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CHANCEL DRAMA AND ULTIMATE REALITY: AN
APPLICATION OF PAUL TILlich'S THEORY OF
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CHANCEL DRAMA AND ULTIMATE REALITY:
AN APPLICATION OF PAUL TILLICH'S THEORY OF AESTHETICS
TO THE FUNCTIONAL ASPECTS OF CHANCEL DRAMA PRODUCTION

by

Dennis R. Henneman

A DISSERTATION

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Department of Speech and Dramatic Art

Under the Supervision of Professor William R. Morgan

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed a revival of interest in religious theatre both inside and outside of the organized Church. Never since the medieval period has Christian religious theatre reached such a high level of activity. Churches have long persisted in presenting innocuous Christmas and Easter pageants as part of their church education and music programs, but many are now beginning to experiment with more serious uses of drama. In recent years my office has received an increasing number of inquiries from pastors of the American Lutheran Church requesting information about quality scripts and materials for use in their church programs. Interest in this area has increased to such an extent that the general catalog of scripts handled by Baker's Plays, Boston, Massachusetts, includes a special section devoted to religious plays and pageants. In response to the increased market, Samuel French, Inc. of New York City has adopted a similar practice.

Religious theatre is also finding a place in the curricula and production schedules of colleges and seminaries across the country. Traveling troupes of

amateurs and young professionals, such as the Covenant Players and the Inspiration Players, have joined college groups in presenting religious plays in church sanctuaries from coast to coast. The professional theatre has provided first-rate support for religious theatre through the work of E. Martin Browne and T. S. Eliot in England and the Judson Memorial Church in New York City. Broadway and Off-Broadway theatre has also experimented with religious themes in such plays as J. L., Gideon, Godspell, and Jesus Christ, Superstar.

Although much of the work in this area has been loosely grouped under the title of religious theatre, the scope of the present study is limited to an analysis of the function of drama within the context of Christian worship. I am referring to this specific use of religious theatre when I use the term Chancel Drama. Although the term merely refers to a specific place or architectural space, i.e., a church chancel, the intent of this expression is to place emphasis on the customary use to which this space is put, namely, corporate Christian worship. This distinction is made to differentiate between drama used as active worship, usually in the church sanctuary, and plays dealing with religious themes and topics which are often presented in theatres and church fellowship halls.

An underlying premise for this study is the belief that Chancel Drama may serve as an effective aid to

individual worship. It is recognized that drama itself did not originate as a means of entertainment nor as an art form, but as an expression of and an aid to the religious lives of primitive peoples. It therefore seems feasible that dramatic art forms may be effectively incorporated into meaningful worship as has been demonstrated in the drama of ancient Athens and the medieval Church. Among the many values of such religious drama appear to be: the expression of worship, the expression of artistic impulses, the broadening of understanding and sympathy, and the raising or suggesting of solutions to problems.

The didactic and cathartic natures of drama can instruct and move audiences in ways seldom experienced in traditional worship services. The late Sir Tyrone Guthrie tells us that "the theatre should assert its claim to be educational . . . because it widens the imaginative horizon by presenting ideas in the most memorable way."¹ I believe that this memorably expressive aspect of drama is one of the qualities of theatrical art upon which Chancel Drama can build its hope for effectiveness.

A second dramatic quality essential to the function of Chancel Drama as worship is that of movement or dramatic progression. Critical discussion of concepts such as

¹Sir Tyrone Guthrie, A Life in the Theatre (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959), p. 144.

action and incident, conflict, and dramatic structure all assume that movement is essential to drama. Edward A. Wright maintains that "a play should be a movement toward something."² John Gassner enlarges on this idea when he says, "We move with the play from incident to incident, and from one response to another. We experience life directly as it proceeds from moment to moment."³ Gassner here brings out the important point that when there is movement on the stage, the audience moves in response.

Writing in the journal, Letter to Laymen, Bill Cozard relates this discussion of dramatic movement directly to the realm of Chancel Drama by saying, "The more I study worship and drama, the more I become convinced that the fundamental dimension in which both of them participate is that of movement."⁴

The term movement, as applied to drama, usually means action and incident. Part of the function of Chancel Drama will involve the utilization of a play that will contain

²Edward A. Wright, Understanding Today's Theatre (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1959), p. 16.

³John Gassner, A Treasury of the Theatre: from Aeschylus to Turgenev (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1963), p. xiii.

⁴Bill Cozard, "Liturgy and the Theatre," Letter to Laymen (Austin, Texas: Christian Faith-and-Life Community, VI, No. 5, January, 1960), p. 1.

this element of movement in a strong enough degree to collectively move an audience to respond emotionally, spiritually, and aesthetically. In order to do this successfully, the dramatic material should contain believable characters with whom the audience can empathize in the ritualistic environment of a dramatic performance. I believe that it is this element of movement in drama that makes the fulfillment of the values and objectives of Chancel Drama possible.

