CHAPTER II

RELIGIOUS DRAMA
The chapter on religious plays is comparatively short, only about ten plays being examined. There is a reorientation as regards the orthodoxies of belief. Whenever a play is written on the subject the purpose often is to present a new approach enabling the old events to be seen from a modern angle. John Arden's "The Business of Good Government" for example, finds an excuse for Herod's massacre of the innocents as a policy aiming at the greater good of the people. We often find that religion is made to subserve the cause of art rather than of orthodoxy. For, the purpose of a play is to have a broad non-sectarian appeal which will include elements of everybody's life and will indicate how the gulf of time between the past and the present could be bridged without any essential sacrifice of material. Thus the myths of the past are often revived in drama and story, suggesting that the human situation changes its external trappings without being changed in any deeper sense. Religion, however, undergoes an abstraction.

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1. We may also quote the following comment made by Marvin Halverson on the subject: "After centuries of alienation, we are witnessing in our day the return of drama to the Church and the recognition by churchmen of the religious dimensions of theater. Although it is now common knowledge that our drama has its roots in the liturgy of the Church, it is only in comparatively recent times that this historic relationship has taken on new life.... Christian faith sees life as a cosmic drama" Religious Drama, Selected and introduced by Marvin Halverson (Living Age Books, published by Meridian Books, INC. New York, 1958), p.5.
to suit the modern attitude of increasing indifference to metaphysics and mere sectarianism; we thereby attain the rational rather than the mystical. The view that follows from such an attitude is less suited to the secluded life of the religious than to the social life of the normal man. Religion often seems no more than a greater degree of charity, good-will and loving-kindness. Seldom is its power invoked in these one-act plays for the cultivation of an inward spiritual life, for the attainment of spiritual perfection. The medium for a religious drama has usually been verse although prose is also used.

Laurence Housman's "Brother Sun" is an account of a meeting between St. Francis and Soldan. The Christian saint, evidently, makes an impression upon the Muslim ruler which produces in the latter, at least a deferential attitude if not a readiness to concede some truth to the Christian view. Freda Collins's "The Fortieth Man" describes early martyrdoms in the cause of Christianity. T. B. Morris's "On A Spring Morning" and Cicely Hamilton's "The Child in Flanders" are both on the life of Christ. As regards the former, it is suggested that a modern setting may also be adopted because evidently, the truth of Christianity does not belong to the temporal dimension. Dorothy Una Ratcliffe's "Desormais" introduces Christ as the good shepherd; Rodney Bennett's
"The Real St. George" and Robert Gittings's "Man's Estate" describe saints of the church. Of all the plays concerned with religion in this century T.S. Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral" in three acts appears to be the most significant. In this play, as in some others, questions of past times are reconsidered with a view to their relevance to the present age. In this attempt at forging a new link between the past and the present the attitude often becomes liberalized; and those alleged to have been fiendish in character seem after such a review to be no more than human, prompted by motives capable of rational interpretation if not of defence.

1. The Business of Good Government is a play by John Arden on the subject of nativity. The Biblical story is slightly altered. Joseph and Mary leave for Egypt because the angel, one of the characters, said that they should do so on account of an imminent danger. The Wise Men of the East also return without seeing Herod because the angel warned them. These two examples replace the warning by dream, the advice being orally given instead of by the angel. King Herod, again, seems to be differently conceived, for he is interested in

good government and does not, in the opinion of the Wise Men, appear to be inclined in favour of evil. The play opens with a song which has been popular for a long time and is, apparently, associated with Christmas celebrations. A number of people who came on the stage sing it in chorus. It is about the birth of Christ and about three ships sailing to Bethlehem. The angel announces tidings of great joy unto all people, glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, good-will towards men.

The angel here does not accord with the orthodox view of his character and function. The author's note indicates that he has a number of different roles to play. "The Angel in this play is not only a Divine Messenger, but also the Presenter of the Play, the Prompter, Herod's conscience, a kind of Devil and a Palace Official". He is one of those to sing the carol, "I saw three ships" at the opening of the play. He is present throughout, he advises the king, wakens up the shepherds to bring to them "Good tidings of great joy" and both to Joseph and the Wise Men of the East, he administers due warning which makes them retire and withdraw to places of safety. To Herod he also communicates the news of the flight of Mary and Joseph.

