

The Boundaries of Theatrical Freedom: When Symbols Challenge Religion

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Abstract: Throughout history, the relationship between theatre and the Church has been notably complex, characterized by recurrent moments of convergence and divergence. In certain instances, religious institutions in Romania have actively intervened in the artistic domain, mobilizing congregants to contest theatrical productions perceived as controversial. However, these are unfortunate cases driven by the ignorance with which such matters have been approached. The act of passing judgment without thorough investigation stands in contradiction to the foundational principles of Christianity; nevertheless, it often manifests when theatrical works incorporate religious symbols that attract ecclesiastical scrutiny. Such circumstances can give rise to widespread public hysteria, placing artists in vulnerable positions—subject to threats and even acts of aggression from individuals who perceive their faith to be under attack. These episodes underscore the essential function of theatre: to stimulate critical reflection, to question established norms, and to engage profoundly with the complexities of the human condition.

Keywords: symbol, censorship, religion, freedom

The role of theatre is to bring people together, to educate, to highlight societal issues, and often to engage the imagination. Through theatre, a sense of belonging is cultivated: individuals share a common culture and are presented with opportunities for debate, gaining access to a wide array of subjects for discussion and reflection. Theatre predates the institutional Church, though not faith itself. Religious ceremonies contain theatrical elements, as theatre emerged from the desire to pay homage to the gods. These tributes traditionally included dances and songs, as well as orgiastic rituals with performative characteristics. In time, such expressions were tempered

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and integrated into religious ceremonies, where priests performed carefully choreographed sequences corresponding to each 'act' of the liturgy.

The role of the Church in society is to encourage citizens and parishioners to act with moral integrity, to treat one another with kindness, to foster mutual understanding, and to practice compassion. Religion emerged as a central concern for individuals long before the establishment of state laws or political systems.¹ As such, the Church played a significant role for an extended period in shaping societal norms and prescribing appropriate behavior, often through the imposition of rules found in the Decalogue. These moral directives, such as “Thou shalt not kill” or “Thou shalt not steal”, were later adopted by civil authorities and codified into legal frameworks.

The most evident theatrical elements within religious ceremonies can be observed during liturgies or major services held at Easter and Christmas. Theatre eventually diverged from the Church, sometimes it was condemned and later encouraged, as the Church itself has been both criticized and supported by political structures and society at large. The two institutions often intersect; ”Răzvan Ionescu notes that one might even speak of a covert relationship between theatre and the Church.”² (trad. n.)

It appears that moments in which the Church condemns theatrical practices recur periodically. At times, due to the circulation of incomplete or misleading information in the media, the Church disseminates conclusions among the faithful that are occasionally based on misinterpretations. A recent example is the production *Proorocul Ilie (The Prophet Elijah)*, directed by Botond Nagy and staged at the “I. L. Caragiale” National Theatre in Bucharest, which became the target of misinformed audience members or, more troublingly, of individuals who neither engage with theatre nor seek accurate information before spreading their views. The director and actors are now facing a wave of threatening messages due to the themes explored in the

¹ Petru Andrea, *Despre rolul religiei în societate*, article available at: <https://www.aosr.ro/despre-rolul-religiei-in-societate/>, accessed on 30.03.2025;

² Răzvan Ionescu *crede că se poate vorbi chiar despre existența unei relații complice între teatru și Biserică* – Mircea Morariu, *Anvergură și Temeritate*, *Teatrul Azi*, Nr. 10-11-12, 2007, periodical available at <https://biblioteca-digitala.ro/?volum=2142-teatrul-azi--10-11-12-2007>, accessed on 30.03.2025;

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production, particularly because of the inclusion of symbols associated with religious belief.

