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de Groot, C.N.

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Playing with Religion in Contemporary Theatre

KEES DE GROOT

Tilburg University, Netherlands

C.N.deGroot@uvt.nl

Abstract

Contemporary theatre sometimes uses religious language, symbols and poses. What do these references mean? Reflection on four productions shows the usefulness of tools developed in the study of liturgy. First, this helps to produce an account of the roles of the sacred and of community in theatre shows. Secondly, this throws light on the appearance of religion in “liquid modernity.” Thirdly, the study of religion in theatre shows how boundaries between fields are fluid—not only between arts and religion, but also between the field of arts and the academic field. Both deal with the significance of religion in a world where religious traditions are questioned and used, both in and outside the religious sphere.

Keywords

Implicit Religion, Drama, Ritual

Introduction

The aim of any show is to unite an audience. This is the very basis of the theatrical experience, its deep meaning: the desire to become one with others, and for a second to hear what it’s like to belong to a single human body.

(Peter Brook, cited in Van Maanen 2009, 193)

1. This article is based on research funded by the Dominican Study Centre for Theology and Society (Project: Looking for a new “we” in the Netherlands). http://www.dstsnl/en/onderzoekproject.html

The great merit of the notion of implicit religion is that it has opened up new terrain for the social study of religion and continues to do so. Thus, insights that have been produced in the course of research into established religions and new religious movements—such as conversion and theodicy, ethics and salvation, ritual and power—have been used to understand and explain phenomena that are usually considered from a purely secular perspective. Why is the game of football so immensely popular (Ter Borg 1996)? Why do people work so hard and buy stuff they do not need (Ter Borg 2003)? Why do we vote for the politicians we do (Ter Borg and Ter Borg 2009)? Why do we put so much money, time and energy into medical treatments that do not make us better (Ter Borg 2000; Ter Borg 1993)?

Our understanding of the fields of leisure, economy, politics and care, benefits (and can benefit a whole lot more) from what we have learned from the studies in the religious field about charisma, world views, scapegoating, and the sacred—whether researchers do or do not mention the overarching, sensitizing concept of implicit religion.

What holds the “implicit religion” project together is the encouragement to look for religion where one would not expect it. A variety of social phenomena cannot be understood properly without considering those aspects which are usually subsumed under the heading of “religion.” What advances the study of implicit religion is their uncovering, thereby promoting interaction between sociology of religion and other subdisciplines. What might hamper the study of implicit religion is an on-going discussion of the definition of implicit religion as if it were a phenomenon itself. Although this is certainly a way to claim a unique field of expertise, it would be contrary to our mission: to highlight parallels, connections, and shifting distinctions, between the religious and the secular (Pärna 2012), and to show how religious experience, beliefs, ritual and ethics appear, decontextualized, in other fields.

The study of implicit religion ipse facto crosses the divisions between disciplines, including between the sociological subdisciplines. As such, it contributes to our insight into religion itself (including its anthropological basis), in the dynamics of fields other than the religious, and in the sheer contingency of our scholarly and societal concepts of what counts as religion. Our studies demonstrate how artificial (and perhaps inadequate) the tacit ideas about the division of social spheres are. There is, therefore, a certain playfulness in our studies: we use tools that might seem inappropriate to understand what people are doing in a bar, a stadium or a kitchen, for instance, as though they are doing theology, liturgy or ritual. The equip-
ment that might have seemed inappropriate at the outset of a study might turn out to have facilitated some additional insight by the end. Moreover, our playfulness corresponds with a process in culture itself: the fluidization of the boundaries between the religious, the economic, the political and the cultural. Pierre Bourdieu and others have argued that the religious field is dissolving into surrounding social fields (Bourdieu 1987, 117–123). A close look, however, shows that the interactions between these fields are more diverse (De Groot 2008). Since social spheres are increasingly permeable, we should not keep our subdisciplines entirely separate, either.

