come out of a hunger to experience something beyond ourselves.

Tadashi Suzuki is a contemporary Japanese theatre artist who synthesizes dramatic practices and theories from multiple cultures in order to create theatre that speaks specifically and poignantly to a Japanese audience. His 2015 book, *Culture is the Body*, is a collection of his writings on theatre. In it he discusses the importance of a historical analysis of our current theatrical trends as well as the importance of the theories discussed by both Brook and Grotowski. He asserts that dramatists in our era of realism do not write new dramas in an attempt to recreate or “portray a quotidian reality” but rather to “express their insights into the psychological and spiritual nature of the human condition”(Suzuki, 10). He also believes that when an actor is successful in creating a drama in theatrical space it prompts “the audience [to] experience a physical and spiritual satisfaction” that they are unable to find in their daily lives.

When analyzing theatre historically Suzuki emphasizes the importance of God not only in the performances of the ancient Greek and ancient Japanese theatre but also the architecture of their theatrical spaces.

“Just like a Noh actor, a Greek actor served as a sort of shaman participating in a ceremony to appease the gods. Hence, acting was a public ritual of religious and magical proportions... Acting therefore, was described as the act of facing god... Just as there was usually a seat for the priest of Dionysus in the classical Greek amphitheatre, the Noh theatre has a shinjindokyo, where the shogun and the shinto god would sit together. In the Kabuki tradition, theatres are traditionally built with a yagura tower on the roof, from which the gods could descend and give permission for a performance to take place. By facing [this structure] actors would show their bodies and speak their text to god. In these cases, the center of the theatre had a life of its own, to which the actors offered the energy of their actions.”

-Suzuki, 23

He further asserts that in order to present these Greek texts in our modern era where God and religion has declined immensely we must “make the fiction of god palpable in performance, [we] must call forth a caliber of energy that evokes the divine spirit”(Suzuki, 28). While our cultures and our theatrical spaces may no longer place great importance on the presence of a God or Gods it is necessary for actors to “make an imaginative leap to discover a divine fiction” in order to create a heightened reality and evoke the same spiritual response from the audience(Suzuki, 29).

Suzuki agrees with Brook in that theatre not only offers a sense of community to its audience, but also some spiritual satisfaction, a sense of communion as Brook and Grotowski

claim(Brook, Suzuki). Suzuki identifies this moment of spiritual sacrifice on the part of the actor and spiritual satisfaction on the part of the audience as “cozening”(Suzuki, 5). Again we see the thread of sacrifice, something that is seen cross culturally in religious worship. Historically theatre was focused on a divine presence, something with a huge and dramatic magnitude. Suzuki conjectures that in order to create drama of the same height in a relatively godless world we must recreate a sense of communal spirituality to take the place of the gods(Suzuki).

Even as religion has declined cross culturally our human need for community and a sense of spirituality has not. Grotowski, Brook and Suzuki all express both their beliefs that theatre can provide these things for a contemporary audience and that theatre actually needs these elements in order to be successful. These artists accept the historical relationship between theatre and religion and build off of it in order to make theatre that not only entertains but touches audiences spiritually. There is an empty space forming in our cultures and in our lives, a space that was once filled by our spiritual customs and religious communities. Theatre has the power and the potential to fill this space; theatre has the ability to connect us.

## Chapter 4: Modern Religious Rituals and Practices

An analytical look at most modern religious rituals and public practices reveals that cross-culturally there is a performative element to these traditions. Normally when something is described as “performative” there is a negative connotation to it; it’s implied that in being performative an act is in some way disingenuous. That is not the case for this discussion of performativity in religious ceremony. I in no way mean to diminish the importance of these rituals or the weight that they carry for those who believe and participate in them. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “performance” as “the execution of an action”(“Performance”). Modern religious rituals are definitely performative by this standard. Various actions; recitation of prayers, singing of hymns, offering of sacrifices for example, are executed during these ceremonies. There is another layer of performance not included in this particular definition that is vital to both theatre and religious ritual: the necessary element of a viewer to this performance - an audience, a spectator, a voyeur. Both the audience and the performer are necessary in these religious rituals and this element is what makes these ceremonies performative in the same way that theater is performative. In this chapter I will examine the performative and quasi-theatrical qualities of a Catholic Mass, a Jewish Shabbat service, an Islamic Jumu’ah, a Hindu Puja and a Buddhist Temple Service. Namely I will be observing the parallels between these modern ritualistic practices and our contemporary theatre practices.

