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Anti-theatrics in the History of Christianity

"Theatre has the ability to communicate multiple streams of content (political, social, religious, personal) on multiple levels (intellectual, emotional, kinesthetic)" (Johnson and Savidge 10). Theatre arts have existed since the beginning of human civilization as a form of devotion and at times entertainment. Anti-theatrics emerged and developed alongside human civilization brought about by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle standing against theater as they believed it to be a corruption of reality. Nevertheless, theatre has not been condemned with as much vehemence as that which arose with the development and spread of Christianity.

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Unlike Judaism, Christianity's precursor, the new religion had to interact with outsiders who had their own culture and beliefs. This created a clash between pagan practices and Christianity where the latter had a mandate to bring all people back to God by helping them avoid evil. This paper will discuss how Christian attitudes towards theatre have developed with religion throughout the ages to the present day.

The earliest opposition to theatre was because of the Greek and Roman influences and some of the rituals performed before a performance, such as slaughtering a goat, were dedicated to pagan gods. This practice became the first defense of early Christians as the Holy Bible states that there is only one true God and worshiping other gods is strictly forbidden. In the second century AD, a renowned theologian named Tertullian of Carthage adopted sentiments against theatre that were presented in Plato's *Republic* to a Christian context. In *De Spectaculis, (On Spectacles in English)* Tertullian presents an ascetic argument regarding how people should try to minimize outward pleasure by avoiding institutions like the theatre as they are places that "… agitate the soul [and keeps people from dealing with]…the Holy Spirit in tranquillity, gentleness, quiet, and peace…in accordance with the goodness of His nature" (Tertullian 12). He wrote extensively about how theatrics evolved from "…the games [or ludi] to the spectacles in the circus" (Tertullian 9)

Tertullian presented a case against theatre as a form of idolatry. Tertullian proves that "… entire apparatus of the spectacles originates from idolatry…" (Tertullian 4), as it was originally made to worship pagan gods such as Neptune, Flora, Ceres, Mars and Jupiter among others (Tertullian 6). He believes that engaging in these spectacles is wrong as they have been stained by their origin and therefore equate to worshiping the devil to whom idolatry is dedicated (Tertullian 6). It is a Christian mandate to renounce idolatry vehemently. Tertullian also

renounces the places where theatre is practiced. For example, “The circus is primarily consecrated to the Sun [and] the first circus show was exhibited by [the goddess] Circe in honor of the Sun, her father” (Tertullian 7). This violates God’s biblical commands that state, “You shall not to make for yourselves an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above, or on the earth below, or in the water under the earth” (King James, Ex 20.4). He denounces the “… procession …held to the theater from the temples and altars…incense and blood…” (Tertullian 9) and other rituals performed in these places, the equipment they use, their names, and locations as they are idolatrous as well (Tertullian 11).

Another issue that arises with the ancient theatre is that it propagates lust and sexual desires which in the Christian faith is a hindrance to salvation and seeking God. The Bible says, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world” (King James, 1 John 2.16) warns Christians against falling to the lust of the flesh as they then cannot receive the love of the Father. Tertullian felt that people learned how to indulge in these pleasures in the theatre and that the spectacles are… “a lust for pleasure.” (Tertullian 12) The theatre also causes public moral decay by worshiping theatrical heroes and praising the display sexual misconduct in the open (Tertullian 14). This causes the corruption of the people and idolatry as presented in the Bible, “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (King James, Col 3.5). Tertullian also believed that people could be demonically possessed in the theatre as it was the devil’s territory and thus had no defense (Tertullian 19).