In this article, I reflect on performances in the field of art, using the equipment of liturgical studies. I feel invited to do so, since the references to religion within the field itself are abundant. I do not wish to make the claim that theatre is basically religious, nor the opposite. I am interested in the specific ways in which theatre plays with religion. Therefore I focus on productions that explicitly deal with religion.

The British director Peter Brook, co-founder of the International Centre for Theatre Research, points to a transcendent, yet fundamental, dimension of theatre: the desire for unity. His view is not uncommon among professionals in the field. Indeed, references to church, religion, and magic, are not exceptional in interviews, reviews and theatre programs. In post-secular artistic milieus, theatre is often depicted as a contemporary alternative to church. Indeed, the cliché is: the church has become obsolete, the quest for meaning persists, the theatre deals with this.

The sociological value of these characterizations is rather limited. First, it overstates the process of secularization. Each year, the amount of church visits exceeds the amount of theatre visits. Moreover, the theatre audience is more select than the churchgoing segment of society. Secondly, it overstates the link between the traditional church and the late modern quest for meaning. The church performed many social functions (such as social integration, social support, and reproduction of the status quo); the contemporary reflexive project of the self has never been its core business. Thirdly, theatre is far from unique in offering ways to deal with the quest for meaning, as the vast amount of studies in implicit religion clearly

3. For example, the Belgian choreographer Alain Platel from the company les ballets C de la B (De Vuyst 2008).

4. In 2005, 16.4 million visits to shows were counted in the Netherlands (http://statline.cbs.nl). In the same year, Roman Catholic parishes (alone) had 17.9 million visits at the weekends (Massaar-Remmerswaal and Bernts 2006, 9). (At that time, 27% of the population were registered as Roman Catholic.)
shows. Yet these claims are interesting as accounts of what theatre is supposed to be doing.

The perception of theatre as religious is the first reason for my exploration. Despite its obvious limitations, Brook’s thesis, that the “deep meaning” of theatre is participation in something like a mystical body, is worthwhile considering. The Dutch sociologist of the arts, Hans van Maanen, contests this thesis, arguing that what is important in modern theatre is individual interpretation. Furthermore, Van Maanen distinguishes “shared individual experiences” from “collective experiences.” Brook accentuates the role of collective experiences in his metaphysical characterization of theatre; Van Maanen ignores it. Instead, one needs to differentiate the extent to which the experience of transcendence is important. The anthropological concept of *communitas* is useful in this respect: the direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities, resulting in the “experience” of humanity as one homogeneous, unstructured, and free community.5 Victor Turner has suggested that postmodern theatre, wherein the observation of a presentation makes way for a playful participation in an event, could be a place for ritual (Turner 1982, 86). Surprisingly, however, the transcendent dimension is left aside in Van Maanen’s discussion. Apparently, there is a distance between the sociology of the arts and the study of religion and ritual, larger than between the corresponding fields of interest within cultural anthropology.

The second reason for my interest has to do with the actual use of religious discourse in the theatre itself. It is not unusual for theatre to use religious symbols, rituals, and language, whether of Greek, Germanic, or Christian origin. This usage can have different meanings: it can be a superficial reference (Catherine 2010); or it can be a form of satire or irony; or it can be an exploration of the power of religious language, myth, or ritual. According to Colin Campbell, an ironical attitude can serve as a pretence for a secret, serious enjoyment of a myth. In a “mythopoeic culture”, myths can function as a source of meaning, precisely because one does not have to believe in their truth claims (Campbell 2007). In a similar way, liturgy on stage can function as what Durkheim calls a *culte*: the creation of a space where those present are bound together as a collective subject, open to communication with the sacred (Durkheim 1999 [1912]).6

5. However, I agree with Matthew Wood (2007, 68–69) that this contrast needs differentiation. Catherine Bell (1992, 172–173) distinguishes individual trajectories of ritualization.

6. The description of this use of the term is mine; Durkheim does not provide a definition. Obviously, the term “cult” has received a different meaning in the more recent sociology of religion.
These two reasons not only lead to an exploration and discussion of the ways in which theatre interacts with religion, but also bring me to the central empirical question that I aim to address here: in what ways is the simultaneous similarity with, and yet distinction from, liturgy pushed to its limits, crossed, blurred or transcended, in contemporary Dutch theatre?