Theatre, in and of itself, is a symbol, beginning with the iconic masks that represent it (the mask of Tragedy alongside the one of Comedy) and extending to the stage itself and the technical elements that surround it. The very existence of a universal symbol for Theatre reflects the fact that the art form is fundamentally constructed upon symbolism. The two masks originate from ancient Greek theatre and carry multiple layers of meaning. The most evident is the notion of the “playing of a role,” expressed either through literal or metaphorical masks. Additionally, they symbolize the duality of human emotion and its extremes, as well as the dramatic arts’ capacity to explore the full spectrum of life, from joy to despair.

Spectators are aware that, in choosing to attend a performance, they are entering into a theatrical convention. Thus, they implicitly accept that they will encounter a variety of symbols. “The use of the artistic symbol has its theoretical precedent in the idea that things are not what they seem.”³ (trad. n.) These symbols add interpretative depth, allowing each audience member to construct a personal understanding or inner world in response to the performance. At times, sections of the script may be omitted and replaced with powerful visual imagery that is capable of deeply moving the viewer in ways that mere words might not achieve. Naturally, as individual beings, spectators may arrive at differing interpretations of a scene’s resolution, an idea which will be further explored in the following section.

When examined individually, theatrical symbols are essential because they offer the audience a far more intense experience than that of simply reading the dramatic text. Once staged, the playwright’s words come to life through theatrical semiotics. Theatrical conventions begin even before the performance itself, with spectators selecting their attire for the event, and continue with the playwrights, who imagine an alternative world, and with those who reinterpret that world in performance. Spectators enter into this shared convention the moment they decide to attend a show, often choosing their clothing based on the venue, the genre of the play, and the prominence

³ *Utilizarea simbolului artistic își are precedentul teoretic în gândul că lucrurile nu sunt ceea ce sunt.* – Gabriel Liiceanu, *Om și simbol*, Bucharest, Humanitas Press, 2005, p. 9;

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of its cast. Playwrights create theatrical conventions by constructing a world that mirrors reality, one that is then translated onto a stage that may or may not resemble what the audience already knows. The director, actors, and technical crew bring this imagined world to life, crafting symbols, signs, and moments with which spectators may identify. “Convention becomes, in fact, a more or less fluctuating agreement regarding how we relate to the world through theatre: how the world of reality is understood.”⁴ (trad. n.) Once the curtain rises, the audience is met with a multitude of stimuli (visual, auditory, olfactory, and even tactile) that they must interpret.⁵ It is, therefore, a convention they willingly enter. Without this conscious or unconscious participation of the audience, the theatrical act would lose its meaning. Any form of detachment from the artistic experience would diminish the power of the imagination. For instance, during the performance of *Zbor deasupra unui cuib de cuci* (*One Flew over The Cuckoo's Nest*), directed by Vlad Cristache and staged at the Nottara Theatre, a member of the audience became outraged during a wedding scene in which the patient Ruckley, played by Mircea Teodorescu, was symbolically crucified and represented the altar. The offended spectator interrupted the performance, shouting “Why are you mocking God?” and had to be escorted from the theatre. As this example shows, exiting the theatrical convention can have serious consequences for audience members, especially an actor who breaks the convention onstage. Imagine, for example, that during Hamlet’s famous monologue, the actor portraying him were to undress, stripping away the character’s identity and jolting the audience back into the reality they had suspended upon entering the theatre. Such an act would likely provoke outrage, demands for refunds, and metaphorical ‘tomatoes’ thrown across social media platforms. It could be perceived as a threat to all those who cherish the art of theatre.

