Efficacious Entertainment: The Baptism of Genesius the Mime and the Performance of Conversion

Courtney J. P. Friesen

THE ACQUISITION of a new religious identity is a matter of performance. Conversion occurs when one takes on the role of a different character. Its success depends on the degree to which the insiders of the corresponding community are persuaded that the actor embodies the cultural codes that distinguish them from outsiders.[1] The legend of Genesius, an ancient mime who suddenly and unexpectedly converted to Christianity while he was being baptized in a stage play, provides a singular perspective on the interplay between performance and religious identity. The actor impersonating an initiate is transformed through the drama itself,

[1] For this view see M. Leone, "Religious Conversion and Semiotic Analysis," in L. R. Rambo et al. (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* (Oxford 2014) 369–400. Sociological perspectives are explored by J. Lofland and R. Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965) 862–875, and by L. R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven 1993). The classic treatment of Christian conversion in antiquity is A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford 1933). For more recent studies see R. MacMullen, "Two Types of Conversion to Early Christianity," *VigChr* 37 (1983) 174–192; Z. A. Crook, *Reconceptualising Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Berlin 2004); M. Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Oxford 2011) 111–141.

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becomes a genuine Christian, and is subsequently executed as a martyr.

Taking the Passion of St. Genesius as a point of departure, I explore the rite of Christian baptism as mimetic drama. In the passion narrative the protagonist's religious conversion is effected through the art of theatrical acting. This striking outcome raises questions about the nature of baptism that were keenly debated among theologians and clergy. What lent baptism its distinctive spiritual power? Was it valid if performed outside the church by someone who was not a priest in good standing? That the grace of God was received through the sacrament performed in a theater is peculiar, the more so because it represents an ironic reversal of the church's official position on acting: whereas by the fourth century it had become a requirement for actors permanently to renounce their profession *prior* to being admitted to the sacrament, Genesius receives it *in the exercise of* his profession.

The unlikely convergence of ritual and theater in the Passion of St. Genesius can be productively analyzed with methodological insights from anthropology and performance studies. That ritual shares fundamental qualities with theater has become axiomatic: both involve temporary role playing, costumes, liminal space, and suspension of ordinary time. Distinctions remain, of course, and delineations developed by Richard Schechner under the rubric of the "efficacy-entertainment dyad" are especially helpful.[2] For Schechner there is no absolute differentiation between ritual and theater. Rather, they function on a continuum: "Whether one calls a specific performance ritual or theatre depends on the degree to which the performance tends toward efficacy or entertainment. No performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment." Ritual

[2] R. Schechner, "From Ritual to Theatre and Back: The Structure/Process of the Efficacy-Entertainment Dyad," *Educational Theatre Journal* 26 (1974) 455–481.

aims at particular results—transformative effects for the participants—whereas theater provides pleasure or fun for the audience. In the former, the audience participates, adopts shared beliefs and "collective creativity"; in the latter, the audience is separated from the performers, whose "individual creativity" is on display.[3] I will show that the performance of Genesius' baptism on stage provides a striking corroboration of Schechner's dyad: while ostensibly for the sake of entertainment, ultimately it proves efficacious. In addition, it exposes the broader dramatic qualities of the baptismal ritual. As scholars after Arnold van Gennep have long recognized, across cultures rites of passage typically involve temporary role-playing in a process of separation from, and reintegration into, the community.[4] In ancient Christian baptism this period of liminality is signaled by the removal of the initiands' garments, symbolizing the old self, their rebirth through water, and their dressing in white to represent their new identity.[5]

My study applies these methodological formulations to the Passion of St. Genesius and explores baptism as theatrical drama. The first section summarizes the text and offers a historical and literary analysis that demonstrates its alignment with Schechner's dyad. The subsequent three sections situate the Passion within its ancient context. In section 2 I argue that its depiction of a mime production exhibits elements of plausibility. The narrative also represents an intervention into religious polemic. In section 3 I show that it directly subverts

[3] Schechner, *Educational Theatre Journal* 26 (1974) 467–468. For a similar analysis see V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago 1969) 112. Cf. C. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in M. Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London 1966) 1–46, esp. 29–35.

[4] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago 1960) 65–115 (orig. 1909); see also Turner, *The Ritual Process* 94–130.

[5] Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* 93–96.

the church's stance on acting and theater. In the last section I demonstrate that over against the Donatists it sides decisively with Augustine's view of baptism.

1. *Acting converted in the Passion of St. Genesius*

Genesius remains a relatively obscure figure, and his baptism and conversion have received scarce attention in theoretical and historical discussions of drama and Christian ritual. The text of his Passion (*BHL* 3320) presents numerous historical difficulties.[6] The events of the narrative are set in Rome during the reign of Diocletian and conventionally dated to 303 CE. But he is only one among several such mime-converts in the martyrological tradition,[7] and literary interrelationships suggest that the Passion of St. Genesius, composed between the mid-sixth and ninth centuries, is an expanded adaptation of one or more earlier versions.[8] In particular, the Passion of Gelasinus of Hierapolis (297 CE)—recorded in the sixth-century Greek *Chronographia* of John Malalas (12.50)—though briefer, follows the same pattern.[9] The Passion of Porphyry (*BHG* 1568z), another mime-martyr, during the reign of Aurelian appears also to be modeled on Gelasinus or some similar source.[10] As

[6] Latin text W. Weismann, "Die 'Passio Genesii mimi' (BHL 3320)," *MLatJB* 12 (1977) 22–43, at 38–43; translations throughout are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[7] For a list of actor-martyrs see W. Weismann, "Gelasinos von Heliopolis, ein Schauspieler-Märtyrer," *AnalBoll* 93 (1975) 39–66, at 41 n.1.

[8] For this date see Weismann, *MLatJB* 12 (1977) 24–25.

[9] On Gelasinus see Weismann, *AnalBoll* 93 (1975) 39–66, and M. Resta, "Dal mimo anticristiano al martirio: il caso di san Gelasino di Eliopoli," *VetChr* 58 (2021) 167–176.