Perspective and method

Whereas at present, theatre might appear as liturgy, in the past, liturgy supposedly became theatre. The claim that theatre has developed out of liturgy is the historical supplement to the former cliché (Guardini 1959 [1914], 101; Smith 2009). One can point to the political-religious character of ancient Greek drama, and to the staging of saints and mysteries in the Middle Ages, both in and outside a liturgical context. But in fact modern theatre has many forerunners, such as storytelling, minstrels, opera and, indeed, mystery or miracle plays. Theatre, as we know it, is a relatively recent product of bourgeois culture, whereas Christianity also has a long tradition of distrust of theatre. In an authoritative work, De spectaculis, the early Christian author Tertullian (ca. 160–220) condemned public shows, including plays in the theatre, as idolatry. Yet this condemnation shows that Tertullian perceived the (by then, implicit) religious character of the heathen public shows very well. He also witnessed the theatrical element of the Christian faith, for, according to Tertullian, there is no greater show near at hand than the Coming of the Lord (Tertullian 1842).

Due to the political influence of Christianity, Western Europe was “exempt” from theatre from the fourth century onwards, with the exception of mime players travelling among the folk (McCall 2007, 9). We know however, that from the tenth century dramatic elements, such as gospel narratives, developed within the Christian liturgy. In 1210, priests were forbidden to participate in the plays, which stimulated their distinctive development outside the church. For a long time, however, the sacred and the profane were mixed. Theatrical means were used to communicate religious messages; biblical material appeared in profane theatre (Margetts 2009). The Reformation led to protests against both profane and biblical drama; by way of contrast, in the sixteenth century the Jesuits encouraged drama. The sometimes friendly, sometimes inimical, relation between theatre and liturgy indicates at least the proximity of the two fields. Trying to reduce drama to liturgy, or liturgy to drama, would not be helpful to understand these relations, although “both liturgy and drama can be seen as subcategories of a larger human activity that has come to be called performance or enactment” (McCall 2007, 5).
In contemporary Western society, liturgy and theatre belong to two different fields or societal systems. Liturgy is part of the religious field, which is constituted by the struggle over legitimate responses to existential questions (Bourdieu 1971). Its defining binary code is the opposition between immanent and transcendent responses (Luhmann 2000). Theatre belongs to the field of art, constituted by the struggle over the authentic production of art (Bourdieu 1996). Its binary code can be described as the fitting/non-fitting of imaginative forms.

Once these fields are distinguished, it is possible to investigate their interactions. One option is to investigate the use of drama and theatre in the religious field, including liturgy (Belderbos 2010). Another is to investigate moves toward liturgy in the field of the arts, which is what I am currently interested in. In order to identify these two sets of moves, it helps to listen to what experts in the field say about the difference between the two.

Liturgy (from the Greek leitourgia) refers originally to work (ergon) of and for the people (leitos). The related plural orgia most closely corresponds to our notion of ritual. It usually refers to the rites in the Dionysian cult, but it also can refer to the ritual service of the gods in general (Kreinath, Snoek, and Stausberg 2006). Christian scholars adopted the term leitourgia to refer to their own rites and ritual tradition (Bell 1997, 218). The theologian Bernhard Lang puts Christian liturgy into the general perspective of “rituality” in his study Sacred Games (Lang 1997). Earlier, the historian Johan Huizinga (1940 [1938]) considered the cult as an activity of the homo ludens. Both drama and cult are characterized by “the dialectic of reality and imagination” (Barnard and Postma 2007). Both are forms of play, yet different forms of play, according to the theologian Gerard Lukken (2005).

