

Liturgy as theater melds myth into history

Michele Saracino | Jun. 22, 2011

THE MYTHOLOGICAL TRADITIONS OF LITURGICAL DRAMA: THE EUCHARIST AS THEATER

By Christine C. Schnusenberg

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A significant aspect of Christine Schnusenberg's work is her attempt to advance the idea that drama not only reflects the great myths of identity, but that theater in many forms creates and recreates identity.

In *The Mythological Traditions of Liturgical Drama*, the author unearths a trajectory of drama from myths in the ancient and distant locales of the Near East to the early church of the Roman Empire. For Schnusenberg, the Christ event is a creation myth "par excellence," and liturgy manifests as a hybridization of the theater of the worlds.

Drawing distinctions between myths of creation and myths of origin, within and among the theater of Egypt, Babylon, Canaan-Ugarit, Greece and Rome, among others, she explores theatrical events and festivals across vast historical and geographical landscapes.

As we embark on this exploration, Schnusenberg shows that it is not necessarily the case that dramatic festivals based on seasonal rhythms or dramatized apocalyptic conflicts of war and power have evolved from one place to another. Rather, they mimetically appear in theatrical episodes across sacred time and space. Notably, Schnusenberg is careful not to create a grand narrative connecting all the cults of the world, at times admitting a lack of evidence despite the commonalities.

She weaves Mircea Eliade's work on myth and Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative to explain how in various places and times participation in festivals and cults is connected to the birthing of great myths of origin and creation. Theater catapults mythical identities into history.



It is hard not to become entranced by the complexity and intricacy of

Schnusenberg's writings. Confidently she weaves together archeological, biblical and theological research, at moments delving into palettes and biblical passages. Her anthropological knowledge of the peoples of the ancient Near East is awesome. Whether it is the use of the striking phrases, "the stage of the theater that is Egypt," "the theater of God," or her provocative claim that "in the beginning there was theater," the reader

cannot help being swept up by the momentum of her argument. As a result her audience becomes a participant in the author's theatrical telling of this trajectory ? driving its future. Like liturgy, Schnusenberg's work is performative, drama in and of itself.

This is where challenges arise. So fascinated by her knowledge of these seemingly esoteric cosmologies and cults, and so enticed by the emotional tone of it, one might miss her implicit theologizing and fail to question it. While the Romans did not incorporate the cult of Yahweh into the imperial cult of Rome, writes Schnusenberg, Christianity, as an imperial religion under Constantine, did. It was Constantinian Christianity ?inculturating? such cults that made Christian drama distinctive and ultimate. Even as she contends that myth in Christianity is hybridized, as in many of the other cultures she examines, there is a dramatic feeling to the Christian hybrid. It represents the climax of the historical trajectory that up until this point she has only been studying from a theoretical perspective.

Once the tone turns theological, the stakes heighten and questions arise. What is Schnusenberg's intent in her valorization of the incarnation as the ?cosmogonic? or creative event? Is she merely describing a sense of Christian triumphalism in liturgical drama, or is she endorsing it? How can the Gospels be used as drama with little attention to their historical context and development? She provides some context for historical terms, and yet the triad among Jesus, the ?Jews? and Pilate remains fixed and unquestioned on the stage of theohistory.

It is conceivable that I have overlooked a significant point, that a historical-critical reading of ancient scripture and texts is futile because we Christians are already ?participants? in this ?great universal drama of Jesus the Christ.? Perhaps that is the case. Yet participating in this type of theater makes me uncomfortable in the shadow of the Shoah, after the declaration of Nostra Aetate, and in light of the many efforts to connect Jewish and Catholic communities in life-giving dialogue.

My concerns are less about Schnusenberg's work and more about the function of drama. Then and now, theater about myths of origin and creation feed a desire for closure, unity and identity ? a desire that can never be fully satiated as there continues to be fissures and ruptures in the stories and events of our identity and creation. These disruptive moments are worthy of pause and reflection.

Schnusenberg's work is not about the ethics of drama but the work of drama, and as that is quite impressive. Her research, including a stunning set of bibliographies, clearly displays a command of the ancient cosmologies and texts. Many would benefit from reading her work, from specialists in ancient cultures to lay readers intrigued by the drama and civilizations of the past.

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