

Introduction

THEOLOGY IS INHERENTLY THEATRICAL, and it is so by virtue of its object, mode, and goal. First, theology is theatrical because its object is the triune God who says and does things in the theatre of the world. God created this cosmic theatre, but he also performs the lead role. He does this not merely by speaking from offstage, but by entering into the action, preeminently by becoming flesh and dwelling among us as Jesus of Nazareth. Theology is a response to and reflection on God's incarnate performance and his continual involvement in the world theatre as Spirit. In other words, theatrical theology deals not just with our human drama, but with the theodrama: the drama of God's being and action. Although theologians have long recognized the dramatic nature of God's revelation and redemption, Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar was the first to claim that theology should take a similar shape, a claim he explored extensively in his five-volume *Theo-Drama*.¹

Second, theology is theatrical because it occurs within the theodrama it seeks to comprehend. Because of this, Balthasar borrows Hegelian categories to argue that both lyric and epic modes are inadequate for Christian theology. Whereas theology in lyric mode merely explores subjective experience and theology in epic mode seeks an objective viewpoint, Balthasar indicates how theology in dramatic mode transcends this dichotomy, since it describes a reality in which we are profoundly involved as participants.² Consequently, theology involves an attempt to articulate the theodrama in which we are inextricably intertwined, and so theology is by definition a provisional and contextual endeavor. However, by drawing on the testimony of past participants—whether canonical or

1. Balthasar, *Theodramatik*, 5 vols. (1973–83); translated into English as *Theo-Drama*, 5 vols. (1988–98).

2. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 2:57.

otherwise—and by relying on the guidance of God himself, theatrical theology can gain enough perspective to avoid the tyranny of the present.

Third, theology is theatrical because its goal is faith seeking performative understanding. Theatrical theology overlaps significantly with narrative theology, but it seeks to be more intentional about moving theology beyond understanding toward practical performance. The theodrama is not merely a reality to comprehend, but the real drama in which every human being has a role to play. The goal of theatrical theology, therefore, is to resource fitting participation in the theodrama in dynamic interplay with accurate perception of the theodrama. In this way, theatrical theology is the fruition of narrative theology, since, as George Lindbeck claims, the intelligibility and credibility of the biblical story arises out of faithful performance.³

Since Christian theology is inherently theatrical, it should come as no surprise that a growing number of contemporary scholars in various theological disciplines are discovering the potential for interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and theatre. Theologians have advanced, deepened, and at times challenged the seminal work of Balthasar, to the extent that there is now a large and growing body of scholarship that reflects a “theatrical turn” in theology. Nevertheless, suspicions still persist in some circles regarding the value of interdisciplinary approaches to theology in general and with theatre in particular, especially given the history of the church’s “anti-theatrical prejudice” throughout the centuries.⁴ The purpose of this collection of essays, therefore, is to pursue the conversation between theology and theatre further, gathering together contributions from theologians who believe theatre has something important to offer the theological task.

Given that theology and theatre have not always been amiable conversation partners, and because the words “theatrical,” “drama,” and “performance” sometimes carry negative connotations within non-theatrical usage, it is important to clarify how this language will be utilized in this volume. In contrast to associating “theatrical” with something that is pretentious or showy, this volume uses “theatrical” to indicate how theology arises out of the historical performance of God and resources the ongoing performance of the church. Likewise, “performance” has nothing to do with hypocrisy, insincerity, or the prideful attempt to achieve

3. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 131.

4. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*.

salvation by works, and everything to do with active participation in the theodrama. The “drama” in “theodrama,” moreover, refers to the real and historical action of God in interaction with humanity on the world stage, and “drama” on its own carries connotations of plot, interaction of characters, conflict, and resolution.

In determining the relationship between these various terms, the distinction between drama and theatre is perhaps the most important. Within the performing arts, drama is the script intended for public performance, whereas theatre is the live performance of that script. To speak of “dramatic theology,” therefore, would orient theology toward the script out of which performance arises, which in Christian theology is normally associated with Scripture and tradition. By contrast, to speak of “theatrical theology” is to orient theology toward its performance, particularly its realization through various forms of life and liturgy. The title *Theatrical Theology*, therefore, indicates the bent of these essays in exploring the *performance* of faith. Finally, it is important to note that we are using “theatre” to refer to theatrical performance and “theater” to refer to the place where performance happens. “Theatre” also happens to be the international spelling, which is gaining more widespread use within the United States.