The concept of play, characterized by the attitude “as if,” is far from homogeneous. Contest-games, such as Monopoly, take place in the reality of the here-and-now, which is dealt with differently for as long as the game takes. In imaginary play (for example, children playing father and mother), the players step into another, illusory, world that they don’t know by experience. Liturgy starts in reality, and in this way resembles contest-games. It opens up reality to the mystery that is hidden within reality (Speelman 2002). Liturgy also resembles imaginary play since the latter has a ritual-like character and, to a certain degree, initiates the players into the world of mystery. Theatre, at least when the “fourth wall” remains intact, is close to imaginary play, yet adds the idea of an audience.

Building on the distinction Aristotle made in his *Poetics*, liturgy is generally regarded as a collective ritual intended to invoke or celebrate the presence of God (*anamnesis*), whereas theatre involves the dramatic presentation by actors of a reality outside the ambience of the theatre (*imitatio*). Reducing to two dimensions the differences to which these (normative) definitions point, allows for different scores (replacing “God” with a Durkheimian notion of “the sacred”).

In fact, these two dimensions can be narrowed down to one (double) question: to what extent does the show enhance the experience of community, both horizontally (among the visitors, and with the players) and vertically (with a transcendent reality, or the sacred)? Both dimensions are necessary: a high degree of participation is considered characteristic of an event (as opposed to a ceremony), but this event can be either secular (Nas and Roymans 1998) or religious (Roeland 2009). A high degree of transparency indicates that something religious is going on, but that does not necessarily imply liturgy. People in a church and watching someone pray, are not involved in a liturgical activity (Lukken 2005, 320–331). It is also necessary that they themselves participate. Thus the innermost essence of liturgy, according to Romano Guardini, is: playing before God. In this way people are (not, create) a work of art (Guardini 1959 [1914], 102).

From Guardini’s “essence of liturgy” to Speelman’s “towards a differentiation,” essentialism is common in liturgical studies. This approach has a strategic function, mainly directed at opponents within the religious field.

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9. This approach corresponds with the distinction made in Greimasian semiotics between the sacred, i.e. the liturgical stage of the myth, which integrates the believers into a collectivity, versus the aesthetic stage of the spectacle, which merely announces messages to the recipients (Lukken 2005, 320–331).
In an actual Mass, one can witness priests with solemn gestures, dramatic rhetoric and exuberant clothing who entice the believers to watch and listen to them, instead of inviting them to pray to them. Denying such performances the label “liturgy” is the most powerful way of criticizing them (Lukken 2010). This understanding of liturgy reflects the theological position of the Liturgical Movement. At the same time that the founding fathers of sociology developed their ideas on society, “the generation of a sense of community was considered a central social function of liturgical enactments.” Originally, this sense of community was intrinsically linked with the awe of the transcendent and the sacredness of mystery, but, as Kieran Flanagan puts it: it “became synonymous with suburban middle-class values of meeting and joining,” in the late twentieth century (Flanagan 1991, 325–326). In the view of the Liturgical Movement, the believers need to be involved in liturgy as a collective act, of which, ultimately, God is the subject. In contrast, other views on liturgy link God’s presence with the mere presence of an ordained priest, and expect less from the collective participation of the believers.

I use the criteria mentioned above in another way: not to underpin the distinctiveness of liturgy from theatre, but to distinguish liturgical elements in theatre. These abstract dimensions are complemented with more descriptive criteria. The scholar of religion, Bernhard Lang, distinguishes six “elementary forms” or “sacred games” in Christian worship: praise, prayer, sermon (including reading), sacrifice, sacrament (especially the presence of Christ in the Holy Supper), and spiritual ecstasy (Lang 1997). I use an adaptation of these categories by the Dutch scholars of liturgy and ritual, Marcel Barnard and Paul Post: prayer, ecstasy, blessing, memorial, sermon, and sacrifice. They also describe dimensions of space and time, as well as the people involved. Their actions may vary from moving, seeing, speaking and hearing, making music and listening, to being silent. These actions can be called “forms of play” (Barnard and Post 2001).

I analyzed several cases using these tools. I attended selected shows where I expected to see moves towards the religious field. I was (actively) present, as in participant observation, and took notes. I also conducted interviews, read scripts, and explored corresponding internet sites. I received comments from the directors of the shows and used these to correct facts. I did not, however, research the reception of the shows by the audience. But my interpretations do include the subjective element of how I experienced the shows myself.

