

## Introduction: Performing Religion

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Performance and religion, both as practices and as fields of study, overlap. In religious studies, performance theory has provided a way to understand ritual as action with performative force (Tambiah 1979; Hollywood 2002), while a shared interest in ritual fuelled the exchanges between Richard Schechner and Victor Turner from which grew one branch of performance studies as a discipline (Jackson 2004, 8; see especially Schechner 1985, which has a foreword by Turner and a tribute to him in the acknowledgements). Less explicitly, a reverence among performance theorists for theatre's transformational potential and performance's politically liberatory power inspires some of the field's foundational work (Dolan 2005; Phelan 1993). These commitments in turn draw strength from a long scholarly tradition that traces the mutually constitutive and sometimes contentious histories of theatre and religion (see, for example, Csapo and Miller 2007; Dox 2010; Barish 1981). A fruitful intersection, sparks can occasionally fly at the crossroads between performance and religion. The intellectual terrain shared by performance studies and religious studies became a particularly painful point of debate after Routledge published a volume attributed to Philip Auslander in 2007 under the title *Theory for Performance Studies: A Student's Guide*, the content of which largely reproduced that of a 2004 volume titled *Theory for Religious Studies* by William E. Deal and Timothy K. Beal (For an analysis of this incident, see Schechner 2009, and the other contributions to the Comment section of the same issue). Although each field possesses a distinct "foundation and history" (Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, cited by Schechner 2009, 18), their objects of study, methods, and analytical frameworks sometimes converge.

My own initial experience of this convergence made the relationship between performance studies and religious studies a slow-burning question to which I will likely return again and again as my research matures. In 2012, I participated in a symposium as part of a grant competition for research on New Directions in the Study of Prayer operated by the Social Science Research Council in the US. After I had presented a proposal for an ethnographic project on the evangelical practice of prayerwalking which used a performance studies framework, a senior scholar in religious studies remarked in the elevator that he saw no distinction between what I considered a performance studies project and the way the same research would have been conceived from within a traditional anthropology department. As a graduate student, I did not have an answer ready to the implicit question behind the comment. What does performance studies bring to the study of religion that religious studies does not already have thanks to its ties to anthropology, not to mention history, sociology, political science, and psychology, to name just a few of the disciplinary approaches that find a home in religion departments?

Since 2012, a dynamic body of recent scholarship in theatre and performance studies has reinvigorated the question of what it means to perform religion, providing essential resources to researchers working at the intersection of these fields. Lance Gharavi's edited collection *Religion, Theatre, and Performance: Acts of Faith*, featuring an impressive list of contributors, appeared in 2012, issuing a clear call for degree programs in theatre and performance studies "to take religion and spirituality into account" (2012a, 5). In 2013, Claire Maria Chambers, Simon W. du Toit, and Joshua Edelman published the collection *Performing Religion in Public*, in which they underscored the importance of a performance studies approach by arguing for a performative, rather than normative, conception of religion (2013, 1). Religion, they insist, "is not (just) a set of ethical, ontological or

theological assertions, but a dynamic, lived, and fluidly embodied set of actions, practices, gestures and speech acts at specific points in time and space” (Chambers, Toit, and Edelman 2013, 1–2). Under Carolyn D. Roark’s editorial leadership, the journal *Ecumenica* further strengthened the field’s capacity to engage critically with religious thought and practice by dedicating a special issue to “Critical Terms in Religion, Spirituality, Performance” in 2014. Support for current and future scholarship on religious performance has also increased. In 2016, the Mellon School of Theater and Performance hosted by Harvard University focused on the topic “Theaters Sacred and Profane,” fostering the research of doctoral students and junior scholars. The work facilitated by such endeavours will soon have a new publication venue. Thanks to the efforts of Chambers, Edelman, Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen, and Edmund Lingan, a new journal titled *Performance, Religion, and Spirituality*—affiliated with the Performance, Religion and Spirituality Working Group of the International Federation of Theatre Researchers and the Religion and Theatre Focus Group of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education—will launch later this year.

Of particular significance, a number of excellent monographs have helped move the study of religion from the margins of theatre and performance studies toward its centre. Unlike earlier performance research in the Schechnerian model, which tended to downplay the religious aspects of ritual practice, this newer work focuses directly on religious activities like worship, private devotion, preaching, evangelization, and veneration. Whether analyzing onstage manifestations of Krishna (Mason 2009), evangelical performative culture (Stevenson 2013), proselytization as activist performance (Fletcher 2013), or occult theatre (Lingan 2014), this work examines the theatrical and performance strategies of religious communities and movements. In doing so, this new wave of scholarship has developed tools that reshape the types of study possible from within theatre and performance studies. Jill Stevenson’s concept of “evangelical dramaturgy,” for example, makes an important contribution to performance theory. It provides a framework for identifying and analyzing the way a wide range of events and practices within a religious tradition—in the case of her study, “contemporary Passion plays, biblical theme parks, Holy Land recreations, creationist museums, and megachurches” (2013, 4)—deploy elements such as space, place, objects, rhythm, and affect to create “experiences designed to foster embodied beliefs that respond to specific devotional needs and priorities” (2013, 4). By thinking dramaturgically, Stevenson crafts a theoretical lens informed by insights from cognitive theory, performance theory, and theatre history that allows her to circumvent the ritual/theatre and sacred/secular binaries that have often structured research in the field.