All of these traditions and rituals share certain elements with contemporary theatre practices. Cross-culturally, theatrical performances are aided by costume, prop and often song. These elements also appear in our religious ceremonies, although there is often deeper meaning

attached to them linking them to the traditions and histories of their belief systems . In Catholicism the priest wears vestments during the Mass that often change color depending on the time of the liturgical year(“What is the Origin...”). At Jewish services men wear a yarmulke or a kippah (a small hat) and Bar-Mitzvahed men wear a tallis (a garment with four corners) to remind them of the presence of God(“Jewish Concepts”). Muslim men and women have the option to wear traditional garments like a Hijab, Thobe or Bishut. A Hijab is a garment worn by women, it is a “square or rectangular piece of fabric which is folded, placed over the head and fastened under the chin as a headscarf”(Huda). The Thobe and Bishut are cloaks and robes that are traditionally worn by men(Huda). The monastic robes of Buddhist monks “serve not just as a kind of uniform to remind the wearer that he or she is a member of a larger universal community, but is itself an object of reflection”(“The Monastic Robes”). The Brahmin, or Hindu priest class, is “distinguished primarily by the sacred thread ‘upavīta), which is bestowed on him during his boyhood investiture and worn diagonally across the body, over the left shoulder, at all times”(Dickie).

The comparison of these garments to “costumes” in theatrical performances is not meant to diminish their importance or significance to the traditions that they come from. Rather it is important to understand the parallels between how they are used in a religious context and how they are used in a theatrical context. In both religious and theatrical spaces garments are deliberately chosen in order to execute what they are trying to accomplish. In religious spaces these garments are often used to promote the connection the congregation feels to their deity or as an expression of the celebration they are commemorating. In theatrical spaces costumes are also used to help execute a goal: to help efficiently and effectively relay a narrative plot to the

audience. As Robert Edmond Jones argues in *The Dramatic Imagination*, all technical elements used on stage(including costume) are present as evocative tools used to evoke emotional responses from the audience(Jones, 96). Do religious garments not also serve to evoke something from their audience? If not an emotional response, then a spiritual response? They are used to evoke humility in some communities or pride in others. The use of garments, costume, props and even song in both theatrical and religious traditions serve to evoke a desired response from the audience, from the congregation, from the community. The comparison of the objects used in theatrical space and religious space is not meant to diminish the incredible value and importance of these objects to religious communities: rather to analyze the similarities between the functionalities of these objects in the two separate spaces.

Similar to the use of costume in both theatrical and religious spaces, the use of song or chorus is also used by both institutions. In both traditional and contemporary Sanskrit theatre nearly all text is sung or chanted; song, percussive instruments and melodic chanting are an integral element to Japanese No theatre. Western musicals have come to dominate the commercial theatre worldwide with the increase of international touring productions. Theatre utilizes music in order to more eloquently and intricately tell stories. Religious celebrations also utilize song in order to accomplish their spiritual goals.