Characters themselves become symbols through the traits emphasized by the actors on stage. The more talented the actor, the more profoundly the audience is affected, remaining fully immersed in the theatrical

⁴ *Convenția devine, de fapt, un acord mai mult sau mai puțin fluctuant asupra felului în care ne raportăm la lume prin teatru: ”cum e lumea realității”*. - Miruna Runcan, *Pentru o semiotică a spectacolului teatral*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia Press, 2005, p. 26;

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Littérature et signification*, Essais critiques, Paris, Seuil/Points, 1981, p. 258;

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convention. This is a reciprocal relationship in which the two essential elements, audience and performance, must operate in harmony, without interruptions that force a return to factual realism. “The actors’ art consists in modulating, working on, stylizing and aestheticizing their bodily appearance, to provide spectators with the possibility of receiving these variations as affects that are not controlled by the actors or the characters they are playing”.⁶ As a result, actors are sometimes mistaken for their characters and even disliked for the negative roles that brought them fame. This phenomenon is even more pronounced in film and television, where actors may be addressed in public by the names of their characters, as is the case with Adrian Văncică, the actor who plays Celentano in the popular Romanian TV series *Las Fierbinți*.

Symbols in theatre take on even greater significance when they are already established in society and easily recognized beyond the stage. Examples of such symbols include gestures of greeting, the peace sign, the raised fist, the wedding ring, the broken mirror, and the cross. The cross, in particular, has become a symbol of sacrifice, of the Holy Trinity, and more broadly, a symbol of faith itself. Interestingly, only a specific form of the cross is recognized as a symbol of Christian belief; any minor alteration may shift or nullify its meaning. In this context, one may consider the St. Andrew’s cross, shaped like an “X,” which is not universally recognized as a religious symbol. Society thus constructs a set of symbols through which people navigate meaning and develop interpretations. Emoticons on social media have become part of everyday communication, appearing even in emails, and their absence can signal a more formal tone. Symbols are omnipresent in our lives, often replacing words entirely; a sequence of signs can form coherent phrases understood by all parties. The language of theatre is not so different from colloquial speech, especially in recent years, as theatrical trends increasingly mimic real life discourse. Theatre constructs symbolic codes that spectators begin decoding from the very start. Once immersed in the convention, this language becomes a shared one.

Throughout history, theatre has sought to bring societal issues to the stage in ways that allow spectators to feel a sense of belonging and to identify

⁶ Patrice Pavis, *The Routledge Dictionary of Performance and Contemporary Theatre*, New York, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016, p. 7;

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with the actors or the moments they witness. Nevertheless, there are instances in which the audience cannot resonate with the events portrayed, as illustrated in the previously mentioned example, or when their interests and value systems diverge from those expressed on stage. In such cases, acts of dissent may arise, sometimes manifesting merely as dissatisfaction with the performance or the actors' interpretations, but in other cases escalating into public scandal. Most frequently, these conflicts are sparked by religious matters, particularly the portrayal of religious symbols, which are often subject to public criticism when presented in a theatrical context. This phenomenon is not limited to theatre alone; it also occurs in cinema, especially when controversial topics are addressed. A notable case is the documentary *Arsenie. Viața de apoi* (*Arsenie. An Amazing Afterlife*), directed by Alexandru Solomon, which undertook a social experiment involving believers, with their consent. However, other members of the religious community who became aware of the film's subject reacted strongly, interpreting it as an affront to religion or to the figure of Arsenie Boca. The Archbishop of Sibiu even called for the film to be banned, generating significant controversy among the faithful.⁷ In the case of theatre, religious symbols have increasingly become the subject of criticism largely due to their promotion via internet. Given that theatrical performances enjoy less visibility than films, they often provoke broader public reaction only when circulated through other forms of publicity. Occasionally, isolated acts of protest may occur during performances, such as in *One Flew over The Cuckoo's Nest*, where an audience member vocally objected and demanded a refund, but rarely do spectators who have actually seen the show gather outside the theatre to protest its themes or symbolism. More often, these reactions unfold in online environments or in the media.