[10] As Weismann notes, the popularity and influence of Malalas' chronicle in the west is evident in its partial translation into Latin in the eighth century (*MLatJB* 12 [1977] 24–25). For the critical editions of the Passions of Gelasinus and Porphyry, see respectively Weismann, *AnalBoll* 93 (1975) 43–44 and Ch. Van der Vorst, "Une passion inédite de S. Porphyre le mime," *AnalBoll* 29 (1910) 258–275, at 270–275.

for Genesius, there are two martyr-saints with this name and the same feast day (25 August), one of Arles and the other of Rome. The former was a secretary, executed for refusing to produce anti-Christian decrees; the sources for his life and martyrdom are earlier, and his cult widespread through Gaul, Italy, and Spain.[11] It seems likely, therefore, that the Passion of St. Genesius is the result of doubling, with material introduced from the Greek east, such as is found in the martyrdom of Gelasinus.[12]

The Passion of St. Genesius, therefore, is of limited historical value for the reign of Diocletian. Of greater interest is its striking perspective on the interplay of theatrical performance and the ritual of baptism. The account introduces Genesius as a "mime actor" (*mimus*) "ignorant of the Lord" (*ignorans dominum*), "always ridiculing Christians" (*irridebat semper christianos*, 1). His motivation in staging a play mocking the Christians was "to please the emperor through the skill of his art" (*imperatori per artis suae peritiam placere*, 1). Its production involved him in research, writing, and memorization: he carefully studied "the secret and revered law of God" (*secretam et venerabilem Dei legem*) and, "struck by the greatest curiosity, he examined each part" (*curiosissime attonitus singula perquirit*, 1). The narrator adds: "he wrote them in his book. When he had retained them all in his mind, he proceeded to the theater" (*in libello sibi conscriberet. Quae cum omnia animo retineret, pergit ad theatrum*, 1–2), where he persuaded his supporting actors (*suis minoribus*, 2) to join the play.

The play itself commences with Genesius "pretending he was sick" (*se aegrotum simulans*) and requesting "the step of baptism" (*gradum baptismatis postularet*, 2). He declares, "I feel heavy, I wish

[11] For Genesius of Arles there is a Passion attributed to Paulinus of Nola (*BHL* 3304) and an anonymous sermon on his life (*BHL* 3306). He is also named by Prudentius (*Liber Peristephanon* 4.35). For historical analysis see esp. S. Cavallin, "Saint Genès le notaire," *Eranos* 43 (1945) 150–175.

[12] For this argument, see esp. Van der Vorst, *AnalBoll* 29 (1910) 266–267.

to be made light" (*gravem me sentio, levem me fieri volo*, 3). Much to the amusement of the audience, his family misunderstands and asserts that they are not carpenters so as to trim him with a plane (3). After he responds, "I desire to die as a Christian" (*christianus desidero mori*, 3), an exorcist and a priest are brought on stage. By the time they address him he was already undergoing a change. Thus, when he asserts, "I am eager to receive the grace of Christ" (*accipere cupio gratiam Christi*), the narrator clarifies that he was "now not pretending and feigning, but answering from a pure heart" (*iam non simulatus et fictus, sed ex corde puro respondens*, 4). The audience, however, remained delighted, and the emperor enthusiastically sends gifts to the actors before the play had even concluded (4).

Next the rite itself is performed. They carry out "all the secrets of the sacraments" (*omnia sacramentorum secreta*), and, as Genesius later reports, when the water touches his body he declares his faith in the forgiveness of sins and angels appear to him announcing his purification (6).[13] Afterward Genesius is dressed in white and partakes in the sacred bread and wine (5). This was supposed to be followed by a mock martyrdom with men sent "as though from the emperor" (*quasi ab imperatore*) to arrest him. By this time, however, Genesius' transformation was complete and the subsequent performance is no longer fictive. Though initially led "to a counterfeit passion" (*ad fucatam passionem adductus*), he finally "set forth a true confession" (*veram ponit confessionem*, 5). Escorted to a prominent place on stage, Genesius delivers a speech revealing the truth of what had happened, how his initial intentions had given way to his genuine conversion (6–7). He concludes: "while I was eager to please an earthly king, I pleased a heavenly king. Although I desired to produce laughter for humans, I produced joy for angels" (*Dum studeo placere regi terrestri, caelesti regi complacui. Cum hominibus risum facere cupio, angelis gaudium feci*, 7; cf. 1 Cor 4:9; Tertullian *Spect.*

[13] An angel similarly appears to Porphyry in his Passion (4).

30.1–5). Finally, he professes that Christ is the only true God and urges Diocletian himself to have faith. At these words the emperor flies into a rage and flogs and interrogates the entire troupe, who openly blaspheme Christ (8). Diocletian sentences Genesius, the lone confessor, to public execution on that very theater's stage (11–12).

Points of convergence with Schechner's efficacy-entertainment dyad emerge clearly from this summary. Both ends of the spectrum remain active throughout the narrative, and it is impossible to draw a precise boundary between entertainment and efficacy. Entertainment was the explicit goal of Genesius, who wished to bring pleasure and amusement to the theater audience, in particular to Diocletian. As the performance proceeds, its pursuit of entertainment is not rejected but shifts from the earthly to heavenly realm. The show goes on but with a new audience and with a transformative outcome. Several contrasting pairs in the Passion of St. Genesius correspond to the efficacy-entertainment dyad:

	Entertainment	Efficacy
4	pretending and feigning *simulatus et fictus*	answering from a pure heart *ex corde puro respondens*
5	counterfeit passion *fucatam passionem*	true confession *veram confessionem*
7	to please an earthly king *placere regi terrestri*	I pleased a heavenly king *caelesti regi complacui*
7	to produce laughter for humans *hominibus risum facere*	I produced joy for angels *angelis gaudium feci*

In short, in the case of Genesius, theatrical acting designed to bring amusement to a human audience gives way to a genuine divine production. As I will argue, the genre of mime acting was singularly suited to an on-stage conversion as it combined written scripts with spontaneous, improvised scenes (§2); the theater was an unorthodox setting for God's converting grace, forgiveness, and purification, as many Christian leaders had emphatically asserted that "pagan entertainments" were antithetical to true piety (§3); and the unexpected baptismal effi-

cacy in a pagan setting is consistent with theological claims that sited the power of the ritual in the use of water and the proper liturgical words rather than the condition of the agent who performed it (§4).

2. *Religion on stage in ancient mime*

Despite the dubious historicity of Genesius, various details of the play plausibly align with what is otherwise known about ancient mime.[14] One of the oldest and most widespread dramatic forms in the ancient world, mime grew prominent in Rome and remained popular throughout the Empire.[15] As late as the sixth century, it still had a vigorous apologist in Choricius of Gaza (*Defense of the Mimes*). Among its distinctive features were the inclusion of female actors, the absence of masks, plots of seduction and adultery, and stock characters like the mimetic fool. Mime tended toward realism and featured dramatic scenarios familiar from common experience, suitably distorted for comic effect.[16] The treatment of Christian ritual in Genesius' play accords well with this. By the fourth

[14] In his classic treatment of ancient mime Hermann Reich undertook a detailed reconstruction of Genesius' play, complete with four separate scenes and a cast of seven characters: *Der Mimus: Ein litterar-entwickelungsgeschichtlicher Versuch* I (Berlin 1903) 87–88. His approach has been sharply criticized; see e.g. Van der Vorst, *AnalBoll* 29 (1910) 267–269, and C. Panayotakis, "Baptism and Crucifixion on the Mimic Stage," *Mnemosyne* 50 (1997) 302–319, esp. 314–317.