In Catholic tradition hymns and psalms are sung by the celebrants, cantors and congregation. “A cry from deep within our being, music is a way for God to lead us to the realm of higher things. As St. Augustine says, ‘singing is for the one who loves.’ Music is therefore a sign of God’s love for us and of our love for him.”(“Why Do We Sing?”) The use of song is meant to augment the mass celebration and strengthen the relationship between those

participating and their God. In the Jewish Shabbat service all of the prayers, as well as the recitation of the Torah, are sung. The melodies have practical use as “they indicate where a phrase begins or ends, and actually aid in interpreting the meaning of the text”(Hammer). An integral part of the Buddhist temple service is the recitation of the Sutras or “the teachings of the Buddha”(“Why Reciting Buddhist...”). The monotonous recitation of these Sutras is not intended as a conscious declaration of a belief, rather as a means to connect the teachings of Buddha to your subconscious. Buddhists “believe the subconscious is where the seeds of enlightenment flourish first” and these chants help lead the practitioner to enlightenment(“Why Reciting Buddhist...”). The Jumu’ah (Friday night Islamic prayer service) begins with the Athan and ends with the Raka’at; two different prayers that are chanted in a melodic fashion by the entire community(“Friday Prayer”). This chanting helps to unite the community in prayer before and after the Imam(celebrant) delivers his sermon(“Friday Prayer”). Throughout the Hindu Puja “invocation[s], mantra[s] or prayer[s]” from the Vedic tradition are chanted and sung(V, Jayaram). “The purpose of such an elaborate procedure is to build rapport with the deity and earn his love and grace for which he specifically chooses prayers and hymns that extol the virtues, triumphs and greatness of the deity”(V, Jayaram).

Physical objects, properties or “props” are frequently used in theatrical settings to augment the storytelling. Again, the use of props in performance is not limited to a single culture or to western tradition. In Western performance we most frequently see physical objects on stage that are similar to the physical objects we encounter in our daily lives. This is largely due to the fact that the predominating genre in our culture is realism. In Sanskrit theatre and Japanese Noh theatre the props used are more sparse but are meant to represent something and

evoke something from an audience rather than convey some false sense of reality. Whether these props are realistic objects used in our everyday lives or more representational objects meant to evoke something from our audience they all serve a purpose and are used to in some way aid in the construction of the narrative.

The use of physical objects to help a performer achieve their goal is something that we also see in the different religious rituals we have been analyzing. Often these objects are considered to be sacred, holy or containing power that transcends our world. During a Catholic Mass chalices, crucifixes(defined as “a representation of Christ on the cross.”), sacred books and unleavened bread are all used in the performance of the mass to celebrate, acknowledge and make a sacrifice to God. Tibetan Buddhists use symbolic bells, daggers, beads and bowls during their Temple services to represent nirvana and metaphorically drive out evil spirits(Hays). In Jewish Shabbat services the scroll of the torah, the Yad (pointer “used by the synagogue Torah reader to keep place in the scroll”) and a silver spice box are all used to help convey God’s message to the congregation(“Jewish Ritual Objects”). During the hindu Pujah the worshippers make offerings to their deity of flowers, fruit, incense and water among other things(V, Jayaram). During the Muslim Jumu’ah sacred texts, prayer beds and prayer beads are used to aid in the worshipping and prayer offering to Allah(“What is A Muslim”).

The structure of the actual physical space in which these religious rituals take place is strikingly similar to theatrical spaces. The architectural structure of both worship spaces and a theatre can vary immensely. A proscenium structure is the most traditional set up found in the theatre: an area for the audience is clearly set up on one side of the space while there is an elevated area for the stage that is utilized by the performers. This structure can also be seen in

various worship spaces. Catholic Churches, Muslim Mosques, Buddhist Temples, Jewish Synagogues and Hindu Temples are frequently set up in this proscenium structure. A large area for congregants to watch, worship, sit, kneel and pray faces some kind of altar space. There are some worship spaces that are set up similarly to a theatre in the round, with the sacred space or performance area located in the center with areas for the congregation or audience to sit surrounding this area on all four sides. There are also altar spaces that can be compared to thrust stages used in theatrical settings. The term thrust is used to describe a set up in which there is a performative space that juts or thrusts out from one wall that is surrounded by spectators on three sides. No matter the specific construction of the space one thing remains similar between theatrical spaces and worship spaces: there are distinct spaces set up that separate the performer or clergy from the audience or congregation.