3. Vide, Author's Preface and production notes.
Herod is interested in the maintenance of order and good government and the angel's announcement of goodwill, joy and peace upon earth does not convince him, for as a practical man he knows that all such high ideals are rarely found as actual benefits enjoyed by the people. With Rome and Persia as neighbours he has to walk on the razor's edge, as it were, preserving the peace of his own kingdom. He is friendly with Rome because Rome controls Egypt which is the granary of the East and from which his own supplies of corn come to feed his people, living on a semi-barren soil and yet he is afraid of the hostility of Persia. There is no lack of evidence to show that he is completely under the control of Rome and when the Wise Men seek his audience he makes his secretary stay in the same room and hear what passes between him and the visitors from the East, lest he should give cause of suspicion to Rome. The Wise Men enquire about the birth of a Prince and report to him the star which guided them to Herod's kingdom. Herod denied having any knowledge of a child being born but he asked the Wise Men to see him at the end of a week when he expected to be able to tell them something they would like to know. He also wished them to see him with whatever information they themselves could gather.
The Wise Men visit Bethlehem and present the child with frankincense, as symbol of religion, gold as symbol of power and myrrh as symbol of death and they hurry away from Bethlehem because they are suspicious of the King's design.

Bethlehem is packed with men and women who had collected there under the order of Caesar Augustus so that they might be counted and the crowd was so large that there was hardly anywhere for them to stay in. We see the hostess of an inn worried by the great pressure of the demand for accommodation. She put this down to administrative incompetence. To her Joseph and Mary come, she is friendly and willing to help, the more so because Mary's hour had practically come. She cannot render such assistance as she desired:

"What do you expect me to do, dear? I don't know whether I'm on my head or my heels — just look at the place, all chockablock and I'm run off my feet!" She offers, however, her stable where she would keep the animals separate. After first giving it a cleanout she would give her next day a more suitable accommodation when she is able to get a bit of space organized.

The midwife helps in the birth of the child who is visited by shepherds coming at the suggestion of the angel from the fields where they had been tending the sheep during the night. An old shepherd holds the child's hand and remarks:

4. Ibid., p.27.
"Ah, that's the feller - he knows how to make an effort, don't he now?"  

Mary has the child born to her after nine months. She sings songs which express appropriate sentiments and with Joseph goes to Egypt. All children of two years old and under are slain by Herod in accordance with the prophecy of Jeremiah (Chapter 31, Verse 15). "The Massacre is indicated by a sudden clash of cymbals, and a loud wailing cry..."  

The play ends with the actors on the stage singing the Corpus Christi Carol: "Down in yon forest there stands a hall :" 

The play is written in verse of varying structure and in prose. There are many indications of the west-country dialect, one of them being a little jargon traditionally used as the shepherd's counting system:

- Hana mana mona mike
- Barcelona bona strike.

There are words of old English vocabulary such as "housen" and many other instances of dialectal variation of the Queen's English.

First presented in 1963 the play reintroduces a subject which featured in the miracles of the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries and was part of the well-known cycles of miracle plays which have come down to us. It however, lacks the comic

5. Ibid., p.33
6. Ibid., p.50
7. Ibid., p.53
8. Ibid., p.23
9. Ibid., p.29
by-play or has it only in a very limited measure. Although shepherds and simple folk are introduced there is a general pattern of behaviour for all, indicating not the type of society which then existed but the type into which contemporary English society has evolved.

There is no attempt to underline the cosmic significance of the Birth except the announcement of the angel regarding the peace and goodwill to which reference has already been made. The fault of the play, if we can think of one, is its sophistication so that the Birth of Christ seems to take place in almost a modern society in spite of the temporary inconvenience, caused by over-crowding.

The title of the play requires explanation. It is found in Herod's speech which outlines his policy and its success, and contains the order to put all children of two and under, to death, which he issued in the interest of good government. The people whom he addressed assured him that they would always follow him in loyalty and trust. Herod's behaviour is that of a despot of our time who appeals occasionally to the public to gain support for his administration. His words with their rhetoric have a contemporary flavour:

"The king must rule his human subjects by means of his own humanity. And naturally, within his rule must be comprehended
such difficult extremes of good and of evil as may be found from one end to the other of his unfortunate kingdom .... Through the years I have been your leader I have kept you free from war and provided unexampled prosperity. You are richer and happier than ever you have been! Your children are receiving opportunities for education and advancement that your own fathers could not have imagined in their wildest dreams. Dare you see this prosperity destroyed in one night?¹⁰

This speech is very much like that Hitler could have given and, therefore, the writer seems to imagine the Birth as a contemporary event, although its reaction not dissimilar, the circumstances have the same pattern but perhaps a slightly different impetus. For, Herod did not consult public opinion; he imposed his will which became the law of the day.

The nativity play, thus transplanted, has a character far different from the orthodox and traditional one. That power produces evil, seems clear to us, its justification varies from age to age - its substance, however, remains unchanged. The Massacre of the Innocents will take place again not to protect the claims of an individual to the throne and to preserve his interests, but in the cause of good government. This will be the new slant to be given on the events described in The Bible.