These two dramatic qualities, expressiveness through imagery and movement through empathic participation, provide the basis for achieving the central goal of Chancel Drama: the creation of a strong religious effect. Although it often appears that "all drama ultimately has theological implications,"⁵ I believe that the play should have a religious effect, or allow the congregation-audience to participate collectively in an ecstatic religious experience before it can properly be called Chancel Drama. Fred Eastman acknowledges the importance of this overall religious effect in his definition of a religious play:

A play is religious when it sends the audience away exalted in spirit and with a deeper understanding of the spiritual struggles of life and a closer fellowship with God and man. Some biblical plays have

⁵Donald Kline, "Patterns of Movement in Modern Religious Drama,: unpublished MA Thesis (Des Moines, Iowa: Drake University Press, 1968), p. 1.

this effect and some do not. Some modern plays have it and some do not.⁶

The importance of this religious effect becomes readily apparent when the play is presented as a Sunday morning worship service or when used as part of a formal service celebrating a sacrament such as Holy Communion. Although the average parishioner may arrive at the service expecting the traditional liturgical ritual and sermon, I do not believe that the Chancel Drama should try to give him this. Preaching and drama are separate and distinct art forms, each with its own particular strengths and weaknesses. Because of these peculiarities, I believe that a strong sermon would be far more effective in some situations than a drama, especially a weak propaganda play, or preachy play, or pious play. Chancel Drama should utilize the most powerful tools of dramatic art if it is to be effective. It would be much better, therefore, to choose plays of character and action, of humor and imagination, of beauty and dramatic power. It would be more effective to choose a play in which a central character has a Christlike struggle, rather than a play in which the characters simply talk about Christ. If the drama has a truly profound religious effect, the members of the congregation will be much more able to put aside their superficial objections to drama in

⁶Fred Eastman, How to Produce a Religious Drama (Boston, Massachusetts: Baker's Plays, n.d.), p. 2.

the church and accept Chancel Drama on its dramatic merits. Such an acceptance will pave the way for effective participation in the ecstatic religious experience.

It appears, then, that drama does have significant qualities which would enable it to function effectively within the context of Christian worship and the recent resurgence of theatre activity within the Church attests to the widespread acceptance of this contention. However, a cursory analysis of this religious theatre activity seems to reveal the absence of any consistent theological or philosophical approach to Chancel Drama production which could complement established theatrical techniques.

My own work with Chancel Drama has shown me the need for a philosophical understanding of the function of drama in worship while personal observations of attempts at presenting Chancel Drama by other groups, both amateur and professional, have led me to recognize that others suffer this lack of philosophical base as well. Recent personal correspondence with leaders of religious drama, parish education, liturgy, and worship in the American Lutheran Church has betrayed a similar lack of expertise, philosophy, and knowledge of this area within the organized Church itself.

Recent literature in the area of religious drama production tends to range from innocuous scripts and attitudes verging on the worthless to elementary discussions

of how to present religious drama which merely outline basic directing and staging procedures with little or no attempt to apply any philosophical approach to the task of integrating technique and purpose. Although many people are presently writing about religious drama, most of them admit to an almost crippling lack of philosophy, particularly in terms of how drama functions as liturgical worship.

Another area of concern in Chancel Drama involves the lack of academic and professional respectability that much of religious theatre suffers from today. Because of many of the reasons stated above, it is easy to understand why so much of the fare that passes for religious theatre on both the amateur and professional levels is of low quality. It is not surprising, then, that religious theatre is often equated with poor theatre. I believe that if a strong philosophical, theological, and academically respectable support for Chancel Drama can be demonstrated which delineates the basic function of drama in worship, much of the creative energy available in the theatrical world will be encouraged to expend itself in this area.

The possibility of the writings of Paul Tillich providing the much needed prestigious support in this area was suggested to me by Lawrence W. Denef, Senior Editor in the Division of Parish Education of the American Lutheran Church. It is his belief that Tillich's work describing the relation and mutual interaction of religion and culture

is capable of supplying a workable premise for understanding the respective natures of drama and worship.⁷

Kenneth R. Pease, original curator of the Paul Tillich Archive at Harvard University, also provides positive encouragement for this study. He was able to corroborate my findings that nothing has been published in either English or German outlining Tillich's stand in this area. He also indicated that he himself had not previously recognized the possibilities of such a position. Upon examining some of the material I have collected and the preliminary observations and extrapolations I have made, however, he believes that Tillich's position on the potentials of Chancel Drama is implicitly clear and needs only to be articulated.⁸

That Paul Tillich can provide both the theological and philosophical background as well as the stature required for such a study appears to be abundantly clear. Up until the time of his death in 1965 he was regarded as one of the premier Protestant (Lutheran) systematic theologians in America. An interesting, and for this study necessary, attribute of Tillich's thought is that the "vertical thinking" necessary in his function as a theologian is

⁷Lawrence W. Denef, letter to the writer, October 3, 1973.