Methodologically, John Fletcher’s study of the methods used by US evangelicals to convert people to Christianity breaks down at least two of the taboos that have kept research on religion on the sidelines of theatre and performance studies scholarship. First, by framing evangelical activities as “performances that aim to change the world” and identifying strategies that could be productively adapted by left-leaning activist performers (2013, 2), Fletcher shows how a field can productively study a group it is more likely to perceive as a political enemy. Second, by clearly articulating his own relationship to evangelicalism—he describes himself as “a liberal, gay, ex-Southern Baptist, United Methodist” (2013, 5)—Fletcher models a “good-faith, critically generous perspective” that enables him to simultaneously describe in detail and with nuance the people and practices he studies while maintaining rigorous academic standards. In other words, Fletcher offers a model for how to keep the *study* of religious performance separate from the *doing* of religion (Ivan Strenski, cited by Gharavi 2012a, 211), while also acknowledging the way his personal experience of evangelicalism as a “preacher’s kid” illuminates his findings (Fletcher 2013, 13). Together, Stevenson and Fletcher’s

contributions to the field, along with the other authors named above, place new scholarship on religious performance on firmer footing.

The proposals received in response to the call for this special issue reinforced my sense that performance studies does, in fact, offer a unique approach to the study of religion. Although I aspired to an issue that would include an equal number of voices from theatre/performance studies and religious studies, broadly defined, ultimately the papers published here in the Articles section are by scholars situated squarely in or identified with theatre and performance studies. Proposals received from religious studies, while presenting important arguments and analysis of the interactions between religion and culture or religion and identity, tended to treat what this journal calls “the materiality and consequentiality” of performance as secondary. Issues such as looking, seeing, being seen, pretending, playing, framing, narrating, reenacting, representing, and role playing, while integral to the objects of study in such proposals were not examined in a way that would reveal how such activities create religious meaning, structure spiritual experience, or inspire religious feeling. As Gharavi puts it, the “connection between religion and performance . . . is a matter of . . . *the means of production*” (Gharavi 2012b, 19). “Religion,” Gharavi continues, “must always be actively made, and be *witnessed* (as performance is witnessed) being made” (2012b, 19). Performance scholarship therefore has important expertise to offer in identifying, describing, and analyzing the building blocks of religion.

In the pages that follow, this issue’s contributors turn a critical gaze on the production and effects of religious performance. Donnalee Dox and Amber Dunai analyze a twelfth-century monastic music-drama by Hildegard von Bingen, the *Ordo Virtutum*, based on which they propose a theory of medieval religious emotion. By reading the *Ordo Virtutum* through Saint Augustine’s concept of *caritas*, or divine love, they argue that the *Ordo Virtutum*, which was likely performed in Hildegard’s convent in a devotional setting, provided its participant-audience with an opportunity to practise spiritual movement toward the good, identified in the play as union with God. Similarly, the final paper in the Articles section, by Ana Fonseca Conboy, considers the relationship between religious practice and theatrical production. Conboy examines the influence of Ignatian spirituality on seventeenth-century French hagiographic drama. Through an analysis of canonical plays like Pierre Corneille’s *Polyeucte* as well as lesser-known works like Nicole Desfontaine’s *Le Martyre de Saint Eustache*, Conboy shows how early modern audiences would have recognized themes central to Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, like detachment and repetition, while also being called upon to use their imaginations in a way akin to the “composition of place” practised during Ignatian meditation.

The two middle articles take an ethnographic approach. Scott Magelssen and Ariaga Mucek trace the history of the immersive field game “Romans and Christians,” which was a staple of Protestant Bible Camp programming in the US from the 1970s through the 1990s. Based on interviews with former camp leaders and pastors, as well as autoethnography, they show how the game figured into what Stevenson would call a dramaturgy aimed at preparing campers for conversion through a simulated crisis. They argue that the game fell out of favour in the 2000s after events like the attacks of September 11, 2001, prompted devotional communities to shift their emphasis toward inclusion and connection. The types of communities shaped through religious practice is a central theme in Claire Maria Chambers’ piece as well. Based on ethnographic interviews and participant observation, Chambers analyzes how the liturgical practices of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests construct a form of relational authority that calls into question both the hierarchical paradigm of the Roman Catholic Church, which is predicated on obedience, heritage, and a literal interpretation of the male

priest as a representative of a masculine Christ, and the masculinist orientations of performance theory paradigms that prioritize doing over being. Relational authority, Chambers argues, like Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, draws its power from exchange and transformation, in this case through the participation of the faith community in liturgical work.