In the selection of the cases for this article, I focused on mainstream, but non-commercial, professional theatre productions, leaving out ama-
teur productions as well as professional productions in related disciplines, e.g., concerts, artistic performances, and dance. All these shows were performed in the Netherlands. Nowadays, the national cultural climate of the Netherlands could be characterized as post-secular, in the sense that organized Christian religion is regarded as something of the past, whereas religion and spirituality as such are considered interesting phenomena.

Yes! To live and love

At a festival in Rotterdam (De Parade, summer 2006), I witnessed a short performance by Dette Glashouwer, which later evolved into a show that toured in the United States (2010/2011). The subtitle of the original show was: “A show with Bach, Barbie, Joh. de Heer11 and the longing for unity.” A recap of my experience follows.

When we enter the tent, our hostess, who is wearing a knitted dress with fake breasts against her bottom, plays Bach at one of the two harmoniums present. She invites us to sing the hymn “Showers of blessing” with her, while explaining the lust that is expressed in its lyrics.12

\[
\text{Showers of blessing,} \\
\text{Showers of blessing we need;} \\
\text{Mercy-drops round us are falling,} \\
\text{But for the showers we plead.}
\]

(Daniel W. Whittle, 1883)

Some join in, others giggle. She shares her memories of family meetings where songs like this were sung, calling our attention to the sublimation of sexuality. In the state of ecstasy thus aroused, she sings the hilarious song Barbie Girl (from the group Aqua). Later, she invites the audience to participate in a séance, in which the Dutch Methodist songbook is taken as a book of answers. The gathering closes with the “Buddhist” song “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah,” as a tribute to the Dutch beat poet Simon Vinkenoog. (The alternative text, “No, no, no, no,” is allowed, too.)


11. Johannes de Heer (1866-1961) was a Dutch writer and translator of Methodist and Pietist songs.

12. An entire meeting, 29 October 2011, was devoted to the singing of these songs, explicitly for non-believers. http://www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/5009/Archief/archief/article/detail/3003401/2011/10/31/Johannes-de-Heer.dhtml

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Although this was definitely theatre, I was not watching a play. I was invited, instead, to play along by a character, present in the here-and-now. The music promoted the participation of the audience in an atmosphere of remembrance and play with elementary liturgical forms such as ecstasy and prayer for blessing. Yet this did not make it liturgy *per se*. Rather, I took part in an experiment to see what happened when we, presumably non-believers, sang these religious songs. Strictly speaking, the interactive show only referred to liturgy, but the authenticity of the actress and the playfulness of the whole meeting could have also given the visitor a liturgical experience. This was the case with me. For others, other elements might have prevailed, for example the bizarre religious criticism, melancholia, or mere fun. Both the reactions during and after the show, and on the actress’s website, suggest such a variety.

**Camp Jesus**

I attended the production of Camp Jesus by the young Flemish/Dutch company *Wunderbaum*, at Theatre Festival *Boulevard* in Summer 2008. The production took place in a large hall, and was loosely inspired by the movie “Jesus Camp.” The stage contained pews (at the left), a wooden cross (in the back), and a band (at the right). The show starts with a live performance of a scene from an Ingmar Bergman movie, *The Seventh Seal*, namely, the dialogue with Death. Then a fragment of Schubert’s *Dies Irae* is played. An actor welcomes the audience and presents the band. All five actors sit down in the pews and start to pray, their faces projected onto big screens. They reveal their longings, desires, complaints, and confessions. These motivations determine the development of the characters during the show. The show builds up to a passion play: the performance of the Way of the Cross in *tableaux vivants*, accompanied by contemporary prayers that are read in a formal manner. The atmosphere is solemn. This changes at the scene of the crucifixion: an actress, dressed only in briefs and a loincloth is tied to the cross, and says the words, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” What I see looks slightly familiar.

