

Lighting the Sacred and the Theatrical

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To visualize a Christian sacred space is to first and foremost to think of the physical and the material: the pews and the altar, the icons and the crucifixes. The space's construction is deeply tied to and rooted in its religiosity, you cannot really separate one from the other— as they are inextricable. They are intertwined from the moment the first stone was laid. This interconnection between space and purpose is a marker of a seemingly different, but ultimately similar space: the theatre. The physical space of a traditional theater is one that is built to enhance the theatricality and performativity of the art. When you think of a theatre, you think of the things that help make it effective as a theatrical space: the seats that separate the viewer from performer, the stage that elevates the performer for all to see, and the curtain that indicates when the performance begins and ends. This space is itself theatrical. The discussion of the relationship between religion and theater is one that has been quite prominent in the field of performances studies, as scholars toe carefully around the sensitive and malleable boundaries between performance, religion, and ritual. To explore this interrelationship in a more detailed and specific way, looking at this materiality and visual physicality of the space could be enriching. In particular, the similarity in the lighting techniques to light these spaces, used in both the Greek Orthodox traditions and in theater, can be seen as a lens through which to explore the emotionality of these two experiences for the respective audiences. Lighting paradoxically can serve as an external impetus to focus for internal change, a material thing that serves a greater meaning. The final purpose of theater and religion are quite obviously different, a distinction that can be seen and examined by looking at the way in which the spaces are materially lit similarly, for different ends.

Before going further into examining the application of a performance-based approach to sacred lighting, it is first necessary to establish the foundation on which this discussion is based,

in how previous scholars and academics have talked about the relationship between theater and religion. It is a field that has been discussed before, primarily in highly theoretical terms, largely focusing on the act of sermon itself as a sort of performance. As Tom Grimwood and Peter Yeandle put it: “Theologians have used performative aspects of rhetoric.”<sup>1</sup> The conversation between the two fields is a constant back and forth, with issues of where the line should be drawn on what is theater and what is religion or ritual increasingly blurred. This is especially seen in David Mason’s *The Performative Ground of Religion and Theatre*, which works through this very tension and relationship between the overt mimesis of performing theater and act of sharing the word of God in a religious space.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately the conclusion drawn here is not quite a definitive conclusion, but more of an evaluation of the nuance of the situation. Theater is not religion and religion is not theater, but certain techniques that are utilized in both forms certainly overlap and are worth examining.

One of the first aspects that will be examined is the physical role that lighting must take in both Greek Orthodox and theatrical traditions. Thinking quite literally about the space that makes up a church, one of the most important aspects is the lighting, without which none of the important icons could be seen by the congregation. The design of the space itself is deeply entrenched in the lighting of the space to create focus and a sense of ascension. To build a

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Grimwood and Peter Yeandle, “Church on/as Stage: Stewart Headlam’s Rhetorical Theology,” in *Performing Religion in Public*, ed. Claire Maria Chambers, Simon W. Du Toit, and Joshua Edelman, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 97.

<sup>2</sup> David Mason, *The Performative Ground of Religion and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

Church ineffectively would be to ignore the basic fact that it must be lit somehow, whether that be in providing space for natural light to enter or to construct the space with consideration to location of candles. This critique against some construction of sacred spaces is a well-worn one, as Michael Tavinor suggests that “a church can often fail to make the most of its sacred space by inappropriate lighting.”<sup>3</sup> The same could be said in thinking of how the theatrical space is constructed for its lighting capabilities. Because lighting design is a field in and of itself within the broader theatrical career, the theatrical space is built with lighting rigs and such in mind for maximum dynamic range as the theatrical content deems. In this manner, the only way that a show could be poorly lit would be at the fault of the individual lighting designer, and not the building’s structure itself. Quite literally, the physical role of lighting, then, seems clear: to highlight particular parts of a space while leaving others in shadow—creating a sense of focus. This physical understanding, though, should be understood as symbolic as well.