What happens, however, when an important institution rises against art? The Church holds a position of authority within the Carpatho-Danubian-Pontic space, having a decisive role in setting the moral guidelines that people follow in pursuit of a spiritually balanced life. If this institution declares an artistic act to be blasphemous, the faithful will take its statements at face value

⁷ Andreea Tobias, *Reacția Patriarhiei Române, după ce Arhiepiscopia Sibiului a cerut interzicerea documentarului „Arsenie. Viața de apoi”*, article available at: <https://www.mediafax.ro/social/reactia-patriarhiei-romane-dupa-ce-arhiepiscopia-sibiului-a-cerut-interzicerea-documentarului-arsenie-viata-de-apoi-22137421>, accessed on 03.04.2025;

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and express their outrage in defense of their values. Although in the article *The Reaction of the Romanian Patriarchate, following the request of the Archdiocese of Sibiu to ban the documentary Arsenie. An Amazing Afterlife*, Vasile Bănescu, spokesperson for the Romanian Orthodox Church, stated that the Church could not prohibit anything in the public sphere, recent events concerning *The Prophet Elijah*, directed by Botond Nagy, subtly convey the idea that religious symbols should only be used within their sacred dimension.⁸ Therefore, any deviation from Christian dogma is harshly criticized by representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Furthermore, one of Romania's political parties is capitalizing on this conflict by demanding the banning of the performance. In response to such criticism and attempts at censorship, the actors and the management of the National Theatre in Bucharest have asserted that freedom of expression is vital in art, and that if a certain artistic act does not appeal to one individual, it cannot be banned to the detriment of others' enjoyment.

This introduces another debate: the subjectivity of art. Beyond the subjectivity of those creating the performance, there is also that of the spectator and what they understand based on their education and personal beliefs. "The raw material of theatre is not the actor, the space, or the text, but the attention, the gaze, the hearing, and the thoughts of the spectator. Theatre is the art of the spectator."⁹ (trad. n.) Yet when a spectator is dissatisfied, should a theatrical act be cancelled, while satisfied spectators must comply with the demands of the discontented? Banning a public product amounts to discriminating against the appreciative segment of the audience. Even if in the minority, those who find value in a work have the right to experience it in its entirety. Consequently, a work cannot be annulled or banned solely on the basis of subjective dislike; it must be allowed to continue until its natural end; in the case of theatre, until audiences lose interest and the performance becomes unsellable.

⁸ Sorin Ionițe, *Punct de vedere referitor la piesa de teatru „Proorocul Ilie”*, article available at: <https://basilica.ro/punct-de-vedere-referitor-la-piesa-de-teatru-proorocul-ilie/>, accessed on 03.04.2025;

⁹ Eugenio Barba, *O canoe de hârtie. Tratat de antropologie teatrală*, Bucharest, Unitext Press, 2003, p. 66-70;

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The Prophet Elijah, written by Tadeusz Słobodzianek, is inspired by a real case from 1930s–1940s Poland and explores themes such as fate, faith, the confrontation between good and evil, and extremism. The play draws inspiration from the biblical figure of the prophet Elijah, adapted to a modern context and centered around the battle between divine justice and human weakness. Elijah is portrayed as a visionary who must face a corrupt world full of moral challenges. He witnesses the suffering and downfall of people, and his mission becomes one of purification and punishment of injustice. The prophet proclaims himself a messenger of God, foretelling the end of the world. From here, people begin to build a kind of cult, following Elijah and listening to what he has to say, revering his advice and prophecies. The performance staged by Botond Nagy serves as a warning about how easily people can idolize personalities who know how to carefully choose their words and manipulate the masses. The controversy around this performance began after a spectator posted on social media a moment from the show in which one of the actresses was on a cross while another danced provocatively, scantily clad. This scene is followed by others in which the characters repent for their actions. Nonetheless, the introduction of a religious symbol such as the cross triggered outrage against the director, actors, and even the theatre's leadership. A significant issue in this situation, as in others of this kind, lies in the fact that many of those expressing outrage and protest are people who have not actually seen the performance, but have based their opinions solely on images or short fragments posted online. These are, by nature, often taken out of context or selectively edited, leading to an incomplete or distorted interpretation of the artistic content, which may result in a disproportionate reaction and an unfounded relationship to the reality presented on stage. This type of response may lead to a misunderstanding of the director's intentions and of the artistic message, turning an artistic theme into a topic of social conflict—or, as George Călin, director of the “I. L. Caragiale” National Theatre in Bucharest, stated, “a tool for electoral manipulation.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Andreea Orosz, *Scandalul „Proorocul Ilie” | Managerul TNB la RFI: Manipulare în scop electoral*, article available at: <https://www.rfi.fr/ro/rom%C3%A2nia/20250331-scandalul-profetul-ilie-managerul-tnb-la-rfi-manipulare-%C3%AEn-scop-electoral>, accessed on 03.04.2025;