[15] By the second century BCE it was featured at Rome in the festival Floralia; and in the mid first century BCE it could even take the place of the traditional Atellan farce after the production of tragedy (Cic. *Fam*. 9.16.7). Studies on ancient mime include: Reich, *Der Mimus*; W. Beare, *The Roman Stage: A Short History of Latin Drama in the Time of the Republic* (London 1964) 149–158; H. Wiemken, *Der griechische Mimus: Dokumente zur Geschichte des antiken Volkstheaters* (Bremen 1972); R. Rieks, "Mimus und Atellanae," in E. Lefèvre (ed.), *Das römische Drama* (Darmstadt 1978) 348–377, esp. 361–368; C. Panayotakis, "Comedy, Atellane Farce and Mime," in S. Harrison (ed.), *A Companion to Latin Literature* (Oxford 2005) 130–147, esp. 139–146.

[16] Reich, *Der Mimus* 19–38; Wiemken, *Der griechische Mimus* 169–172.

century Christian practices will have been common knowledge to a Roman audience, including Diocletian.

Mime troupes were led by an *archimimus* (or *archimima*) responsible for composition and production (Suet. *Vesp.* 19, Plut. *Sulla* 36). He (or she) was also the lead actor, while others played supporting roles (*partis mimum tractare secundas*, Hor. *Epist.* 1.18.14).[17] Theater troupes were often patronized by statesmen and rulers, and it would not have been unexceptional to design a production with a view to currying favor with an emperor.[18] Genesius was an *archimimus*: the text calls his troupe supporting actors (*suis minoribus*, 2), whereas he himself devised the plot.

Mime was distinct from other theatrical genres in its use of improvisation. The few celebrated literary playwrights (e.g. Laberius and Publilius) appear to be the exception.[19] Partially scripted plays were more common. The relationship between script and improvisation is evident in a Greek papyrus from Oxyrhynchus (*P.Oxy.* III 413). On the recto the so-called Chariton mime seems to be a producer's copy, and it is marked with character entrances and exists. The text of a second play on the verso, the "Adulteress," consists of speeches to be delivered by the *archimima*, interspersed with scenes to be improvised by other actors.[20] This agrees with Genesius' production: sections of the play closely follow relevant Christian liturgical texts, which he would have written down and memorized, while the open-ended, improvised sections allowed for an alternative ending—an ending that culminated in the protagonist's extemporaneous confession before the emperor.

[17] See Wiemken, *Der griechische Mimus* 173–174.

[18] The Roman general Sulla, for instance, is said to have had an *archimimus* by the name of Sinex as a close associate (Plut. *Sull.* 36.1). See further Beare, *The Roman Stage* 152–153.

[19] See Rieks, in *Das römische Drama* 366–368; Panayotakis, in *A Companion* 142–145.

[20] This follows the analysis of Wiemken, *Der griechische Mimus* 48–109.

3. *Christian baptism and the renunciation of theater*

The Passion of St. Genesius also reflects the animosity that some Christians felt toward Greco-Roman spectacles. That Christians were occasionally mocked in theatrical plays, as in Genesius' production, exacerbated this hostility. In extreme cases actual Christians were dressed up as mythological characters (*1 Clem.* 6.2) or priests (*Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 18.4–5) and their executions were publicly staged as dramatic performances (Tertullian *Spect.* 27).[21] Sometimes they were characters derisively portrayed in comic plays. Gregory Nazianzus laments that by their infighting Christians "have become a new theater" (γενόναμεν θέατρον καινόν) in every place, from the agora to the stage, and that no spectacle offers so much pleasure "as a Christian in comic ridicule" (ὡς Χριστιανὸς κωμῳδούμενος, *Or.* 2.84). Baptism was a popular comic plot device, and some theaters even had pools of water installed in the orchestra for this purpose: John Chrysostom warns Christians against the dangers of public shows and urges them to flee "the font in the theater" (τὴν ἐν τῷ θεάτρῳ κολυμβήθραν, *Hom.Matt.* 7.6).[22]

Many church leaders expressed vehement disapproval of theatrical spectacles and exhorted converts to cease attending games and shows (Cyril *Mystagogiae* 1.6; Chrysostom *Contra ludos*

[21] Cf. K. M. Coleman, "Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments," *JRS* 80 (1990) 44–73. Christianity was not the only religion subjected to mockery on stage. Tertullian observes that Roman mimes regularly ridiculed their own deities (*Apol.* 15.1–3). Moreover, the comic treatment of cultic festivals and traditional gods is well attested as early as Aristophanes (*Ach.* 241–279, *Nub.* 408–411, *Ran.* 479–493, *Av.* 1604–1605).

[22] See Panayotakis, *Mnemosyne* 50 (1997) 307–308. Beginning in the late third century numerous theaters were retrofitted with a *kolymbethra* in the orchestra for water spectacles, e.g. at Ostia, Hierapolis, Ephesus, Ptolemais, Tralles, Syracuse, Athens, and Corinth: F. Sear, *Roman Theatres: An Architectural Study* (Oxford 2006) 44, 191, 389, 392.

et theatra; Ambrose *Exp. Ps. 118* 5.26).[23] Just as Plato had objected to mimetic poetry for its deleterious morality (*Resp.* 386A–392D), for being thrice-removed from truth (599D), and for provoking undue passions (602C–607A), many ecclesial authorities denounced public performances for their immoral content (Tertullian *Spect.* 10.4–9, Cyprian *Don.* 8, Lactantius *Inst.* 6.20). Their association with pagan cult-festivals supplied further grounds for objection (Tertullian 10.1–3, Tatian *Or. Graec.* 24, Firmicus Maternus *Err.prof.rel.* 12.9, Augustine *De civ. D.* 1.32, 2.8, 4.26).[24] Augustine dwells on his personal experience, recalling the allures of the theater and its appeal to his carnal appetites and youthful passions (*Conf.* 3.2.2–3; cf. Chrysostom *Hom.Act.* 10.3–4). While he does not often distinguish between the genres of drama (as in *Solil.* 2.18), mime was doubtless among those "composed with obscene language" (*verborum obscenitate compositae*, *De Civ. D.* 2.8), in contrast to the more elevated literary works of tragedians and comedians.

Despite ecclesiastical censures, these shows were still popular well after the political ascendency of Christianity in the fourth century. In fact, Christianity appears to have had little im-

[23] Cf. W. Weismann, *Kirche und Schauspiele: Die Schauspiele im Urteil der lateinischen Kirchenväter unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Augustin* (Würzburg 1972); T. D. Barnes, "Christians and the Theater," in W. J. Slater (ed.), *Roman Theater and Society: E. Togo Salmon Papers* I (Ann Arbor 1996) 161–180; R. Webb, *Demons and Dancers: Performance in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge [Mass.] 2008) 197–216; C. J. P. Friesen, *Acting Gods, Playing Heroes, and the Interaction between Judaism, Christianity, and Greek Drama in the Early Common Era* (London 2024) 3–8.