Tertullian’s sentiments are echoed throughout most of history in different voices by many prominent Christians as well as laymen. In the 4th century, a Church father named John

Chrysostom spoke up against theatre echoing the words of Tertullian but centering his argument on the sexual corruption of Christian men. Christianity had evolved to view women as inherently evil beings that could be used by the devil to lead good men astray. Chrysostom denounced attending theatre saying that it corrupts the mind as the provocative woman did not leave the man's mind after the performance but went with him to his home and filled his thoughts that he may not find pleasure in his wife or God (Chrysostom 2). He quotes the Bible, "But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (King James, Matt 5.28), in his rebuttal of theatre due to this decadence and warns Christians that they need to protect themselves against damnation. He says that when one "…cannot control what he watches, but is so enthusiastic about doing so, [they cannot] …remain virtuous after …watching [because the] body [is] made of …flesh [and is thus]…enflamed by desire as easily as grass." (Chrysostom 2) Chrysostom is appalled by how theatre produces idleness in men that they spend time seeking false pleasure rather than engaging in the works that please the Lord. He stresses that is not pleasure but the opposition of it that results in salvation and thus engagement in theatre had no benefit to the human soul. During these times, Christians involved in the theatre were excommunicated from the church lest they contaminate the rest of the flock as justified by Chrysostom (4).

St Augustine of Hippo was another anti-theatric from the 4th century that is worth mention. He was a bishop in North African Rome and in his youth, he had led a hedonistic life and engaged in worldly pleasures before his studies led him to Christian conversion (Foley 257; Barish 60). In his *Confession*, St Augustine echoed the sentiments of Plato about the lack of benefit in the imitation that was found in theatre arts. He advocated the lack of truth in the actions of actors and condemned hero worship as a form of idolatry. He also felt that theatre

mislead people to false happiness as people absorbed these imitations as truth, caused bad behavior and sexual deviance, and hindered one from absorbing the teachings of God (Foley 244). St Augustine felt that while theatre was an ultimate evil as it corrupted not only those performing but also those merely watching (Barish 80).

By the decline of the Roman Empire around 470AD, the influence of the Roman Catholic Church increased and theatre was eliminated (Barish 49). During the Middle Ages, theatre was reborn in the context of the church through miracle plays which portrayed biblical stories and were usually performed by clergy men for the masses. Before the renaissance period began, the laity had taken over these performances and since they were sanctioned by the church, there was virtually no opposition against them.

Anti-theatrics re-emerged in 1559 when an English priest, Thomas Becon, wrote *The Displaying of the Popish Mass* in a protestant voice (Barish 161). He spoke against the costumes, gestures, and rituals of the Catholic mass which resembled theatrical performances that captivated the masses more than the understanding of the scriptures (Barish 163-164). Becon was in exile during the reign of Queen Mary, a time of religious upheaval between the Roman Catholics and Protestants in England. Secular theatrics became popular during the reign of Queen Elizabeth in the late 16th century and famous talents such as Shakespeare and Marlowe revolutionized theatre (Barish 104, 191). Critics were opposed to the stage presentations of the plays rather than the works themselves due to the costumes used and the depiction of women by men with feminine attire. This was seen by the church as a trying to correct God's creation which is perfect. However, this may have had more to do with the preservation of masculinity than religious conviction. In 1642, when the Monarch was overthrown by Puritans, who felt that the new Church of England retained too much of the Catholic doctrine and rituals, theatre was

completely abolished (Barish 80,119). Puritans believed in scriptural Christianity and felt that men mimicking women was forbidden by the Bible, “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God” (King James, Deut 22.5). Theatre was shortly restored in 1660 when the Monarch was restored and anti-theatrics continued.

Although the industrial revolution of the 18th century and subsequent secularization of the world from the 19th century to the current age has reduced anti-theatrics, the practice still exists among Christians. As stated earlier, unlike early Christianity when paganism beliefs and practices reigned, where staying away from theatre was considered an absolute evil; however, modern Christians accept to co-exist with those that do not share their beliefs, and often use this form of art to evangelize. “The experience of theatre, with its incarnational nature, the sense of community among both audience and actors, and the presence that happens in the shared space and time is powerful and necessary antidote to the virtual world of the twenty-first century.” (Johnson and Savidge 119) Christian groups have formed their own theatrical groups that produce content that is considered right and teaches about God. “Any theatre piece with integrity that truthfully presents itself to us can open a door for theological reflection.” (Johnson and Savidge 120) Anti-theatrics are now confined to the content itself where Christians are encouraged to avoid content that is pervasive. Consider pieces of scriptures such as, “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God” and “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” (King James, 1 Cor 10.31; 3.16) They are used as moral guidelines to help Christians determine the type of theatre that does not deviate from faith.

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