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The Incarnational Actor: From Christian Theology into Theatrical Praxis

By
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Let me begin by sketching out what I understand to be several basic Christian beliefs. While Christians hold a dizzying array of beliefs, I think most Christians would agree on the following broad principles. Most centrally, Christians believe in the Incarnation—that in some sense God was present in the man Jesus. While they differ on the precise meaning of that formula, most Christians take it to mean that Jesus Christ represented God's coming into the world and that through Jesus God experienced human existence.

Secondly, Christians hold the cross as the central symbol of their faith. Christians consider the death of Jesus to be not only an expression of the fullness of God's experience of human pain but also an example of the kind of selfless commitment expected of Jesus' followers. Which leads to ethics.

Most Christians believe that Jesus' followers are called to bring about reconciliation. Throughout history, Christians have sought actively to spread their faith around the world in order to bring all of the human family into reconciliation with God. Furthermore, Christians have frequently been in the vanguard of peace and justice movements aimed at bringing about reconciliation amongst humankind.

Reconciliation, and indeed the entire Christian ethic, can be summarized in the law of love, the one commandment that Jesus imposed upon his followers: Christians are commanded to love others, friend and foe, as Christ loved them—meaning sacrificially, even unto death—and to do unto others as they would have others do unto them. While the devil may indeed be in the details of how each of these tenets of faith is interpreted, in broad outline, this is the basis of Christian belief and practice.

So how does this belief system impact the work of the Christian actor? To begin with, let me clarify that "the Christian actor," as I describe this artist, is a construct. There are many actors who consider themselves Christian. Others, regardless of belief and commitment, have

been impacted by Christian viewpoints absorbed in their youth or encountered in maturity. What I intend to talk about is how the belief structure I have sketched out might most characteristically condition the work of an actor who is impacted by it.

For the Christian actor, just as the Incarnation is central to faith, so it is central to art. While the visual artist and novelist, the scenic designer and playwright may consider their art analogous to the work of God the Creator, Christian actors consider theirs more closely related to the God who took on flesh. The model of the incarnation has implications for the reason Christian actors enter their art in the first place, for their artistic goals and the techniques they employ, and for their understanding of the implications of the characters they build, the lines they recite, and the business they execute.

The Incarnation establishes the Christian actor's reason for acting. For the Christian, acting is a vocation. More than a means of earning a living, an outlet for creative expression, a means of attracting attention, or even an occupation that one falls into by accident, for the Christian, acting is a calling. Performance is an act of obedience, an act in which religious service and human endeavor come together. Acting is a means for carrying out the ministry of reconciliation.

As called artists Christian actors enter their profession in order to express, clarify, and communicate the best values. Rather than aiming just to entertain or provide diversion, Christians act in order to call their audiences to self-examination, to the pursuit of peace, justice, beauty, and goodness. And understanding the incarnational aspect of their art, Christians know that theatre almost always does its work by enacting human fallen-ness, brokenness, rebellion, by showing human beings caught up in violence, injustice, coarseness, giving over to their worst or settling for mediocrity instead of aspiring to the best. The Christian actor does not shrink from these aspects of theatre but rather embraces them as integral parts of the art of reconciliation.

Christians also become actors in order to experience the lives of others—not out of idle curiosity or as a means of indulging on stage in behaviors they'd not do in real life but rather as

an intentional act of learning what it's like to be someone else and, through theatrical empathy, to share that experience with their audience. Actors know that this experience will result in their becoming more empathetic persons off stage. In the practice of their art, just as they witness that the Incarnation raised humankind to God, so they vicariously elevate symbols of humanity—Oedipus and Lear, Hedda and Evita, Argon and Lenny Magrath, even Macbeth and Regina Giddens, redeeming them through the apotheosis of theatre.

The Incarnation also reminds aspiring actors that their art is a matter of submission and denial of the self rather than self-aggrandizement. So Christians act, not in order to reap the rewards of glory, but rather with the full realization that, just as their Lord became servant of all, so they must subordinate themselves to their roles, their art, and even their colleagues in order to fulfill their high calling.