[24] In his criticism of the theater Plato does not explicitly address mime, but he disapproves sharply of dramatic mimesis, including the imitation of the sounds of horses, bulls, or rivers (*Resp.* 396B, *Leg.* 669B–670B). His strongest censure is aimed at tragedy, while he remains more open to comedy (*Resp.* 396D–E; *Laws* 816D–E). See S. Halliwell, "Plato's Repudiation of the Tragic," in M. S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond* (Oxford 1996) 332–349; Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton 2002) 82–84.

mediate effect on the public appetite for entertainments. Laws in the *Theodosian Code* presume their continuation and make provision for them (15.5.1; 15.7.3, 4; 15.7.13).[25] The Emperor's own interest in, and support for, public performances is further indicated on the base of the Obelisk of Theodosius, erected in the Hippodrome at Constantinople ca. 390. It features reliefs of him in his imperial box, above dancers and musicians.[26] In at least some cases Christians themselves were active participants;[27] and, according to Palladius of Galatia's *Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom* (15–16), certain prominent bishops (Victor at Ephesus and Porphyrius at Antioch) not only supported public entertainments but even fraternized with stage actors and other performers.[28] Only in the sixth century were theaters finally closed and spectacles discontinued by an imperial decree of Justinian (Procop. *Anec.* 26.8–9).[29]

The frustration felt by Christian leaders over the enduring

[25] Christian concerns are still addressed, e.g. by forbidding performances on the Lord's Day (*Cod. Theod.* 15.5.5). Cf. R. Webb, "Female Entertainers in Late Antiquity," in P. Easterling et al. (eds.), *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession* (Cambridge 2002) 282–303; R. Lim, "Converting the Un-Christianizable: The Baptism of Stage Performers in Late Antiquity," in K. Mills et al. (eds.), *Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing* (Rochester 2003) 84–126, esp. 87–91.

[26] Cf. K. M. D. Dunbabin, *Theater and Spectacle in the Art of the Roman Empire* (Ithaca 2016) 262–267.

[27] This is evident, for instance, from paintings, inscriptions, and chapels installed in theater buildings at Aphrodisias and Side: K. Bowes, "Christians in the Amphitheater? The 'Christianization' of Spectacle Buildings and Martyrial Memory," *MÉFRM* 126 (2014) 93–114, esp. 107–108.

[28] B. Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives: John Chrysostom's Attack on Spiritual Marriage* (Berkeley 2001) 17–19.

[29] In Athens the use of the Theater of Dionysus was discontinued in the sixth century and a basilica constructed on the eastern *parodos* with a *phiale* built into the floor of the orchestra. For its site plan see J. Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens* (New York 1971) 549, pl. 686. There was a similar construction at Priene: Bowes, *MÉFRM* 126 (2014) 103–104.

appeal of the theater is evident in a sermon preached by John Chrysostom at Constantinople in 399. In it he threatens those who attend shows with banishment from the sacred precinct (*Contra ludos*, *PG* 56.268).[30] Tactics were devised to enforce these censures. For instance, catechetical instruction made admission to baptism contingent upon the repudiation of all public spectacles. In the ritual exorcism that led into the ceremony the initiate would declare: "I renounce you, Satan, and your pomp" (ἀποτάσσομαί σοι, Σατανᾶ, καὶ τῇ πομπῇ σου, as quoted by Chrysostom, *Catech.illum.* 2.5; also *Bapt.Inst.* 11.25; cf. Hippolytus *Trad.ap*. 21.9, *Const.ap*. 7.41). While the terms πομπή and *pompa* apply broadly to public processions, religious and military, several ecclesiastical authorities use them to refer specifically to theatrical and spectacle entertainments. Cyril of Jerusalem instructs initiates to denounce the "pomp of the Devil" (πομπὴ δὲ διαβόλου) which includes "theatrical madnesses, chariot races, animals hunting, and all such vanity" (θεατρομανίαι, καὶ ἱπποδρομίαι, καὶ κυνηγεσία, καὶ πᾶσα τοιαύτη ματαιότης, *Mystagogiae* 1.6). Similarly, John Chrysostom asserts that "the Satanic pomp is theaters and horse races, and every sin and observance of days, and invocations and omens (πομπὴ δὲ σατανική ἐστι θέατρα καὶ ἱπποδρομίαι, καὶ πᾶσα ἁμαρτία καὶ παρατήρησις ἡμερῶν, καὶ κληδόνες καὶ σύμβολα, *Catech.illum.* 2.5; also *Bapt.Inst.* 11.25). And Tertullian insists that when at baptism "we renounce the Devil, his pomp, and his angels" (*renuntiasse nos diabolo et pompae et angelis eius*) this entails especially spectacles (*spectacula*) owing to their derivation from idolatry (*Spect.* 4; also *Cor.* 3).

As for stage performers, their exclusion from baptism was encoded in early church orders. The third-century *Apostolic Tradition* attributed to Hippolytus includes acting among the professions preventing one from entering the catechumenate: "If a man be an actor (θεατρικός) or one who makes shows

[30] For Chrysostom on the theater see Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows*.

(ἐπίδειξις) in the theater (θέατρον), either let him desist or let him be rejected"[31] (*Trad.ap.* 16.12; also *Const.ap.* 8.32.7–13, *Can. Hipp.* 11, *Testamentum Domini* 2.2). The Council of Arles in 314 decreed that those active in the theater should be "excluded from communion" (*a communione separari*, can. 5; cf. Augustine *De fide et operibus* 18.33).[32]

The prohibition against actors' receiving baptism was further established by imperial legislation. Regulations in the *Theodosian Code* forbid "men and women of the stage" (*scaenici et scaenicae*) from the sacraments (*sacramenta*, 15.7.1). A "woman of the stage" (*scaenae mulier*) could obtain her release from the profession "in the name of religion" (*religionis nomine*), but she was subsequently to be prevented from returning to it (15.7.8). Once performers had obtained freedom from their profession "by reverence for the mysteries" (*secretorum reverentia*) of the Christian faith, they may not serve even as stagehands (15.7.9).[33] More than a century later the ritual status of actors remained a concern, and a decree issued under Justinian reiterates their impurity (*Nov.* 123.44). The marriage of this emperor to a former mime, Theodora, proved scandalous to at least some of his contemporaries (Procop. *Anec.* 9.1–54).[34]

[31] This translation of the Coptic with inclusion of Greek loanwords is from G. Dix, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St Hippolytus of Rome*[2] (London 1992). For a helpful synopsis of several church orders see P. F. Bradshaw, M. E. Johnson, and L. E. Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary* (Minneapolis 2002) 88–89.

[32] L. Gaudemet notes that while the language here is imprecise, "communion" suggests any and all participation in the community, not merely in the sacrament: *Conciles gaulois du IV*[e] *siècle* (Paris 1977) 48 n.2.

[33] Apparently some worried that too many departures would deplete the profession. At Ravenna a decree was issued in 414 that compelled actors to return to the stage to ensure the continuation of festival amusements (15.7.13). Elsewhere priests were cautioned against premature deathbed baptisms lest an actor recover and be ineligible to perform (15.7.1).