The meaning that lies behind light, and the lighting a specific space, is another layer that is important to consider in both theatrical and religious terms. The importance of light in the Christian tradition can really not be overstate. This is most clearly seen in the way in which light is discussed and talked about within the Bible itself. Genesis 1:4 clearly states that “And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness”.<sup>4</sup> Light is thus associated with the religious good, and with religious enlightenment. Even further, the language that surrounds religious experiences, as one is ‘brought into the light’, is tied directly to this

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Tavinor, “Sacred Space and the Built Environment,” in *Sacred Space: House of God, Gate of Heaven*, ed. Philip North and John North (New York: Continuum, 2007), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Gn. 1:4

sense that light operates as a mode of transformation and transfiguration. Light in the Christian tradition, therefore, holds both the physical and the symbolic meaning. This meaning extends itself into the world of art and performance as well, as Rudolf Arnheim clarifies that “the religious symbolism of light was, of course, familiar,” in visual art.<sup>5</sup> Taking this into the realm of performance art, a similar approach can be taken. The art of lighting design is firmly based in a metaphorical approach to light, and what it means for something to be fully lit versus shrouded in darkness. For instance, to fully light a character’s face is to expose their facial expression, and thus their emotions, to the audience. The audience is drawn into that character and evokes empathy. In contrast, choosing to constantly obscure one character’s face is to suggest to the audience that there is something mysterious, and perhaps sinister underlying the character, as their emotions are hidden. This multi-dimensional relationship between an emotional response and lighting is one that is constantly at the forefront of lighting designer’s minds during technical rehearsals. Either consciously or not, the creation of religious space utilizes a form of lighting design by a similar means. Lighting in the theatrical sense is meant to evoke a certain feeling, while religious lighting is meant to invoke a spiritual experience.

The choice of how one lights a space can drastically change not just the space itself but the emotional hold the space has on the viewer, on the audience. This importance that lighting holds in religious spaces is one that has been discussed previously, but not necessarily in relation to the lighting design approach in theater. In describing the role of lighting of Greek Orthodox spaces, Tavinor discusses the importance of lighting in creating a sense of sacredness. In limiting

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<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 314.

the amount of light that is able to enter the sacred space, the space does “not enable the worshipper or pilgrim to see the full sacredness of the place all at once.”<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the lighting of the space itself mimics the theatrical lighting conventions. The congregation cannot physically see the entirety of the space, much in the way that the sacred cannot be fully seen or understood. “Light in a medieval church is effective because of its sheer paucity”.<sup>7</sup> In this manner, an understanding of sacred space through the lens of performance theory is one that, while not applied to lighting, is extremely relevant and important to consider. The ways in which lighting is thought of in theatrical settings as a hub for the emotional life of the show is as the lighting of a sacred space shapes the emotional response to the religious sermon.

While both religion and theatre engage and evoke a liminal space, the difference lies in intention and purpose. The purpose of a traditional, Aristotelian theatrical approach, in regard to the audience to create a sense of catharsis: to purge the audience of their positive and negative emotions. The audience is meant to leave the emotional experience that they have in the theatrical space, in the space. Taking it beyond into the real world is not really the aim of Aristotelian theater.<sup>8</sup> On a very basic and simplistic way, the audience of an Aristotelian theater

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Tavinor. “Sacred Space and the Built Environment,” 31

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>8</sup> In this, I specify Aristotelian theater, as this is arguably the most prevalent approach to theater. It is the basis on which the largest genres of theater are based. There are other genres of theater, specifically Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theater that deal more with the impact that theater is meant to have on the audience as they exit the theatrical space—a genre that is meant to cause actual sociopolitical change in the world beyond the theatre. In some ways, this genre may be closer to

