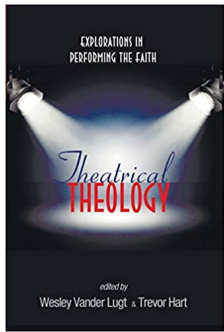


## [Review] *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith*, edited by Wesley Vander Lugt and Trevor Hart



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For various and sometimes differing reasons, philosophers and Christian thinkers have expressed concern about poets and the theater. In *The Republic* (Book X, Section 3), Plato argued that theater and poetry gratified and indulged our baser natures. Church father Tertullian railed against plays, not only because Greek theater derived from idolatry but also because he believed the plays themselves excited impure passions through acts that were shameful to say or do, much less observe in others (*De Spectaculis*). In 1642, the Puritans influenced England's parliament to forbid all stage plays, on the grounds that they encouraged immoral, obscene behavior.

From these past examples, one could paraphrase Tertullian: “What hath Broadway to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between Juilliard and the Church?”<sup>1</sup> Recently, however, theologians and other scholars have suggested a dynamic interaction between Christian theology and the theater. Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar introduced the term theodrama in his five-volume systematic theology (1973–1983). In 2005, Kevin Vanhoozer reconceptualized the term for Protestant theology in *The Drama of Doctrine*. And a 2012 conference sponsored by the Institute for Theology, Imagination, and the Arts at the University at St. Andrews represents a continuation of such effort. A compilation of some of the papers and ideas expressed at this conference resulted in the publication of *Theatrical Theology*.

In thirteen chapters, the editors and contributors of *Theatrical Theology* contend that theology is “inherently theatrical . . . by virtue of its object, mode, and goal” (Introduction, xiii). God, the

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<sup>1</sup> Tertullian (c. 160–225), was an attorney and Stoic philosopher in Carthage, Africa, before his conversion to Christianity. He later became the first of the Latin Fathers and the originator of the term “Trinity.” In his *Against Heresies*, Chapter 7, Tertullian wrote the famous phrase, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem, what has the Academy to do with the Church?” When well-meaning Christian thinkers attempted to win over the skeptical Hellenistic intelligentsia by referring to Greek philosophical categories, Tertullian feared a blend of Hellenistic philosophy with Christian doctrine. The anticipated syncretistic fusion that Tertullian warned against threatened to compromise the integrity of the Christian message. The rhetorical flourish of Tertullian is, in fact, a perennial question for Christians of all generations. The present discussion about theology and the theater is no exception.



object of theology, acts and performs on the theater of his creation. As John Calvin famously said, all creation is “the theater of God’s glory” (*Institutes* 1.5.8). Moreover, theology is theatrical in its mode because a person inescapably acts within this theodrama even in the process of doing theology. Finally, the goal of theology, like the theater, is performance. The Church does theology not to produce a weighty tome of esoteric knowledge but to guide the faithful in their performance of the script (Bible) on the world stage. In 1 Corinthians 4:9, Paul mentions that he and the other apostles have become “a spectacle” (Gk. *theatron*) to the world. And Hebrews 10:32–33 says that believers are a “public spectacle” (Gk. *theatrizomenoi*) in their suffering, beatings, and imprisonments. The world as onlookers beholds the way in which believers face these hardships. As most theatrical productions receive critical reviews, so with *Theatrical Theology* I’ll begin with a summary of the contents followed by a critique of each contributing author’s “performance.”

In the first chapter, Kevin Vanhoozer discusses the inter-Trinitarian relations by using drama as an analogy. For almost two thousand years, theologians have discussed how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit interact not only within space–time in redemptive history (economic Trinity), but also in eternity (ontological Trinity). Commenting on John 5:19–20, Vanhoozer contends that the economic Trinity is a dramatic expression of the ontological Trinity, suggesting little difference between the two. The conclusion is that the Trinitarian relations pertaining to redemption do not refer merely to history but also to eternity.

Vanhoozer also defends a more orthodox doctrine of God, in contrast to the theodramatic visions from theologians Robert Jenson and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Unlike Jenson and Balthasar, Vanhoozer cautions readers that “theologians should not elevate theater studies to the queen of the sciences.” His use of theatrical language is a “qualifier, not the main subject,” since his use of theatrical terms is “ministerial and heuristic” (3).

Vanhoozer shows the potential of theatrical theology. First, he uses a dramatic analogy as a heuristic device to explain how the economic Trinity is an expression of the ontological Trinity. Then Vanhoozer engages the rival theodramatic interpretations of the Godhead from Jenson and Balthasar. Rather than wielding theodrama merely as a clever analogy or a cumbersome add-on, Vanhoozer’s use of theodrama successfully elucidates classical Christian orthodoxy in a manner more accessible to contemporary readers.

Vanhoozer also deftly avoids heterodoxy in his use of theatrical theology. As mentioned above, he warns against relegating dramatic theory as the norm of norms. His theatrical metaphors function descriptively, not prescriptively. Theatrical terminology is “ministerial and heuristic,” rather than ontological and regulative. Paul Tillich argued that contemporary theology must be apologetic in its approach (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 1–8). What he meant by that was that theology must be prepared to respond to the prevailing assumptions, questions, and ideas within the culture. Theatrical theology, as Vanhoozer articulates it, is an excellent contemporary example. It dramatically takes the old wine of classical Christian teaching and serves it in the new wineskin of theatrical theology as a response to postmodern questions about truth, reason, and epistemological and hermeneutical issues. May God send more theologians to the Vanhoozer School of Theatrical Theology.