In terms of acting methodologies, some Christian actors, building on worship practices common to most religions, incline towards external, movement- and voice-based technique acting. Like many religions, Christianity celebrates its central mythos through ritual and liturgy. Christian worship varies from highly formalized liturgics as practiced by Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and high-church Anglicanism to the improvisational, impromptu, and ecstatic group experiences common amongst such groups as charismatic and evangelical fundamentalist congregations. These practices, diverse as they may be, almost always include patterned vocal and gestural expressions that each group recognizes as typical and traditional. The emotional and spiritual efficacy of these worship patterns incline some Christian actors toward acting methodologies that focus on movement and voice.

Other Christian actors utilize acting techniques, similar to those of the Stanislavsky method, that aim to provide the actor with an internal experience of the character's suffering, emotions, values, and motivations. In a manner analogous to God's taking on human nature in the Incarnation, these actors seek a union with their characters so thoroughgoing that it becomes difficult to determine the borders between actor and character. Just as Jesus, in the gospel accounts, seems aware simultaneously of his divine and human identities, so these actors are conscious of being themselves and at the same time of "being," in some sense of the word, their

characters. For actors with this understanding of the connection between their faith and their art form, the goal of unification of performer and character can become not just an artistic goal but a religious act connected with the call to the ministry of reconciliation that impacts them as Christians and also led them to become actors in the first place.

This kind of internalized union with a character demands that the actor engage in the intense introspection necessary to find one's connection to one's character. It also demands committed research into the character being played in order to understand fully a "person" different from the self. Christian actors accept this dual task fearlessly and eagerly because the self-examination and the empathy engendered in the process serve both their artistic objectives and their religious goals.

Many Christian actors find that the intentional nature of their vocation conditions their choice of plays to perform. So the Christian is likely to seek out plays with moral and philosophical impact rather than plays intended primarily for entertainment and escape. Furthermore they seek out plays with the over-all effect of fostering reconciliation amongst people and advocating lives of virtue, honor, and integrity.

Conversely, Christian actors avoid plays perceived as advocating or fostering anti-Christian purposes. So Christians tend to avoid plays intended to foster hatred (including anti-Semitism) or plays that advocate and encourage reprehensible behavior—behaviors perhaps most easily summarized by the traditional seven deadlies: pride, covetousness, wrath, lechery, gluttony, envy, & sloth. Fortunately the vast majority of plays from all periods of theatre do have positive humanitarian impacts.

Some Christians, especially those in conservative, fundamentalist traditions, consider it wrong for actors to accept roles that call for tabooed behaviors. Objectionable behaviors can range from creating evil characters to speaking obscene or profane dialogue to performing specific business such as kissing, fondling, imitating sex acts, and even smoking. They may also include performance modes such as dancing or nudity. I would point out that numerous Christians do many of these acts in their daily lives with no sense of guilt, shame, or

wrongdoing. Furthermore, while I've heard many Christians object to performing sexually-related business on stage, I've never heard a single Christian object to performing violent acts on stage—shooting, stabbing, bludgeoning or engaging in various forms of psychological abuse toward other characters.

The Christian actor has three responses to this kind of Puritanism. First, individual behaviors need to be placed in the context of the total effect of the play; the same over-all qualities that make a play worthy render the parts of that play acceptable, including actions that might in themselves be objectionable. Secondly, the Christian actor extends the idea of incarnation to experiencing on stage the "fallen-ness" of humankind in the service of reconciliation. Finally, Christian actors accept themselves—both as individuals and as representatives of humanity—as "reconciled to God" through the Incarnation and therefore accepted and forgiven by God.

In summary, then, Christian actors find, at the very heart of their faith, a framework for entering a career of acting, inspiration for the process of acting, and affirmation in performing boldly the rich variety of roles provided by plays from every period of world drama.