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The backlash highlights an important issue in the interaction between theatrical acts and their audiences. As mentioned before, many of the individuals who do not recognize a production as a legitimate artistic work have not seen the performance in full but rather relied on the opinions of others from the online environment or on partial imagery. Religious symbols are sensitive in any culture, and the director may be aware that their inclusion can be perceived as offensive. Botond Nagy's *The Prophet Elijah* was intended as an artistic interpretation, not as a denial of religious values, with the director stating that, for him, "God is not dead, but lives through [his] art."

What can be observed from the hysteria surrounding this performance is that the show itself is not being judged, but rather a 30-second moment taken out of context—a duration that most people have become accustomed to through social media. Opinions are now formed hastily; there is no longer room for research, and patience is no longer a virtue in the fast-paced century we live in. A paradox also occurred: the performance is a wake-up call about how easily people can be manipulated by an all-knowing guru. Unfortunately, there was a manipulation of online perception: someone posted a short clip from the play with the title *Blasphemy!*, and people did not investigate further, they stopped, shocked by the images they saw, and began to wholly denigrate the artistic act. Thus, one person manipulated others into believing in their own ideas, creating a chain reaction. It is, in any case, easier to unleash hysteria when you manage to convince at least two people to support your idea. Such reactions resemble those of political protests, where groups of people gather to support the same belief, willing to scale buildings and start fights simply because they are part of a group.

Another example of a play that sparked controversy among the religious community is *Evangheliștii (The Evangelists)* by Alina Mungiu Pippidi, directed by Benoit Vitse, staged at the Iași Athenaeum in 2005. The performance was criticized by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bucharest as well as by Patriarch Teoctist, who called it "an insult to the Orthodox Church" and "a blasphemy against our life and faith."¹¹ (trad. n.) However,

¹¹ *O jignire a Bisericii Ortodoxe and blasfemie la viața și la credința noastră – Adevărul Press, Piesa „Evangheliștii”, un kitsch sfidător care a scandalizat biserica și lumea teatrului*, article available at: <https://adevarul.ro/stil-de-viata/cultura/piesa-evanghelistii-un-kitsch-sfidator-care-a-1335051.html>, accessed on 03.04.2025;

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theater critic Cristina Modreanu described the show as "modest and harmless"¹² (trad. n.) after being delegated by the Ministry of Culture to analyze the veracity of the clergy's statements. It is, therefore, an example of a situation in which the Church circulates questionable information about plays that employ religious symbols. In *The Evangelists*, the director uses nudity as an interpretation of biblical myths. Another interpretation, suggested by the text itself, is the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus Christ, a relationship labeled as defiant by the two clerics. Nevertheless, the script won the UNITER award in 1992.

Another example of a performance criticized by the Church is *Eu sunt. Și? (I Am. So?)*, written by Dan Boldea and directed by Lorán Betty. The play had several showings between 2018 and 2019, and during the Pride Festival in Cluj-Napoca, the Church was scandalized by an image showing actors in underwear, wearing religious garments on their upper bodies, eating at a table improvised from an icon. "Starting from the situation of the concentration camps for gay people in Chechnya, the performance presents the local/national perspective on this controversial topic. Containing elements of performance art, it aims for an exaggerated expression of our views regarding the condition of the LGBT community. The play is a test of honesty and courage, both for the team and the audience."¹³ (trad. n.) Therefore, this is a play that tackles the issue of discrimination against a minority, and the

