



Chair's Introduction Modern Church Conference 2016

**by Revd Dr Alison Milbank,
Associate Professor of Theology and Literature, University of Nottingham.**

Welcome everyone to our conference, and many thanks to Modern Church for having the generosity of vision and imagination to conceive of such an event and for inviting me to chair. I am not a professional Shakespeare scholar but as someone in the field of religion and culture I am fascinated by the theatrical 'turn' in theology. As long ago as 1908 G. K. Chesterton observed that God made a play not a poem: 'a play he had planned as perfect but which had been left to human actors and stage managers who had since made a great mess of it'. And Chesterton was working with the *theatrum mundi* of the Renaissance, from which Shakespeare himself derived his famous 'all the world's a stage' analogy. For the great Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balathasar, in his *Theodrama*, God himself speaks and acts in this theatre of the world and enters the action. In the Incarnation, Christ himself becomes an actor, taking on our role as human, and the final act is the cross. Is it a comedy or a tragedy? Theologians differ here: perhaps it is a tragi-comedy, a genre particularly associated with Shakespeare.

If human and cosmic reality can truly be described as a divine drama, then the mode of our response is inherently participatory. We are called to what Yale School theologian, George Lindbeck, called 'faithful performance' and perhaps even more helpfully described by Wesley Lugt and Trevor Hart as 'faith seeking performative understanding'. We are called to learn by taking our part, to understand by doing. For ours is a virtue ethics in which we learn by copying Christ, and his form of life, with a strong element of improvisation, about which Sam Wells has written eloquently. I hope that this theology of participation will shape our time together at this conference. We have a wonderful range of experts: literary scholars, theologians, directors and those concerned with performance. Our audience too contains a richness of experience and knowledge of all sorts. I hope we will all contribute and not be afraid to ask the most erudite and the most basic questions. Shakespeare himself was a master at expressing the sublime through the earthy and if we remain only at the academic we shall, in the words of Touchstone the clown in *As You Like It* be damn'd for 'an ill-roasted egg, all on one side'.

Which brings me to the question: why Shakespeare? It is his year; he died on 3rd May 1616 and was buried in Holy Trinity Church Stratford-upon-Avon, which is now a shrine. He has become central to our national identity, in that his words have shaped our language, rather like the King James Bible, so it is no accident that any castaway on Desert Island discs will have a copy of both to enliven his or her Crusoe solitude. He is the one literary text you will be sure to study at school, not only in this country but often around the world. His immersion in the local and particular aids his translation into other cultures, times and situations. So performances behind the Iron Curtain became a form of political resistance; adaptation into Japanese culture allows meditation on their association of blood and power.

Several of us here were part of a BBC Big Questions programme, which asked whether the Bible or Shakespeare was a better guide to morality. It was an unhelpful question, since biblical language, stories and theology are all central to Shakespeare's work, and it is often the least likely characters, such as the rogue Falstaff, who are the most acute biblical interpreters. In Shakespeare we find a writer seeking to make meaning in the wake of the trauma of the Reformation, which gradually stopped the popular mode of miracle and mystery plays, which cut away the whole social imaginary, and yet which gave the individual soul a vertiginous but real importance. Shakespeare registers the shock of the dissolution in sonnet 73, in which he compares his middle-aged self to 'bare ruin'd quires, where late the sweet birds sang'. We too in Europe are registering the shock of secularism, and a breakdown of the post-war social and economic consensus, of which Brexit is one example. How can we act faithful performances in this chilly world? In a strange way, Shakespeare's men and women can speak to us even today, not just because human nature has certain stable features but in their post-Reformation search for mediation in a proto-capitalist world defined by the *sola scriptura* of Protestant biblical hermeneutics.

More than any other dramatist of his time, Shakespeare fills his plays with self-conscious references to prologues, acting and the stage. He ends *The Tempest* by Prospero in the Epilogue equating the language of prayer with that of theatrical applause. In that way he can help us think about our own theatrical theology. I want to end by reading you that epilogue, which may have been a kind of retirement bowing-out. He speaks as Prospero the magician, who is going home and renouncing his spells.

Let me not,

Since I have my dukedom got
And pardoned the deceiver, dwell
In this bare island by your spell,
But release me from my bands
With the help of your good hands.
Gentle breath of yours my sails
Must fill, or else my project fails,
Which was to please. Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
And my ending is despair,
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardoned be,
Let your indulgence set me free.

Our breath will fill his sails to pray in our poetry mass; we shall I hope be merciful to Shakespeare and each other in our exchanges but also find virtues like mercy embodied and explored in his characters. In reading him theologically, I hope that we will not confine him but release him, setting him free to challenge us, and lead us into new truth, and faithful performances.

So let us begin.