⁸Personal interview with Kenneth Pease, August 8, 1974.

augmented by rational "horizontal thinking" resulting from his function as a philosopher. It is primarily as a philosopher/theologian that I believe Paul Tillich can provide sound support for developing an approach to the presentation of Chancel Drama based on an understanding of the function of drama in worship.

Although very little has been written about Tillich's position in the field of aesthetics, it is evident that he was strongly interested in the function of art. In his autobiographical sketch, Tillich himself underscores this interest:

Art is the highest form of play and the genuinely creative realm of the imagination. Though I have not produced anything in the field of the creative arts, my love for the arts has been of great⁹ importance to my theological and philosophical work.

Although no major study of Tillich's aesthetics has come to light, a few scholars have noted his intense interest in this area. Daniel Leidig, in an abstract of his doctoral dissertation on "Existentialist Protestantism and Literary Criticism" states:

Although Tillich has not attempted any systematic aesthetic, he has been vitally interested in the relation of art to religion. In addition to his instructive comments on art there is in the theology itself concepts which are relevant to aesthetics. His ideas on meaning, insight, belief-ful realism, kairos, revelation, symbol, the unconditional, and ultimate concern, are important means of relating

⁹Paul Tillich, On the Boundary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), p. 26.

theology and criticism. Tillich's own judgement of the function of art is, if not utilitarian, at least analogical.¹⁰

Perhaps John Dixon expresses the extent of Paul Tillich's impact on this area most cogently.

Other theologians have made incidental allusions to the arts, but Tillich is without equal among Protestant theologians and perhaps among distinctive Protestant thinkers, not just in the range and variety of his interests in the arts, but in the centrality of his concern with it.

The result has been that, almost singlehandedly, he has restored communication between the community of the arts and the community of thinkers in the Protestant churches.¹¹

Although Tillich has been explicit in his analysis of the relation between religion and the visual arts, especially painting, he has left the world of theatre virtually untouched. Although it is evident that he did enjoy attending the theatre, there is little evidence that he did a great deal of thinking about it. On occasion he would refer to religious or cultural themes in dramatic literature--he was particularly enamoured with Sophocles and Shakespeare as reflections of their respective cultures and with Sartre, Miller, and Williams as expressions of twentieth-century man's feeling of existential estrangement

¹⁰ Daniel Leidig, "Existential Protestantism and Literary Criticism (Abstract)," in Dissertation Abstracts, Volume 30-A, p. 3295.

¹¹ John Dixon, "Is Tragedy Essential to Knowing?" Journal of Religion (October, 1963), p. 271.

--but he did not leap into the implications and artistic function of drama as he did painting. It is both curious and disappointing that he did not take this leap, for he has written, ". . . the influence of literature on the religious situation of a period, by virtue of the superiority of words over lines and colors, is both more direct and more general than is the influence of art."¹²

Tillich further articulates the importance of verbal expression, especially in contemporary Protestantism, in his answer to a student's question concerning the use of cultural symbols as agents for the revitalization of religion:

I believe that something of this revitalization has already occurred--probably more by poetry, drama, and literature than through the visual arts. You see, the visual arts lack the "word"; and the religions are, in Christianity especially and in Protestantism even more, bound to the "word." Religion has had a very questionable relationship to the visual arts. Now, as you have perhaps already noticed, my own personal preference is for the visual arts. But this is one of the points where I am not considered fully Protestant, but rather "Catholicistic." Nevertheless, I would say that in some works of literature and in the visual arts, we already have possibilities for interpreting the Christian symbols in a way which is not only philosophical--something I do as a theologian--but which has in itself the other side of symbolism, the artistic.¹³

¹²Paul Tillich, The Religious Situation, translated by H. Richard Niebuhr, 1932 (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company (Meridian Books), 1956), pp. 93-94.

¹³D. Mackenzie Brown, editor, Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 39.

It appears that such attitudes point directly to the supremacy of theatrical art as a means of expressing the contemporary religious situation in symbolic form since it distinctively combines verbal and visual images.

It is therefore the purpose of this study to extrapolate from Paul Tillich's theological aesthetic a perspective capable of describing how Chancel Drama functions within the framework of liturgical Christian worship. It is my contention that such a perspective could lead to the formulation of a sound philosophical/theological approach to the production of Chancel Drama within the structure of Protestant corporate worship.