Then another actress leaves the scene, and drinks a beer at the back of the stage. She protests against this simulation. The actress who played Jesus responds that it is her way of trying to experience the reality of suffering.

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14. In the Netherlands, the protests against similar scenes, on the playbill of the show I.N.R.I. (2003–2005) by De Bloeiende Maagden (“The Flourishing Virgins”) and in Madonna’s Confessions on a Dance Floor (2006), were few.
A row starts. We hear, again, a fragment of *Dies Irae*. End of show. Applause.

The show evokes the image of a Christian youth camp, with many of its particular rituals or “ritual-like” aspects (Taves 2007). Within this frame there are references to confession, prayer, ecstasy and memorial, namely the Way of the Cross. Despite the elementary forms that were used, the code of a theatrical performance was not violated during the scenes. The play as a whole did not become liturgical, although the music could have had a liturgical effect. The play explored what faith and rituals could mean for a contemporary, un-churched generation dealing with desires, guilt, ecstasy, frustration, suffering, and death of loved ones. It showed the ambivalent character of religion: on the one hand, religion is fascinating, both as a personal source of inspiration and as a cultural resource; on the other hand, it is destructive, as a limitation on sexual freedom and a source of conflict. Interestingly, the research for the show included advice from a sociologist of religion.

The play with religion was characterized by both hesitation and ambivalence. The movement towards participation and transparency was made, but the actors refrained from entering the liturgical performance in depth. Instead, they focused on the boundaries of theatre, and brought a metadiscourse into the show. By not entering the discourse of liturgy and by discussing blasphemy (rather than simply blaspheming), the show dealt with religion and taboos, without itself entering the religious field or breaking taboos.

**Midnight Mass**

I attended the City Theatre of Amsterdam on 24 December 2009 at 22.00. Urban Myth, the young multidisciplinary domestic company of the theatre, directed by Jörgen Tjon A Fong, presented a show in the context of Expanding Theatre (“up-to-date socially and politically engaged programs”). Those in attendance received beforehand a simple program entitled “Liturgy Alternative Midnight Mass.” The program stated: “Christmas has [become] de-Christianized and [has] turned into a boundless drinking- and eating-bout without content. … It’s time for contemplation and new values. … We will give you food for thought using the traditional Catholic rituals. (Jörgen used to be an altar boy).”

A local black gospel choir (one of two choirs participating in the show) is singing as we enter the house. The show starts when an actress descends from the ceiling, singing *Ave Maria*. Another actress starts recollecting the songs she used to sing in church when she was young. The audience

15. In 2010 and 2011, a Midnight Mass was performed as well: http://www.urbanmyth.nl (accessed 15 August 2012).
is about to join her when an actor interrupts the community-singing with the announcement of the Penitential Rite. He, in turn, is also interrupted by another actress who reads Ezekiel’s complaint against the rich from the Old Testament.

The Second Reading is disturbing: a story is told, based on an actual news item, about a convicted paedophile for whom there is no place in his hometown. His position, alone in his car and “wrapped in swaddling clothes” (cf. Luke 2:7), is compared to baby Jesus. The suggestion is made that, maybe, someone should have a coffee with people who are like that.

Then, slowly, the actors start to express their embarrassment at the concept of the Holy Mass. They reveal that they thought it would be inappropriate to share bread. Instead, they decide to celebrate Communion by sharing two piles of 2-euro coins, allegedly collected from their own pockets. This chaotic ritual actually takes place. After a remembrance of the deceased (including a eulogy for Michael Jackson), another disturbing moment is prepared: the Offertory. We are invited to donate money for a genuinely existing project in Suriname (Dutch Guiana), supporting children with HIV. The proceeds (1400 euros) are immediately briefed to a reporter through a live Skype-connection with the capital of Suriname. The reporter reacts flabbergasted (“Jesus, that’s a lot of money, but…”), and expresses her mixed feelings: this act of charity will become another excuse for the local rich people to neglect the poverty in their country. The audience is left in an agony of doubt when a stand-up comedian delivers the Sermon, which, according to the program, should be followed by the Benediction. However, the actor-on-duty says he is empty-handed. Therefore the meeting is closed with the rendition of an exuberant song (“Sing, fight, cry, pray, laugh, work and admire”) written by Ramses Shaffy, a Dutch singer-songwriter, who passed away that year. This is announced in the program as community-singing, but this does not happen. The audience leaves as the choirs re-enter the stage.