This issue's Forum section gathers four short position statements, mini-analyses, or reflections from scholars representing a range of disciplinary positions who study religious performance. Lance Gharavi, reflecting on the title of a conference panel that posed the question "What constitutes secular blasphemy?," underscores the scholar's responsibility to analyze the categories that organize his or her critical apparatus, be they terms like "secular," "blasphemy," "theatre," "performance," or "religion." All such terms, Gharavi reminds us (not without humour) are what he calls "folk categories" in that they "protect and serve the political and economic interests of certain social groups." The scholar must vigilantly attend to the ideological work accomplished by such terms. Insider and outsider status feature prominently in John Fletcher's contribution, too. Fletcher wrestles with critical generosity in the Trump era, when demonizing his supporters would be easier. After reaffirming the importance of empathy while acknowledging its political limits, Fletcher proposes a slightly different, if related, posture which he calls, borrowing from John Paul Lederach, "moral imagination." More pragmatic, even pessimistic, moral imagination "finds ways to acknowledge conflict while also thinking past it to new realities." Ebenezer Obadare's piece also takes up the relationship between religious performance and politics, in an analysis of the way Nigeria's former president, Goodluck Jonathan, used carefully staged displays of piety to gain allies in the Pentecostal community and legitimize his regime by presenting himself as a miraculous outsider-turned-insider. Once in office, though, the political "character" constructed through such performances became difficult to maintain. In the last piece of the Forum section, Karen Gonzalez Rice explores the political ramifications of performance art that draws on religious practice. By analyzing Christian Jankowski's *The Holy Artwork*, in which the artist "prostrated himself at the feet of a televangelist preacher for the duration of a televised worship service," Rice teases out Jankowski's citation of pre-9/11 American imperialism and then argues that art historians can overcome the taboo attached to studying the religious content and context of much contemporary performance art by analyzing such pieces as encounters.

Encounter would be a suitable subtitle for this issue's Materials section, which features two contributions that stage, represent, or play with the continuously shifting insider/outsider distinctions that religious performance helps produce and that the researcher must navigate. In *Jesus Camp Queen* and the artist's reflection that accompanies it, Angela Latham presents an autoethnographic performance about her experience growing up in a Fundamentalist Christian community where her belonging hinged in large part on her successful performance of a carefully policed femininity, at which she excelled until the toll taken by this performance became too great in her early adulthood. Now as a scholar of theatre and performance studies, Latham turns her past religious experience into material that allows her to develop a theory of what she calls "fundamental femininity." A filmed version of her performance and reviews of *Jesus Camp Queen* by Julie Ingersoll and Patrick Santoro further enrich the creative and critical intervention carried out by Latham's piece. Richard Schechner's contribution, too, invites a reflection about the way insider/outsider perspectives evolve over time in relation to ritual performance. Schechner shares excerpts from the fieldnotes for his ongoing research project on the Ramlila of Ramnagar, the first from 1978 and the second from 2013. Vivid and raw, the notes convey something of how the performances that sew together ritual and theatre, politics and religion, culture and community require, in their complexity, repeated encounters.

With the exception of Schechner's fieldnotes, the other contributions, as readers will surely note, focus exclusively on the Christian tradition. The issue could, in retrospect, have been titled "Performing Christianity." This was not planned. It was, in fact, something of a surprise. As Sarah Goldingay has argued, Christianity was "largely ignored" by performance studies' founding scholars and artists, who "looked to the East for their inspiration," while Christianity's cultural and intellectual heritage was simultaneously "naturalized" (Goldingay 2009, 13). This naturalization either made Christianity unremarkable—"put it beyond discussion"—or raised the suspicion that a performance scholar interested in studying Christian practice was a "subjective zealot . . . unable to disentangle their misplaced belief from their research" (Goldingay 2009, 13). This issue is therefore a sign of the degree to which researchers like Stevenson and Fletcher, among others, have denaturalized Christianity and removed the taboos surrounding its study in the field. At the same time, the strong representation of Christian, mostly US and European performance in these pages signals the importance of encouraging new research at the graduate level on global religious performance across a broad spectrum of faith traditions.<sup>1</sup>

## Note

1. Responses to the call for papers for this issue suggest that emerging scholarship at the intersection of performance and religion treats a wider range of practices and traditions than represented here, although the projects I had the pleasure of vetting that would have broadened this issue's scope needed more time than our production schedule allowed.

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