[34] See Lim, in *Conversion in Late Antiquity* 104–109; A. Foka, "Gender Subversion and the Early Christian East: Reconstructing the Byzantine Comic

In the face of such ecclesiastical strictures and imperial laws, the circumstances in which an actor might experience conversion and be subsequently admitted to baptism are well illustrated in the legends concerning Pelagia.[35] An early version of her story is mentioned in a sermon by John Chrysostom, who describes an unnamed woman as "that harlot" (ἐκείνη ἡ πόρνη) famous for "being the leader of the stage" (τὰ πρωτεῖα ἐπὶ τῆς σκηνῆς ἔχουσα, *Hom.Matt.* 67.3). She converted "suddenly" (ἀθρόον), rejected her career on stage, and devoted herself instead to rigorous self-restraint among the Christian *parthenoi*. Soldiers were sent to retrieve and restore her to her former life but she resists. In the more expansive narrative of the *Life of Pelagia* she is "the leader of the mime actresses of Antioch" (ἡ πρώτη τῶν μιμάδων Ἀντιοχείας / *prima mimarum Antiochiae*, 4).[36] Although she acknowledges her sins to the bishop Nonnus and asks that he baptize her and make her a Christian (20–23), this can only happen after she secures a sponsor who authenticates her constancy, that her departure from the theater is indeed genuine and lasting (24). As in Chrysostom's version, Pelagia faces grave threats, now from Satan himself who appears in an effort to restore her to acting (33–35). After escaping his allures she flees and spends her remaining days as an anchorite ("Pelagius") on the Mount of Olives (42–51).

The scenario described in the Passion of St. Genesius

Mime," in *Laughter, Humor, and the (Un)Making of Gender: Historical and Cultural Perspectives* (New York 2015) 65–84, esp. 70–72.

[35] For discussion of Pelagia see Reich, *Der Mimus* 101–107; L. L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia 1997) 77–84; Lim, in *Conversion in Late Antiquity* 102–104; Foka, in *Laughter* 70–72; Al. Cameron, "The Poet, the Bishop, and the Harlot," in *Wandering Poets and Other Essays on Late Greek Literature and Philosophy* (Oxford 2016) 81–90.

[36] The textual transmission of the *Life of Pelagia* is complex. For a compilation of critical editions in its various languages accompanied by a composite French translation see P. Petitmengin (ed.), *Pélagie la Pénitente: Métamorphoses d'une légende* I (Paris 1981).

strikingly inverts the established procedures of the church. Catechetical instruction emphasized that one must denounce the *pompa* of the Devil *prior* to baptism; and that an actor must prove his permanent rejection of acting *before* baptism is granted. By contrast, Genesius undergoes the life-giving, transformative ritual *in the course of* a public theatrical performance. To use Schechner's terminology, the baptism of Genesius started as entertainment and culminated in efficacy.

4. *The power of baptism as mimetic drama*

The surprising efficacy of the baptism of Genesius foregrounds several theological issues that were disputed at the time among Christians.[37] There was no consensus on the precise aims and results of baptism. As an initiatory rite, it was thought to effect a change in one's religious identity and status. Initially it had developed in conjunction with the ritual washings of Judaism.[38] In some sectarian communities like the Essenes described by Josephus, acquiring membership involved washings for purification: after a one-year probationary period the neophyte "participates in purer waters for ceremonial cleansing" (καθαρωτέρων τῶν πρὸς ἁγνείαν ὑδάτων μεταλαμβάνει, *BJ* 2.138). Two more years were then necessary for full admission (2.137–142).[39] The baptism of John appears to have

[37] For overviews of the Christian practice in its ancient context see T. M. Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* (New York 1997); E. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids 2009).

[38] Outlined in the Mosaic Law (e.g. Lev 15:1–30, Num 19:14–22), by the first century a range of practices is attested in texts and archaeological remains. For literary sources see J. D. Lawrence, *Washing in Water: Trajectories of Ritual Bathing in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature* (Leiden 2006) 23–154; and for the archaeology of ritual baths (*mikva'ot*) see R. Reich, "Design and Maintenance of First-Century Ritual Immersion Baths," *Jerusalem Perspective* 56 (1999) 14–19; J. Magness, *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids 2002) 134–162.

[39] At Qumran the *Community Rule* also specifies that participation in the

had similar aims: "for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4) and the "purification of the body" (Jos. *AJ* 18.116–119). Jesus himself is said to have received it at the start of his ministry of preaching and healing (Mark 1:9, Matt 3:16, Luke 3:21).[40]

The Apostle Paul also emphasizes that baptism enacts a new identity for the recipient, and his formulation of this transformation as death and rebirth became particularly influential.[41] For Paul baptism was an entrance "into [Christ's] death" (εἰς τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ) followed by burial and resurrection with him, so as to participate "in newness of life" (ἐν καινότητι ζωῆς, Rom 6:3–4). That baptism effected rebirth and new life is also expressed in the Gospel of John, where Jesus taught that to enter the kingdom of God one must be born "again" or "from above" (ἄνωθεν), "from water and spirit" (ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, 3:5–8). Accordingly, later theologians designated baptism a "bath of rebirth" (λουτρὸν παλιγγενεσίας, Greg. Naz. *Or.* 40.4; Chrysostom, *Catech.illum.*1.2, 1.3; also λουτρὸν ἀναγεννήσεως, Greg. Nys. *Or.catechetica* 35.13; cf. Justin *1 Apol.* 61.3).

This view of baptism exhibits striking resonances with initiation rites in the Greco-Roman world that also occasionally involved ritual cleansing with water.[42] Tertullian already recog-

covenant community required cleansing from wickedness and defilement (1QS 3.8–10, 5.12–14; cf. CD 10.1–3). On the processes of initiation among the Essene and Qumran communities see Magness, *Archaeology of Qumran* 137–142; Lawrence, *Washing in Water* 71–77, 135–141; M. E. Stone, *Secret Groups in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford 2018) 78–87.

[40] For historical analysis see J. E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism: Studying the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids 1997) 261–277.

[41] Caroline Johnson Hodge emphasizes that for Paul this change of identity has a distinctly ethnic quality, because baptism serves to establish a kinship relationship of Gentiles with the descendants of Abraham: *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford 2007) 16–17, 76–78. See also Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion* 5–6, 146–148.