The show extensively used the format of the Mass, which enabled the actors to both invoke and repress the participation of the audience. Nearly all forms of play were used. This was clearly not a theatre play, but rather a parody of an entertainment show. The shocking elements disturbed moral conventions and contributed to a transcendence of the dominant symbolic universe (Ter Borg 1991, 40–42). Within the context of entertainment, the ambivalence towards old-time religion was expressed, without affirming secular wisdom.
The Last Lunch

In August 2010, at the Theatre Festival Boulevard, located at the plaza of St. John’s Cathedral in Den Bosch (in the southern Netherlands), I viewed a production called “The Last Lunch.” The title, of course, is strongly reminiscent of the Last Supper. The production was prepared and performed by final-year students of the Academy for Cabaret, assisted by a professional female comedian.16 The initiator was Patrick Nederkoorn, who also happens to be a political scientist and religions scholar. During the show, the actors used their own names. The show took place in a small mobile wooden construction with walls of glass, called “The Greenhouse,” which served as a restaurant during the festival.

Outside the venue, the audience is welcomed and invited to perform a liminal ritual: the scrubbing of the hands with water and salt. Inside, the theme of the gathering is introduced: “Know what you eat.” We are invited to greet our neighbours. We have to tell the staff whether we eat vegetarian, organic, or “anything.” Those in the last category have to indicate how they will compensate for their large ecological footprint—their sacrifice.

The meal starts with a cleansing ritual: tequila, water, salt and lemon are taken in a prescribed order. Visual presentations, dialogues with the audience, monologues, dialogues, scenes, and praise songs follow between the courses. At certain moments the actors pray in poetic language, in a natural tone of voice. The first prayer addresses the food, thanking It for what it brings. The second prayer, before dessert, addresses Our Mother: “Our Mother who art in the earth./ … Watch over me. / And let us live. Amen.” The first line, of course, is a play on the first line of the Lord’s Prayer, but the text as a whole appeared to me as though it could be meant as an authentic prayer, and that is how I experienced it myself.

The visitors are requested to feed the grand dessert (pies, fruit, etc.) to each other with long spoons. This activity is interrupted by a collective performance in which the actors supposedly evaluate their performance, and discuss their views on ecological responsibility in a hilarious way: “Is it OK to eat meat from factory farming?” “But is there anything entirely OK, then?” Different attitudes are expressed: hedonistic, cynical, engaged, and spiritual.

One actress ends the show with a poetic text about a sparrow that ascends from the roof of St. John's Cathedral and proclaims to the heavens that the message has been received. The visitors chat, some of them exchange cards. All receive a booklet with ecological suggestions from each of the individual actors.

Rather than specifically referring to Christian liturgy, this show created theatre on the basis of the ritual act of having a meal together (a feast). Added to this was an ethical dimension, in the tradition of morally engaged comedy. The show had a strict protocol. Various forms of play and sacred games were used. It is remarkable that these elements had a liturgical function. The prayers were not “presented,” but functioned as real prayers. This was induced by the setting (the prayers had an organic place in the act of having a meal; there was no sharp division between audience and players), and by the authentic performance of the actors. Yet, the code of a show seemed to prevail. It was possible to simply enjoy the music, the poetry, and the performances—and to have a meal while doing so. It was also possible to participate more intensely, by discussing and praying along (in silence), and by entering into communication with your neighbours, the players, and the One to whom the prayers were directed. The experience of community was enhanced, both in a horizontal and in a vertical manner. This was done by staging a feast, with accents on the ritual elements in which the visitors actually took part.

Conclusion

Inspired by the concept of implicit religion, I found the following insights about (a) theatre, (b) religion and (c) the study of implicit religion, in my participant observation of contemporary theatre.