The present volume had its provenance in an international conference hosted by the Institute for Theology, Imagination, and the Arts at the University of St. Andrews in August 2012. The purpose of this conference was to demonstrate the fruitfulness for constructive conversation between Christian theology and theatre by pursuing this dialogue further, tracing some of the advances that have already been made, and identifying new challenges and opportunities still to be reckoned with as the interaction continues and develops further. Despite von Balthasar’s magisterial work, attempts to develop this particular interdisciplinary conversation in a serious manner have been relatively few and far between, though the past decade has witnessed burgeoning interest in doing so along a range of different theological fronts. The conference organizers hoped that by bringing some of the interested parties together for a few days, a sustained engagement might result that would be identifiably more than the sum of its various and already scripted parts. This hope was duly realized, and much of the most valuable exchange occurred during the question and answer sessions and in personal conversations held during coffee breaks. All the plenary speakers had opportunity to rework their papers for publication, so at least some of that surplus of intellectual

foment is reflected here. Not all those invited to speak at the conference were able to attend, but some of them generously committed themselves to submit essays for publication. Finally, the editors solicited a handful of further contributions in light of the conference, which served to fill some of the gaps that had become apparent as the conversation unfolded and new possibilities were glimpsed. The result can hardly claim to be an exhaustive or even a comprehensive treatment of the subject, but the hope is to show the potential for bringing theology and theatre into conversation with thirteen essays from scholars who have been at the forefront of this exploration.

Kevin Vanhoozer's opening essay sets the concerns of the volume as a whole in the fitting context of a cosmic drama. The story of God's acts in history, he suggests, represents the perfections of God's own eternal nature and the outworking of the divine decree. The economic Trinity is the dramatic presentation of the immanent Trinity, and the characterization of God as King is identical with the substance of the gospel, the good news of the Trinity's establishment of a kingdom in which we are called to participate. Trevor Hart builds on the insights of Max Harris's work *Theater and Incarnation*, especially the notion of a "theatrical hermeneutics," by pursuing further the claim that meaning is always more than a matter of words alone, because our creaturely being straddles the spheres of material and immaterial reality. This theological-anthropological claim, Hart argues, must be worked out carefully in relation to the central Christian conviction that God's own Logos is inexorably bound up with the unique dynamics of the "enfleshment" of the eternal Son, a conviction with potentially dramatic implications for the way Scripture is engaged with in the church. Ivan Khovacs considers Christ's prayer in the garden through the lens of Aristotelian tragedy and the work of Susan Taubes in order to press Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar's readings of Gethsemane towards a specifically theological-dramatic account of the tragic.

Some of Peter Brook's writing on theatre in the late twentieth century invites the possibility of exploring theatre direction as a metaphor for providence. Like any metaphor, it has limitations, but it also has rich possibilities in pairing creaturely freedom with the overall vision and even overall control of the director. Timothy Gorringer shows how providence is a major feature in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, reflecting on the practice of theatre, contemporary events, and the theme of providence in general. Shannon Craigo-Snell suggests that church is a disciplined performance of relationship with Jesus Christ, mediated by Scripture. Her exploration

of this theme produces a nuanced picture of Peter Brook's ideal of Holy/Rough theatre, a novel diagnosis of Karl Barth's not-quite-incarnational ecclesiology, and an appreciation of the value both men place on emptiness. As both gift and discipline, emptiness is a form of hope and response to grace and inspiration that ultimately comes from beyond the realm of human striving. George Pattison's essay sheds fresh light on Søren Kierkegaard as someone thoroughly immersed in the world of theatre, frequently attending performances, writing extensive reviews of contemporary productions, and peppering his writings with theatrical allusions. In *Repetition*, through the mouthpiece of his pseudonym Constantin Constantius, Kierkegaard gives an account of why theatre is an important element in human development and illustrates it with an anecdotal account of a visit to the Königstädter farce theatre in Berlin. Kierkegaard wrote no dramas, but his writing, Pattison suggests, was decisively shaped by his experience of theater-going. Furthermore, in terms of his own aesthetic theories, he is seeking, like the dramatist, to show us what the various possible positions vis-à-vis the decision of faith look like when taken out of the pages of theology textbooks and "staged" in life.