As a lifelong member of the Catholic Church my bias in this research is that I am able to more deeply analyze the Mass in a way that I am unable to for the traditions that I only witnessed once. That being said, at the risk of being egocentric I feel that it is necessary to point out a dramaturgical similarity between the celebration of the Mass and western performance traditions. Perhaps the most obvious parallel between Catholicism and theatrical practices is the use of recitation and the need for a script to outline how the performance will unfold. In traditional western theatrical practices performers will follow a narrative script with a plot that will build and grow to a climax. Anything that follows the climax is dramaturgically considered the denouement and is of less theatrical importance than the climax and the events leading up to the climactic moment. The Catholic Mass is divided into two sections: first the Liturgy of the Word followed by the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Liturgy of the Word includes the recitation of

different bible passages by trained members of the community that culminates in the priest reciting his “homily” or personal thoughts on the readings that are traditionally prepared prior to the service. The Liturgy of the Word flows seamlessly into the Liturgy of the Eucharist where the priest ceremoniously turns bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The congregation then eats the body and blood of Christ in an act of communion. The events of the mass, while all important, lead up to this moment of communion which could easily be considered the spiritual climax of the ritual. The events following communion generally include parish announcements and an exit song, elements that run parallel to the denouement of western dramaturgy. This parallel structure is a remnant; evidence of the relationship between these two structures that dates back to the formation of these rituals.

These specific services were chosen because of the need to demonstrate the cross cultural use of performance in religious rituals. These services were also chosen because they are the most frequently performed of the ceremonies in each religion and are generally attended at least once a week by these communities. The tendency to utilize a performative setting to illicit spiritual response from a congregation is not limited to one culture, one religion or one people: each of the world's major religions share this trait.

## Conclusion

Cross culturally organized religion and performance traditions have evolved side by side. Performance traditions grew out of religious practices and both faced challenges from external forces, specifically government censorship. As religiosity has declined internationally dramatic theory has increased its reliance on spirituality both in practice and conceptually and our modern religious rituals have performative qualities to them as well as parallels to our theatrical practices. There is a clear, distinctive and undeniable relationship between these two institutions. They borrow ideas and practices from each other and both use a public platform to spread a message to their audience.

As theatre practitioners so much of our creative process is based off of the work of these modern dramatic theorists. It is important that we understand the historical implications of their claims in order to better implement their theories in our own work. For centuries organized religions of multiple cultures have used their platform to promote empathy, love and understanding to their followers. As religiosity declines internationally theatre has the opportunity to fill the void that is being left in our cultures. It is especially important for us to do this as we live in an era where political figures and oppressive social structures are constantly trying to strip us of our compassion.

If, as theatre artists, we are able to fully understand the potential impact of our artform through the analysis of its relationship and similarities to organized religion then we will have the ability to enact real change through our work. We also must recognize that this rich history of interconnection and relationship points to one thing; that we as theatre artists have a spiritual responsibility to our audiences and it is our duty to act accordingly. We have been gifted a

platform, a voice and the opportunity to share our stories and ideas with a broad audience. This responsibility isn't something that should be taken lightly: a powerful and well thought out performance has the ability to change lives, change our point of view and change the way we perceive and interact with those around us. As individual artists we must address, within ourselves, what we find to be our fundamental beliefs. In an industry that is increasingly geared towards box office sales and commercial success it is integral that we check in with our personal morals and ethics to ensure that we are creating theatre that will nourish our audiences spiritually. Do you hold diversity as a core value? Then be sure to participate in and produce the writing of diverse artists. Do you believe in the importance of accessibility? Then make sure that the theatre you are creating is accessible to those of lower income and disabled persons. Do you believe the theatre should be a more joyous place? Then ensure that the staff of your theatre company are happy with the way they are treated in their workplace. For millenia religious institutions have used performative tactics to accomplish their various goals. Various governments utilized performative organizations to accomplish their political goals. The question we face as theatre artists is: what do we want to accomplish?

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