Regrettably, the other contributors to this volume seem to me to ignore Vanhoozer's "stage directions" for the use of theatrical theology. Their performance, in contrast, morphs theology into a play within a play—a farce starring a god fashioned in their own image. Rather than staying close to the script (the canon of scripture), these contributors follow drama theorists, which inadvertently introduces nonbiblical worldviews into their theology. During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther described scripture as *norma normans non normanda*, or the "norm of norms that cannot be normed." The majority of *Theatrical Theology* contributors, unfortunately, are following cues from another norm, thereby unwittingly norming scripture.

Ivan Patricio Khovacs's (mis)use of tragedy in Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard* to interpret an aspect of the relationship of the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ (hypostatic union) is one example. The author describes how Jesus's divine and human wills interacted with one another at Gethsemane. Chekov's dramatic theory, Khovacs argues, offers a valuable clue. The final chord at the end of *The Cherry Orchard*, according to Khovacs, is representative of the moment at which Jesus's human will submits to the Father by becoming subsumed by his own divine will. Such was the moment, according to Khovacs, when Jesus said, "Not my will but yours be done."

The union of Jesus's divine and human natures is, obviously, a very complex matter. Yet this theatrical explanation is heterodox. Khovacs's explanation, that the human will of Jesus was overcome by his divine will, teaches a form of doctrine known as Eutycheanism. The Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon condemned Eutycheanism as heretical in 451. Jesus's human and divine wills were never at odds with one another, nor did his divine will overcome his human will. Rather, the Council of Chalcedon affirmed that Jesus Christ has one nature having both a divine and human character. Christ's divine nature maintained all of the divine and human character without "mixture, confusion, or comingling." The anguish that Jesus experienced at Gethsemane was real, to be sure. But it was not a theological tug-of-war between his divine and human wills.

Several contributors cite Peter Brook's volume on theater direction, *The Empty Space*, for useful analogies in theology. Timothy Gorringe refers to Brook for helpful insights on the nature of divine providence. In *The Empty Space*, Brook explains how he eschewed his earlier method of theater direction in favor of a dynamic interaction between the director and the actors. The blocking, gestures, and various interpretations of the characters' actions were as much a decision of the actors as of the director.

Gorringe's interpretation is similar to twentieth-century process philosophy when he writes that God does not know what human beings will do or say on the dramatic stage of creation. Gorringe's theological interpretation of divine providence pantomimes the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and the process theology of John Cobb in the twentieth century. Both Whitehead's and Cobb's ideas were contingent upon a cosmology of a steady-state universe that contemporary astrophysics debunked decades ago. Besides having a discredited cosmological basis, Gorringe's interpretation of divine providence has been roundly condemned by theologians as a radical departure from our traditional understanding of God. As a manual for theological



direction, *The Empty Space* resembles the infinite abyss mentioned by Blaise Pascal in his *Pensées*. The only object that can fill a space so vast is the infinite and immutable sovereignty of God.

Other contributors, sadly, continue with dramatic theological missteps in their reliance on Brook. David Cunningham refers to Brook's minimalist theatrical direction as he makes a case for a Christian antinomianism, or an outright rejection of laws and commandments in Christian ethics. Jesus, argues Cunningham, spoke in narratives and parables rather than by giving commandments. In response to Cunningham, one might consider Jesus's words in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments," or even "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I came not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). Likewise, David Brown refers to Brook in his argument that theater is a rich source for "religious insight and revelation." For all of theater's promise, it can never enjoy scripture's status as revelation. To be sure, dramatic theory is part of God's general revelation. Yet the benefit of general revelation is *Scientia* (knowledge) that assists us when we reflect on the *Sapientia* (wisdom) of the biblical canon. Scripture directs our understanding and use of theater (especially in theology), not the other way around.

Three of the last four chapters discuss social justice in relation to Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* and Bob Ekblad's *Reading the Bible with the Damned*. Marilyn McCord Adams discusses how the Church should envisage eucharistic liturgy in terms of societal revolution and renewal. Boal's revolutionary model of theater direction counters Aristotelian notions of tragedy. Peter Goodwin Heltzel's chapter, "The Church as a Theater of the Oppressed," refers to Boal's work as the inspiration for youth-led revolution during the Occupy Wall Street protest. Richard Carter and Samuel Wells refer to Ekblad, who, like Boal, was inspired by Paulo Freire's Marxist philosophy in his popular *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This classic work presents a pedagogy for adult education in the majority world, albeit from a Marxist perspective.

Adams, Heltzel, Carter, and Wells articulate a theatrical theology of social justice that is problematic. To be sure, the Bible is very clear about helping the poor, the orphan and the widow, and the disadvantaged. Of all people, Christians should plead in behalf of those who face injustice. The problem is the contributors' reliance on Boal and Ekblad. Both of them drew inspiration from Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. What all these authors have in common is a vision of social justice based on the dialectical materialist philosophy found in Marxism. Adams, Heltzel, Carter, and Wells unintentionally present a syncretistic comingling of Christian theology with an inherently atheistic philosophy (social Marxism) that is antithetical to classical Christianity. As constructive feedback, these authors should consider a biblical vision of authentic human flourishing that is found in the biblical-theological themes of the image of God, the kingdom of God, and the Temple. Tracing these themes and their social implications can offer an alternative that is theologically rich and biblically sound.

The editors of *Theatrical Theology* are correct that dramatic theological interpretations offer fruitful discussions in doctrinal development. Vanhoozer proves that this type of serious academic work is possible. Before theologians begin this endeavor, however, their first task is to establish unequivocally the relationship between theology and theater. Dramatic theory is not scripture, nor

should it ever be. Rather than confining, theologians may find this theological axiom to be quite liberating in their labors.