¹² *Modest și inofensiv* – Ziarul de Iași Press, „*Evangelistii, un spectacol modest și inofensiv*”, article available at: https://www.ziaruldeiasi.ro/stiri/evangelistii-un-spectacol-modest-si-inofensiv--3up3.html#google_vignette, accessed on 03.04.2025;

¹³ *Având ca punct de pornire situația lagărelor de concentrare pentru gay din Cecenia, spectacolul expune perspectiva locală/națională asupra acestui subiect polemic. Conținând elemente de performance, tinde spre o exprimare exacerbată a ideilor noastre cu privire la condiția comunității LGBT. Spectacolul este un test de onestitate și curaj atât pentru echipă, cât și pentru public.* – Hotnews Press, *Patriarhia Română acuză un spectacol de teatru despre lagărele de concentrare pentru homosexuali din Cecenia că încalcă Legea Cultelor: Ofensează public simbolurile religioase*, article available at: <https://hotnews.ro/patriarhia-romna-acuza-un-spectacol-de-teatru-despre-lagarele-de-concentrare-pentru-homosexuali-din-cecenia-ca-nalca-legea-cultelor-ofenseaza-public-simbolurile-religioase-316181>, accessed on 04.04.2025;

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reaction of the Romanian religious institution did nothing but incite the very behavior the play was trying to expose.

Such reactions from religious institutions are not limited to Romania, they are a recurring phenomenon in countries where religion plays an important role in people's lives. In countries like Poland, Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, or even the USA (in certain conservative regions), religious institutions frequently intervene in public life, expressing their positions on issues such as human rights, education, sexuality, and politics. In Peru, for example, earlier this year, a theater festival was suspended because of a poster. The 24th edition of the *Saliendo de la Caja* festival, organized by the Faculty of Performing Arts of the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (PUCP), was canceled after the Peruvian Episcopal Conference condemned the promotional image, considering it degrading to the Virgin Mary. The poster for the play *María Maricón* depicted a man in makeup, wearing a black cloak, with a heart surrounded by roses on his chest, and two hands lifting the hooded cloak. The mayor of Lima labeled the poster as blasphemous and emphasized that PUCP should not tolerate such expressions. In response, the university publicly apologized and announced the suspension of the festival. In protest against what they viewed as artistic censorship, student groups organized demonstrations at PUCP's Cultural Center in Lima, advocating for freedom of expression and respect for diversity.¹⁴

What can be inferred from such events is that sometimes negative publicity ensures the necessary visibility for cultural events. In the case of all the mentioned performances, they gained notoriety, just like their authors, who later directed shows that enjoyed visibility.

In Romania, through the phenomenon of vehement reactions against performances involving religious symbols, a debate is raised concerning the limits of artistic freedom. Theater remains a space where various ideologies and sensitivities intersect for many people in this society guided by religion. Directors and theater artists find themselves in a delicate position when

¹⁴ RD/Efe, *Un cartel blasfemo: La Universidad Católica peruana suspende un festival teatral tras quejas del Gobierno y la Iglesia*, article available at: https://www.religiondigital.org/educacion/Universidad-Catolica-suspende-Gobierno-Iglesia_0_2743525624.html, accessed on 04.04.2025;

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choosing to stage performances that include religious symbols, especially when these are used in unconventional ways. In this light, despite the negative reactions that may arise, it is important for theater and art in general to retain their role of provoking, questioning, and exploring the deeper meanings of human existence.

The mentioned conflicts are not a sign of a crisis in Romanian theater, but rather proof of an ongoing dialogue between the arts and society, between freedom of expression and the sensitivities of the public. However, it is essential for the audience to understand the full context of a theatrical product before drawing conclusions and to be open to appreciating the complexity of artistic discourse, even (or especially) when it highlights fundamental values, such as faith.

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