

Panel: Politics and Religion in America

Abstract

Religion generally gets a “bad rap” in the American theatre. For many artists and intellectuals, conservative religious beliefs have been responsible for antitheatrical prejudice, intolerance of difference, moral self-righteousness, and irrational behaviors. The theatre has often sought to portray narrowness of belief as tied to political conservatism. Yet religion and spirituality are clearly multi-faceted. While most Americans describe themselves as somewhat religious, there is widespread diversity in the ways people experience or practice their spirituality. The short essays collected here confront this habit pattern in theatrical representation as ultimately unfortunate and self-defeating. Examining the role of spiritual experience within American ideology in relation to performance and performance theory, our goal is to examine carefully the powerful emotional connections to religion that are part of an American landscape and to interrogate our ways of performing what we understand. Our intention is to provoke further thinking about this topic in an effort to achieve a better understanding of how artists and scholars might respond more productively to the recent turn to the Christian evangelical right in American politics. Simply dismissing this phenomenon is not an adequate response in our view, nor is a binary polarization between the evil religious right and the virtuous secular left. Anthony Kubiak calls his contribution “A Polemic” because he seriously calls performance theory to account for failure to pursue substantive close engagement with American religious culture. Ann Pellegrini reverses the “coming out narrative” by analyzing its use within Protestant traditions of testimony and conversion. I urge attention to the exemplary performances of religious women committed to social justice as counter-performance to the theatrics of the Christian right.

—Janelle Reinelt