[42] For comparative analyses of Christian baptism and mystery initiations see F. Graf, "Baptism and Graeco-Roman Mystery Cults," in D. Hellholm

nized similarities with the mysteries of Isis and Mithras, whose rites "pagans" (*nationes*) performed with "the same efficacy" (*eadem efficacia*, *Bapt.* 5.1; see also Justin *1 Apol.* 62.1).[43] According to a fictional account by Apuleius, in preparation for initiation into the mysteries of Isis Lucius and other devotees were led to the baths, where the priest "sprinkling him all around washed [him] most purely" (*purissime circumrorans abluit*, *Meta.* 11.23). This was followed by a period of fasting for purification, after which Lucius was wrapped in pure linen and received revelatory instructions. Forbidden from disclosing their con-

et al. (eds.), *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity* I (Berlin 2011) 101–118; R. E. DeMaris, "Water Rites, Emotions, and Epiphanic Encounters in the Literary and Material Record of the Roman East," in S. Al-Suadi et al. (eds.), *Ritual, Emotion, and Materiality in the Early Christian World* (London 2022) 82–102. With special attention to Paul, see M. Smith, "Pauline Worship as Seen by Pagans," *HThR* 73 (1980) 241–249, esp. 242–244; W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven 1983) 150–157. A classic treatment of mystery cults in relation to ancient Christianity is A. D. Nock, "Hellenistic Mysteries and Christian Sacraments," *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* I (Oxford 1972) 791–820 (org. 1952). For helpful critiques and more recent approaches see now B. Bøgh, "Beyond Nock: From Adhesion to Conversion in the Mystery Cults," *HR* 54 (2015) 260–287; G. van den Heever, "Conversion in Mystery Religions? Theory Meets Mysteries and Conversion," in V. Nicolet et al. (eds.), *The Complexity of Conversion: Intersectional Perspectives on Religious Change in Antiquity and Beyond* (Sheffield 2021) 59–98.

[43] Tertullian deemed the resemblances so close that he proposed that the Devil himself had set them up as an imitation of, and rival to, true religion (*Bapt.* 5.3–4). Although Tertullian emphasizes Isis and Mithras, ritual washings in water were also associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries, the oldest and most widely known Greek initiatory cult. The second day of the festival was referred to as "initiates, to the sea" (ἅλαδε μύσται). An anecdote reported by Plutarch, however, suggests that the bathing in the sea may have concerned the sacrificial piglets more than the initiates themselves (*Phoc.* 26.6): see N. D. Robertson, "The Two Processions to Eleusis and the Program of the Mysteries," *AJP* 119 (1998) 547–575, esp. 562–566. For a more complete list of ritual washings in Greek and Roman cults see Graf, in *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism* 105–110.

tent, nevertheless he reports: "I approached the boundary of death and, having stepped over the threshold of Proserpina, I travelled through all the elements and returned" (*accessi confinium mortis et, calcato Proserpinae limine, per omnia vectus elementa remeavi*, 11.23).

Similarities between the narrative of Apuleius and Paul's words in Romans 6 are clear. Paul's formulation implies, moreover, that baptism was a mimetic performance in which the initiate (re-)enacts the death and resurrection of Christ. The theatrical quality of this action is made explicit by Gregory of Nyssa, who asserts that for the ritual to become "effective" (ἐνεργός) "it is necessary to follow [the leader of our salvation] through imitation" (ἐπάναγκες διὰ μιμήσεως ἕπεσθαι, *Or. Catechetica* 35.2). This is accomplished, he adds, through the three-fold ritual pouring of water, which "represents mimetically the third-day grace of the resurrection" (τὴν τριήμερον τῆς ἀναστάσεως χάριν ἀπεμιμήσατο, 6). He proceeds with overtly theatrical language: "we act out the saving burial and a resurrection that occurred in the space of three days" (τὴν σωτήριον ταφὴν καὶ ἀνάστασιν τὴν ἐν τριημέρῳ γενομένην τῷ χρόνῳ ὑποκρινόμεθα, 10; cf. Basil *De spiritu santo* 15.34–36).

The Passion of St. Genesius presents the ritual of baptism even more explicitly as a theatrical performance. Its plot suggests what factors establish the efficacy of baptism. First, it emphasizes adherence to the precise words of the liturgy. As noted above, Genesius consulted Christian texts, and the relevant words were memorized for performance. His assent came in response to the priest-actor's formulaic question: "when asked whether I believe in the remission of my sins, I affirmed it" (*ubi me interrogatus crederem remissionem peccatorum meorum respondi*, 6).[44]

[44] The Passion of St. Porphyry also emphasizes the accuracy of the ritual performed on stage, noting that they did so "according to the pattern of the holy church, just as they had by then learned from faithful Christians" (κατὰ τὸν τύπον τῆς ἁγίας ἐκκλησίας καθὼς ἤδη παρὰ πιστῶν χριστιανῶν μεμαθηκότες, 2). It underscores repeatedly and more explicitly than does the

Other writers corroborate the all-important need to follow the precise words of the baptismal liturgy. Tertullian, e.g., asserts that the power of Christian baptism depends upon its "great simplicity" (*tanta simplicitate*); by contrast with its pagan counterparts, it happened "without pomp" (*sine pompa*) and "in few words" (*inter pauca verba*, *Bapt.* 2.1). Besides renouncing the Devil's pomp, these words would have included credal affirmations and the invocation of the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (e.g. Hippolytus *Trad.ap.* 21.9–26, *Const.ap.* 7.3.41; Justin *1 Apol.* 65; Tertullian *Cor.* 3; Cyprian *Mag.* 75, *Jan.* 2; Cyril *Cat.* 3.3; Theodore of Mopsuestia *Baptismal Homilies* 2.1, 5; 3.8–27).[45]

Joined to the formulaic words water was thought to have life-giving power. This is alluded to by Genesius' testimony before the emperor: "the water touched me while naked" (*me aqua nudum tetigit*), and immediately he saw a hand descend from heaven and a vision of divine angels standing by, declaring his forgiveness (6). A similar belief in the power of baptismal water was held by other Christians. Tertullian observed that water at the primordial creation, when the Spirit hovered over it, was already life-giving (*Bapt.* 3.2–6, citing Gen 1:2). In like manner, in baptism the waters "become medicinal through the intervention of an angel" (*medicatis quodammodo aquis per angeli interventum*) and cleanse both flesh and spirit (4.5). As an analogy, Tertullian points to the pool of Bethsaida (Bethesda in the NT), which according to a tradition preserved by John 5:4 occasionally acquired healing powers by the stirring of an angel. The life-giving efficacy of the water was tied to formulaic pronouncements. Cyril compares this to the contrary dynamic in traditional pagan sacrifices: although their offerings are "simple by nature" (τῇ φύσει ὄντα λιτά), they become defiled "by the in-

Passion of St. Genesius that the Trinitarian formula was evoked (2–3).