In order to supply the production specificity necessary for this study, I am limiting my comments concerning the practical application of principles to four major scripts. To provide this study with proper historical perspective, I have chosen two plays from the historical period most clearly recognized for its contribution to religious theatre, i.e., the medieval period, to compare with two scripts written in the twentieth century. Generic scope will be insured by selecting representatives of each of the three widely recognized types of religious drama: the mystery play, the miracle play, and the morality play. The practicality of the contentions will be supported by selecting plays which have been presented as Chancel Drama productions and on which extensive production data have been

collected. It is important to note that each Chancel Drama was presented a significant number of times in a fairly wide variety of worship settings.¹⁴

The mystery play, traditionally defined as a drama explicating religious mysteries contained within biblical scripture, will be represented by selections taken from the Wakefield cycle of the medieval period. Although I have not directed the entire cycle, analytical comments will relate to the entire series of short plays with special emphasis given to those sections actually produced.

Plays which deal with the lives of saints and church history are categorized as miracle plays. This study will use Murder in the Cathedral by T. S. Eliot as an example of a twentieth-century miracle play.

Whereas mystery and miracle plays deal with characters and events recorded in history and/or literature, morality plays tend to emphasize instruction and moral teaching. Morality plays often use abstraction of character and setting and the action is more allegorical than real. Because of the great generic difference between morality plays on the one hand and mystery and miracle plays on the other, I have chosen to use both a medieval and a twentieth-century drama to illustrate this form. The medieval period

¹⁴Please refer to Appendix D for complete performance schedules.

will be represented by Everyman while the character of the modern morality play will be delineated by Archibald MacLeish's play J.B.

I will begin this study with a brief analysis of Paul Tillich's theology of culture. In presenting this analysis, I will introduce key terms and concepts which bear special significance for Chancel Drama. The analysis will describe Tillich's view of the relation between religion and culture and it will outline the special task of the cultural theologian.

The next section will treat Tillich's aesthetic theory, particularly as to how it relates to Chancel Drama. A brief delineation of Tillich's theory of symbol will be followed by a Tillichian discussion of theological knowledge functioning as aesthetic knowledge.

A discussion of artistic style will comprise the bulk of Chapter Four. An attempt will be made to analyze Tillich's conception of how style functions as a mediating device for ultimate reality. The analysis will define individual stylistic elements both in terms of types of religious experience mediated and in terms of the specific Chancel Dramas produced as part of this study.

Chapter Five will describe how the auditory, visual, and acting aspects of Chancel Drama can function on a symbolic level. The descriptive hypotheses in terms of symbolic translucence developed in the earlier chapters

will be discussed in light of the practical aspects of Chancel Drama production. The actual performances of the Chancel Dramas produced for this study will serve to illustrate the contentions presented.

The concluding chapter will attempt to summarize the effect of Paul Tillich's aesthetic theory on developing an understanding of how Chancel Drama functions as worship. The particular responsibilities of the religious community and the theatre artist in terms of Chancel Drama will be discussed in light of Tillich's theology of culture.

This study is, of course, not without its problems and limitations. Chief among these is the problem of extrapolation. Since Tillich did not deal directly with the area of theatre, any attempt to use his writings to build a philosophical base for Chancel Drama presentation is fraught with dangers of distortion and misinterpretation. Mere recognition of this difficulty will not insure successful avoidance of such pitfalls; great care must be taken in every instance to interpret Tillich's comments within the context in which they were intended.

A second difficulty is closely related. In a system of theological and philosophical thought as extensive and complex as that of Paul Tillich, we find themes and ideas interwoven to such a degree that any separation of those themes and ideas will create a disunity in a system which is essentially a whole. To pull one thread of this system

out for close analysis and potential application in another field cannot help but mar Tillich's intricately woven tapestry. Although I am aware of this problem, the scope of this study dictates that an attempt to deal adequately with all of the threads of such an extensive system would be infeasible.

A third problem and limitation involves the necessary integration of several disciplines. It must be recognized that any attempt to treat philosophy, theology, aesthetics, and practical theatre on the level of this study will encounter objections from specialists in each of the four areas. I am sure that systematic theologians will complain that they see too much theatre and not enough Tillich while theatre people will no doubt feel that philosophy and theology have been emphasized at the expense of practical theatre application. Nevertheless, I believe it necessary to attempt to bridge the gap between the several disciplines in an effort, albeit necessarily feeble in some areas, to establish meaningful communication designed to foster mutual enrichment.

A fourth problem is one which Tillich would immediately recognize and understand--the problem of correlation. Any study which attempts to look at a body of material in one discipline through the eyes of another runs the risk of prostituting the one for the sake of the other. Each area must be comprehended first and foremost in its own terms and