is meant to enter and exit the same way. The audience should appreciate the artistic experience had in the theatrical space, but is not really fundamentally altered by it. It is something to admire from somewhat of a distance, but not carry with them for the rest of their lives. This is absolutely not true of the religious experience. To enter and exit a sacred space, an individual is meant to be changed in some way, hopefully inspired by the religious experience had within the space. A sermon is really meant to inspire and change. The congregation is meant to take what they experienced in the religious space into their daily lives, into every fiber of the being. This element of transformation and enriched personal growth is the aim; To leave it behind is to not really understand the sermon. Religion, unlike theater to a certain extent, is meant to permeate the entirety of the audience's (or congregation's) life. In this sense, the end purpose of these two forms, though utilizing similar techniques of lighting for emotional evocation, are vastly different in terms the relationship between the experience and the audience.

One major difference in the use of lighting in both of these spaces and the effect that it might have is the temporality of light, either moving in the cycles of time as determined by nature, or by the lighting designer. In thinking of lighting design for theatrical purposes, the light changes because the designer decides it should, the audience's emotional experience as defined by the lighting of the space is manipulated by an individual. The space is visible only when and where the lightning designer wants it to be so. While the architect of a sacred space is also responsible for constructing the lighting of the space, to a certain extent the light is also to the whim, or command, of nature. As the day progresses from morning to night, the colors and

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the religious experience described. For the sake of this paper and for a more focused approach, I will be dealing exclusively with Aristotelian theater.

intensity of the light that enters and changes the sacred space varies. A religious ritual happening at dawn, then, is inherently different in terms of lighting, and arguably in emotional experience, than one happening at noon or midnight— something also reflected in the nature of liturgical music, the daily offices of prayer of liturgical Byzantine chant. The sacred space, then, surrenders its lighting and emotional experience to focus its narrative to the higher power, to the world beyond. In this manner, the space is not just constructed to enable the religiosity of the rituals, but to integrate God's power into the space as well. The emotional relationship, then, of light in a religious space is inherently different from that of a theatrical setting due to the source of the lighting changes, either coming from man or nature. One is a framing device which creates centrality of focus of the divine, where the other is lead by initiative and ego.

Looking very specifically at the Monastery of Hagios Ioannis Prodromos, this theatricality of the lighting is particularly prominent. Looking at the central nave in particular, the lighting plays an important role of bringing the congregation into not just the actual, physical space but the metaphorical, holy space as well. With a ring of small windows up at the dome, and one large window above the seats to the left (when facing the altar), there is a sense of theatrical down-lighting. This, in some ways, makes the lighting not as noticeable as in other parts of the church where the lighting is more limited and therefore more stark. In the monastery's nave, however, the light seems to fall everywhere, a sense that is only amplified by the golden icons, chandelier, and walls. The congregation, therefore, is somewhat all encompassed by light, by the love and religious enlightenment of God. Even further, when the sunlight hits the icons at certain times of day, the faces of Christ and the Virgin Mary are encompassed in a halo of natural light. In this manner, the role of lighting in this ephemeral moment points towards a theatricality that is enhanced by the lighting. At the most sacred of the



physical space, the light in Hagios Ioannis Prodromos works alongside the architecture and the liturgy to create an enhanced sacred space for the congregation.

In thinking in total of the construction of theatrical and sacred spaces as they enable the emotionality of lighting, the connection between the theatrical and liturgical is apparent. While the ends are different, the means are the similar, bringing the audience or congregation into a higher experience, either religious or theatrical. To think of the materiality of these two spaces, it is necessary to consider how the lighting of the space ultimately shapes, frames, and resonates aspects of the viewer's emotional experience. While the audience of a theatrical production is meant to go through the emotion and release it all before exiting the space, the congregation in a Greek Orthodox space is meant to be inspired and bring the emotional experience to others, bringing the light to others. In this sense, then, the examination of the lighting in these two spaces is a way through which to examine the greater debate at hand. The varying intentions and purposes of religion and theater can be analyzed through this material approach. The relationship between theater and religion is an interrelated and complicated one, with even something as seemingly basic, but ultimately dynamic, as lighting tying them together.

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