Jim Fodor brings theatrical theorists into conversation with philosophy and theology in pursuit of a theological-hermeneutical dramatics. Specifically, he deploys Hans-Georg Gadamer's influential account of "play" and David Ford's appeal to the biblical category of wisdom to propose a series of fruitful engagements between theology and theatre, focusing on the areas of play or re-playing, the performative dimensions of reading, the open structure of play in light of the audience, and the centrality of play in human flourishing and God's redemption. Todd Johnson draws both on sociologist Erving Goffman's suggestion that human life is a succession of accepting and performing roles and on philosopher Paul Woodruff's insistence that the phenomenon of theatre itself is vital to human social formation in order to explore what it means to be human and perform the life of faith. He insists that faith is not a static thing, but a process of participating in God's story in liturgy and in everyday life. David Cunningham, by engaging with *Hamlet*, *Angels in America*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, argues that Christian ethical claims should look less like those produced by the study of law or logic and more like those evoked by the experience of theatrical performance. The essay concludes with a meditation on Gloucester's final line in *King Lear*, a line that encapsulates theatre's ability to present multiple voices simultaneously, and thereby to complicate any excessively immodest pronouncements

about Christianity's moral truth. Marilyn McCord Adams looks to theatre theory, especially to Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, for help in understanding how cultic drama, by symbolically enacting cosmic problems, may successfully produce cosmic effects. Boal's analysis of Aristotelian poetics and his own revolutionary replacements shed light on how eucharistic drama co-opts worshippers into "acting out" truths about what is at stake between God and human beings, and provokes participants into rehearsing for a revolution.

Richard Carter and Sam Wells consider theatre's power to communicate the gospel through action, by showing rather than telling. Reflecting upon Carter's experience as a performer and priest with the Melanesian Brotherhood in the Solomon Islands, their essay explores theatre as a vivid and appropriate form of ecclesial witness in the public square, enquires whether it might be especially significant in the light of its power to encourage a form of ecclesial democracy, and investigates how drama is a kind of evangelistic liturgy and exegesis, a place of potential revelation and transformation. In the spirit of Augusto Boal, Peter Heltzel argues that theologians today need to reimagine the church as a Theatre of the Oppressed, a Spirit-led community that improvises for love and justice. Drawing on the example of Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, a youth-led, faith-rooted environmental justice ministry in South Bronx, New York, he considers ways in which, as Boal's productions sought to break the "fourth wall" between actors and audiences, prophetic Christian communities today need to break the "fourth wall" between Word and world. Finally, David Brown examines the factors that led to a renewed interest in relations between theatre and religion in the twentieth century and grapples with questions about the nature of religious experience, its significance, and its relationship to aesthetic experience. He does so not just theoretically, but through concrete examples—including instances as varied as Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and Robert Lepage's 2012 direction of Wagner's *Ring*—in order to explore the possibility of religious experience being mediated through drama.

It is important to acknowledge the numerous players that made the publication of these essays possible. First, we are grateful for the Institute for Theology, Imagination, and the Arts (ITIA) at the University of St. Andrews, which is a community of scholars who model and inspire the kind of constructive, interdisciplinary dialogue demonstrated in this volume. We are also indebted to everyone who participated in the Theatrical

Theology conference hosted by ITIA in August 2012. It was because of the widespread interest in this topic, as well as the quality and depth of the presentations and conversations, that we were motivated to put together these contributions and offer them to a wider audience. We were honored to have such high caliber plenary speakers at the conference, and we are doubly honored to add contributions written by distinguished scholars from both sides of the Atlantic. Particular words of thanks are due to Robin Parry, who initially encouraged us to publish these essays and then edited them with skill, as well as to Christian Amondson and the incredibly capable team at Cascade Books. In addition, Natan Mladin was willing to read through each essay and provide detailed and invaluable editorial suggestions, which were worth their weight in gold. We would also like to thank Cole Matson and Wilson Ricketts for their careful perusal of the manuscript. Overall, it takes a village to create and sustain dialogue of this nature, and we are equally thankful for the numerous voices that we hope will take up the conversation from here and continue to pursue a theatrical theology.