[45] English translations of ancient liturgical sources are conveniently compiled in E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*[3] (London 2003).

vocation of idols" (τῇ ἐπικλήσει τῶν εἰδώλων). Conversely, "the simple water" (τὸ λιτὸν ὕδωρ) of baptism by "the invocation of the Holy Spirit, Christ, and the Father" (Πνεύματος ἁγίου καὶ Χριστοῦ καὶ Πατρὸς τὴν ἐπίκλησιν) acquires the "power to sanctify" (δύναμιν ἁγιότητος, *Cat.* 3.3; cf. *Const.ap.* 7.3.43).[46]

The inherently effectual power of baptism could produce new life in a recipient even without his or her conscious cooperation. The practice of "those who are baptized for the dead" (οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν, 1 Cor 15:29) has been understood by some as "substitutionary magic," rooted in the expectation "that ceremonies performed on a substitute for an intended object will affect the object."[47] In later times provision was made for parents or family members to speak on behalf of children too young to answer the baptismal questions (Hippolytus *Trad.ap.* 21.4). Augustine tells us of a friend who received baptism while sick and unconscious; when he later awoke it became clear that the ritual had changed him (*Conf.* 4.4.8). While each of these examples differs from the case of Genesius, they all make the same point: baptism could effect a genuine transformation even when the recipient underwent the ritual without the expectation or the intention to become a Christian.[48]

[46] So also did the priest confer the power of divine grace and forgiveness to the oil of anointing by uttering the name of Christ (*Const.ap.* 7.3.42). In a different context Ignatius speaks of the waters of baptism becoming pure through Christ's passion (*Ad Eph.* 18.2).

[47] Smith, *HThR* 73 (1980) 243.

[48] The miraculous qualities of baptismal waters are vividly illustrated in a scene from the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. While facing beasts in the arena, the heroine discovers a pit of water which happens to be filled with flesh-eating seals. Undaunted, she casts herself in declaring, "in the name of Jesus Christ I baptize myself on the last day" (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ὑστέρᾳ ἡμέρᾳ βαπτίζομαι); after this declaration "the seals saw a flash of lightning fire and floated up dead" (αἱ δὲ φῶκαι πυρὸς ἀστραπῆς φέγγος ἰδοῦσαι νεκραὶ ἐπέπλευσαν, 34). As Ramsay MacMullen observes, stories of spiritual power arising from baptism (like Thecla's and Genesius') seem to have been aimed at attracting and retaining Christian converts (*VigChr* 37 [1983] 174–192).

That baptismal ritual could function as 'magic'—that is, could prove effective apart from the cooperation of the initiate—was an implication some Christian leaders were careful to counter.[49] The extensive preparatory instruction, prayer, and fasting of the catechumenate undermined the perception that the baptismal ritual in and of itself effected rebirth.[50] Cyril exhorts catechumens to prepare their minds: God "awaits the genuine intention of each person … for even if you have your body here but not your mind, it profits nothing" (περιμένει δὲ ἑκάστου τὴν γνησίαν προαίρεσιν … κἂν γὰρ τὸ σῶμα ὧδε ἔχῃς, τὴν δὲ διάνοιαν μὴ ἔχῃς, οὐδὲν ὠφελῇ, *Procatechesis* 1). As a cautionary example, he points to Simon Magus: "he baptized the body in water, but did not enlighten the heart in the Spirit; his body went down and came up, but his soul was neither buried with Christ nor raised with him" (καὶ τὸ μὲν σῶμα ἔβαψεν ὕδατι, τὴν δὲ καρδίαν οὐκ ἐφώτισε Πνεύματι· καὶ κατέβη μὲν τὸ σῶμα, καὶ ἀνέβη· ἡ δὲ ψυχὴ οὐ συνετάφη Χριστῷ, οὐδὲ συνηγέρθη, 2; cf. Acts 8:9–24).

[49] On the power of words in Christian rituals against the background of ancient magical practices see E. G. Weltin, "The Concept of *Ex-Opere-Operato*: Efficacy in the Fathers as an Evidence of Magic in Early Christianity," *GRBS* 3 (1960) 74–100, esp. 80–88. Christians were, of course, careful to distinguish their own acts of power from 'magic', as the latter was often associated with illicit religious practices. Jesus himself was criticized as a "wizard" (γόης, Origen *C. Cels.* 1.71) and for performing his deeds "by magical art" (μαγικῇ τέχνῃ, Justin *1 Apol.* 30.1). Cf. H. Remus, "'Magic or Miracle'? Some Second-Century Instances," *Second Century* 2 (1982) 127–156; K. B. Stratton, "The Rhetoric of 'Magic' in Early Christian Discourse: Gender, Power and the Construction of 'Heresy'," in T. Penner et al. (eds.), *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses* (Leiden 2007) 89–114.

[50] Initially baptism could take place immediately upon professing faith (e.g. Acts 2:41; 8:12, 36–38; 9:18; 10:47–48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 22:16). But a delay is attested early (*Didache* 7; Justin *1 Apol.* 61.2; Tertullian *Bapt.* 20), in some sources of up to three years (e.g. Hippolytus *Trad.ap.* 17.1–2) though usually less (40 days according to Cyril *Cat.* 1.5, 3.13; cf. Chrysostom *Catech. illum.* 1.4 and Tertullian *Bapt.* 18).

The narrator of the Passion of St. Genesius appears to have been attentive to this problem. While Genesius' speech to Diocletian gives the impression that the rite became effectual simply through the water and the spoken formula, the narrator indicates that God had been moving upon Genesius before the enactment of the ritual. We are told that Genesius was *already* speaking "from a pure heart"; and the narrator further states that, in his desire to die as a Christian, Genesius was, "I believe, compelled by the Lord" (*credo a domino compulsus*, 3).[51] Thus he hints that the process of Genesius' conversion and spiritual cleansing was already underway before the water was applied. There is therefore a conceptual tension between the mechanical efficacy of baptism and the requirement that an initiate prepare spiritually for it.

Other fiercely contested issues for the validity of baptism concerned the setting—whether it must be a church—and the agent—whether it must be performed by a priest in good standing.[52] In the third century Cyprian of Carthage had insisted that baptism at the hands of a heretical priest was invalid (*Jan.* 1–3).[53] After the Diocletianic persecutions of the fourth century the problem became more acute, with the Donatists declaring

[51] In the case of Gelasinus there is no indication of a religious transformation prior to his coming out of the water. Only immediately afterward, when clothed in white, "he was no longer able to endure acting" (οὐκέτι ἠνέσχετο θεατρίσαι) and publicly declares his Christian identity. By contrast, of Porphyry it is explicitly emphasized that "the Holy Spirit was working in [him] in advance" (ἐν ᾧ δὴ τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον προενήργει), i.e. before the water was applied (2); even so, the full and immediate descent of the Spirit is experienced only after the baptism (3).

[52] There is a hint in Tertullian that it could be performed by a lay person (*Bapt.* 17.2), but this seems exceptional. Hence Thecla's self-baptism is highly unusual (n.48 above).