(a) Tools designed for the study of liturgy produce interesting results when applied to the study of theatre. It appears possible to make distinctions about the extent to which theatre has liturgical qualities. The first factor that enhances the liturgical quality is the extent to which the players and audience are separated. In contemporary theatre, the gap is often bridged, e.g., in locating theatre in parks, historic buildings, factories, restaurants, and even church buildings. Since the performative turn in the sixties (Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Living Theatre), chances for participation have grown in mainstream theatre (Margetts 2009). The second factor is the “borrowing” of religious language, rituals, etc. However, there are differences between doing and showing ritual.

The first case (Yes! To live and love) celebrates the desire for unity (socially and sexually) through the enactment of religious rituals with the partici-
pation of the audience. The second case (*Camp Jesus*) presents actors who investigate the role of religion. The third case (*Midnight Mass*) deals with moral issues through the ambivalent use of an established liturgical format. The fourth case (*The Last Supper*) invites the guests to join in the performance of a collective ritual, grounded in the act of a common meal. Although the references to established religion play a minor role here, the liturgical quality is strong, since it starts with a collective act that is suitable for ritualization (Bell 1992, 90).

(b) The results are instructive about the appearance of religion in liquid modernity. Referring to the definition of liturgy I suggested at the outset, several characteristics of the community and the sacred have come to the fore. Characteristic for the community that is experienced is, firstly, that it is momentary: it is “only for a second,” as Peter Brook puts it. Secondly, there is an indirect link with the life world: it is not the living community itself that performs the act (contrary, e.g., to community theatre). The life world is present because the shows refer to social issues which are recognized by the audience. Thirdly, there is infrequent contact between performers and players. The distinction between actors and audience usually persists, even if music sometimes results in joint activity. Fourthly, the shows attract a select (theatre) audience, although festivals tend to appeal to a wider audience (Van den Broek, Huysmans and De Haan 2000).

The characteristics of the communication about and with the sacred are, firstly, the diversity of the religions and forms of spirituality referred to: Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Reformed, and Ecological. Often, they are mixed. Secondly, there is striking creativity. Directors and actors feel free to explore both the religions and the religious, sometimes leading to moralizing tendencies, beyond irony. Thirdly, there is variety in showing, discussing, reflecting, and commenting on conceptions of the sacred, but also incidental communication with the sacred. However, since contemporary theatre is obliged to surprise, the room for ritual (which is, by definition, repeatable) remains limited (Grimes 2006).

(c) It appears that the perspective of liturgical studies is useful for studying phenomena outside the religious field, or on the boundaries of the

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17. The theologian Francesco Taborda distinguishes four elements in the concept of “feast,” which he considered as “sacramental”: the feast contrasts with everyday life; it has an anamnetic character (memorial, myth); the acts have a ritual character; it expresses a group culture (cf. Post 2001, 68–69).

18. The numerous repetitions of the Dionysian performances conducted by Hermann Nitsch, enhance their rituality (Belderbos 2010, 249).

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religious and the cultural field. In the cultural field of theatre, the codes of the field are mostly left intact. However, this does not prevent actors from exploring religious resources. In this manner the potential liturgical quality of theatre is made explicit. It is a play with religion.

Thus the fields of religion, art and science are connected in even more ways than expected. The individual connections are the most visible ones. Personal religious backgrounds are reflected in the shows; theatre (Belderbos 2010) and festivals (Kommers 2011) are discussed by students of religion; scholars of religion advise artists (Wunderbaum), or are themselves performers (Nederkoorn). On a more fundamental level, actors in the three fields are dealing with similar questions, each in their own discourse. The same subject is investigated both in the study of religion and in theatre: the relevance of religion, in a world where the continuation of religious traditions is changing rapidly. Theatre has the ability to draw quite close to the subject of its fascination; science usually stays more aloof. The anthropological approach of taking the stance of a participant for a while incites the investigator to include his or her own experience (Droogers 2006). This is what I have tried to do.

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