[53] On the third-century controversy see Ferguson, *Baptism* 380–399; J. P. Burns, "On Rebaptism: Social Organization in the Third Century," *JECS* 1 (1993) 367–403.

invalid those baptisms performed by *traditores* who had handed over books and church property to avoid execution. Although the Council of Arles in 314 had ruled against the Donatists, several cities had an alternative Donatist bishop and their numbers remained strong. Augustine, himself a bishop since 395, devoted an extensive treatise to refuting them. *De baptismo contra Donatistas* answers emphatically in the affirmative the question whether "it is possible for baptism to be given outside the catholic communion" (*posse extra catholicam communionem dari Baptismum*, 1.1.2).[54] For Augustine the efficacy of the ritual was independent of the standing or piety of the minister (3.17.22–3.18.23). Ultimately, its power derived from Christ himself, not from the human agent or even the church.[55] If even Judas the betrayer could confer efficacious baptism (as hinted by John 4:2), so also by extension could an adulterer, a drunkard, or a murderer (*Tract.Ev.Jo.* 5.18).[56]

The Passion of St. Genesius clearly aligns with Augustine in its view of baptism. The ritual was conducted by an actor-priest who, along with his fellow performers, explicitly denied at the end of the narrative any personal sympathy for the Christian faith of Genesius. Augustine in fact imagines a test case that closely resembles the legend of Genesius. He theorizes that it is possible for the agent himself not to have been baptized but

[54] For Augustine's views on baptism see R. De Latte, "Saint Augustin et le baptême: étude liturgico-historique du rituel baptismal des adultes chez saint Augustin," *Questions liturgiques* 56 (1975) 177–223.

[55] Augustine develops this argument further in an interpretation of John 1:33, where John the Baptist insists that whereas he only baptizes with water, Jesus will baptize with the Spirit (*Tract.Ev.Jo.* ad loc.). See A. D. Ployd, "The Power of Baptism: Augustine's Pro-Nicene Response to the Donatists," *JECS* 22 (2014) 519–540.

[56] John Chrysostom makes a similar point in a different context, when he cites John 1:33 to establish the ultimately divine administration of baptism: "It is not a human who baptizes us but God" (οὐκ ἄνθρωπος ἡμᾶς βαπτίζει, ἀλλ' ὁ θεός, *Bapt.Inst.* 11.13; cf. *Hom. 1 Cor.* 8.2).

merely to have "learned out of curiosity in what manner it was to be given" (*curiositate aliqua didicit quemadmodum dandum sit*, *Bapt.* 7.53.101). Similarly, Genesius was motivated to study the Christian ritual "struck by the greatest curiosity" (*curiosissime attonitus*, 1). Augustine adds that the subject can undergo the ritual either "with or without deceit" (*cum simulatione, an sine simulatione*). To baptize "as though in the church" (*sicut in Ecclesia*) was a type of "deceit" (*simulatio*), as was to baptize "as a joke" (*iocans*), "as in a mime" (*sicut in mimo*, *Bapt.* 7.53.101). The former might occur either "falsely" (*fallaciter*) or "in heresy or schism without falsity" (*in haeresi vel schismate sine fallacia*); the latter, though detached from the church, could become genuinely effectual "in a mime with faith, if someone during acting is moved by unexpected piety" (*in mimo cum fide, si quisquam inter agendum repentina pietate moveatur*). In Augustine's hypothetical scenario, baptism could be received "deceitfully" (*fallaciter*) within the catholic church but "honestly" (*fideliter*) in the theater by one who was "suddenly moved" (*subito commotus*). Whether a ritual is performed within or without the church, and whether some perform it deceitfully or truthfully, "there is no difference for the integrity of the sacrament itself" (*ad ipsius autem Sacramenti integritatem nihil intersit*) so long as "both do the same thing" (*hoc idem utrique agant*).[57] The sudden turn to repentance envisioned by Augustine is exactly what happened to Genesius, and, as Augustine suggests, it was a precise adherence to the right words and actions that proved decisive for the ritual's efficacy. That they had been learned and were enacted outside the church was no object.

A final example, an anecdote from Athanasius' youth of

[57] For Augustine the use of the Trinitarian formula in baptism was central; see De Latte, *Questions liturgiques* 56 (1975) 208–211. Similarly, the Council of Arles (canon 9[8]) decreed that anyone who had been baptized with this formula should be accepted into the church simply with the laying on of hands.

doubtful historicity, confirms the widespread acceptance of this view of baptism. Some children who happened to be catechumens were playing and "imitating" (*imitantium*) the sacred rites. Athanasius "pretended to be the bishop of that childish game" (*ludi illius puerilis episcopus fuerat simulatus*) and baptized them (Rufinus *HE* 10.14). Alexander, the real bishop, saw what happened and questioned the participants. When he established that Athanasius had used the proper words, the baptisms were deemed valid (cf. Sozomen *HE* 2.17). Here too the ritual was efficacious though acted out for amusement, as mimetic play, by a performer without priestly qualifications.

Conclusions

In his criticism of theater Plato insisted that mimetic performance, in being so far removed from ultimate reality, was antithetical to truth. This rhetorical posture was also adopted by some Christians in antiquity (e.g. Augustine *Solil.* 2.18). All the same, the ritual of baptism could be characterized as mimetic drama. As early as the Apostle Paul it was conceptualized as a (re-)enactment of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ; and Gregory of Nyssa applied to it explicitly theatrical language: it was a mimetic representation of the three days in the grave that culminated in new life. The theological view of baptism as *mimesis* involving the initiate in a symbolic performance finds a striking correspondence in the Passion of St. Genesius, which traces a convergence between ritual and theater.

In the narrative, baptism is performed as part of a play that aimed at pleasing the emperor. In a surprising turn, Genesius undergoes a genuine conversion to Christianity. I have argued that this convergence of ritual and theater accords well with the efficacy-entertainment dyad formulated by Richard Schechner. He observes that performances do not exist as pure ritual or pure theater but occur along a spectrum. In the case of Genesius the two poles merge, since what begins as fiction *becomes* reality. The text underscores this dynamic interplay with two

contrasts: fabricated action versus true confession, and human audience versus divine audience.

That a mock baptism on stage could result in a genuine spiritual rebirth functions as a poignant intervention into contemporary debates about the nature of the ritual. The Passion supports the view that the transformative power of baptism depends on the use of water and the precision with which the celebrant adheres to the sanctioned liturgical words. Perhaps to counter the appearance of an automatic, even magical efficacy, the narrator intimates that Genesius' purification was already underway prior to the ritual. Nevertheless, the implication was clear that baptismal efficacy depended neither on the intentions of the recipient nor on the standing, moral or ecclesiastical, of the priest. In this regard, the case of Genesius aligns closely with Augustine's view of baptism over against the Donatists. At the same time, it represents an ironic reversal of policies set out in canon law and imperial legislation, which called on the actor to renounce his or her profession *before* being admitted to the sacrament. By contrast, Genesius received true baptism *in the course of* his acting, so that his performance became the real experience of his new identity as a Christian convert and martyr.[58]

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Department of Religious
Studies and Classics
University of Arizona
Tucson, AZ 85721
friesen@arizona.edu

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