¹⁰. Ibid., pp. 49-50.
2. "The Fortieth Man" by Freda Collins. This is a play about forty martyrs, frozen to death in the Tiber instead of Sebaste, as in the original story. Thirteen Christians were thrown into the river and were drowned. The fortieth man Titus was rescued by Julia, his mistress. Members of the Roman legion were mostly heartless. They wanted to see what would win, flesh or spirit, Julia or Christ, and were immensely amused at Julia's success. They remarked with triumphant sarcasm that one betrayer had ruined the cause of Christ which the forty were determined to serve until an additional martyr was found. Christ's dominion had little chance of success. This mocking language disturbed Titus who prepared to go and lay down his life. But a member of the Roman legion was a Christian, the nineteen year old Lucius. Except Caius, another Roman who gave him the affectionate protection, nobody knew about his faith. He wanted to be the fortieth martyr and took the plunge into the frozen Tiber. Thus by his faith does he make amends for the frailty of a fellow Christian and help the cause to triumph. Among the Romans Christianity was regarded as a source of anti-social behaviour. Yet they could not help admiring the greatness of the faith inspiring collective martyrdom. The characters generally are seen as a crowd, Only two stand


12. The original forty martyrs were, Armenians, attached to 'The Thundering Legion', who were frozen to death at Sebaste. Ibid., p.31.
out- Luclius and Caius, and of course the lovers, Julius and Titus are also to some extent individualized. What gives them power to live is their attitude towards Christianity, their ability to identify themselves more or less with its message.

3. "The Only Miracle" by John Challen is in prose and is an exposition of what seems a doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. Regarding the time of the action no detail is given except that it is "other than the present". A cripple is cured by the help of three feathers by father Bernard. Carlos, the cripple, reverts to his deformity but recovers again by the recovery of faith. The feathers are supposed to have dropped from an angel. Father Bernard clung to this belief while a Bishop showed scepticism and made the poor man undo his cure by making him share it. The play has no sign in the language used, of its being the picture of a distant past. Miracles have more or less ceased since the mediaeval times and although the claim is made that they are possible everywhere and at all times, this does not seem to enjoy credence outside the Catholic Church. We have a miracle in Graham Greene's The End of An Affair. To this novelist a miracle is an expression of "the appalling mercy of God".

4. "The Child in Flanders" by Cicely Hamilton. The action takes place evidently during the first world war. A Christmas Eve is the occasion of the prologue; the tableau

and the epilogue take place on the Christmas Day. Three soldiers find refuge in the cottage of a peasant where a child was born a little earlier the same day. The soldiers offer presents to him. They are humble gifts but seem to suggest some kind of a correspondence to gold, frankincense and myrrh presented by the Magi to the child Jesus. They sleep at night and have dreams of annunciation, birth and of the blessedness of Mary, crucifixion, resurrection and the ascent to heaven. In the morning on waking they still hear strains of heavenly music and when they visit the child they feel a reverence, as if they were in the presence of the divine child itself. The view here proposed is irrational or perhaps mystical, for every child in the light of this play would seem to have elements of divinity to which homage is due. Yet the Father is called Joseph and is described as a French peasant. The choice of the name implies a mysterious identification and explains the homage paid. In a religious drama some measure of mystery is permissible.

The ways of the spirit cannot be clearly charted and one writes about them from one’s secret feelings, perhaps from faith. The purpose is to render the world of a higher reality. In such an attempt while attention is focussed upon an

extra mundane order of existence, this has the effect of lessening the purely artistic qualities. Belief of the kind represented does not normally aid artistic creation. The music and the vision are entertaining but they do not appear to be part of the normal human scene; in fact, they are a kind of aid to worship, a ritual rather than drama, although it must be admitted that it is in ritual that we look for the beginning of the drama.

5. "Desormais" by Dorothy Una Ratcliffe. The play dramatizes the theme of the good shepherd who informs about the danger which overtakes some sheep and thus brings them assistance. Jesus as the good shepherd has always captured the imagination of the Christian world. As the shepherds are informed by the traveller regarding the sheep in need of rescue, they see some signs proving that their visitor is supernatural. The theme has been presented against a pastoral background and the severe winter of January. There is a certain charm in the simple questions asked and in the shepherd's whole-hearted care for their charges. The appearance of Jesus in the depth of winter on a mission so humble confirms in our mind his picture as the good shepherd. The point seems further to be brought home by the simple colloquy among the shepherds.

15. Dorothy Una Ratcliffe's "Desormais", Modern Short Plays, Second Series (University of London Press, Ltd., 1931)
"The Real St. George" by Rodney Bennett. It is in prose and contains, apart from the play in five scenes, a prologue and an introduction. In the prologue, a boy and a minstrel rehearse between them the legendary tale about St. George for the purpose of earning money. They are, however, interrupted by a stranger, described as a mediaeval traveller, who undertakes to give a correct version of the Saint's life. Thus the play begins. St. George in the first scene leaves home at the age of seventeen. At thirty-four he reappears in the next scene, now a distinguished man whom the Emperor Diocletian proposes to put in charge of several states as Governor. This was to be his reward for his worthy services. He saw the Emperor and when the latter said he would grant any favour George would ask for, George wanted him to show mercy to the Christians. The Emperor's policy was inspired by terror of the real design behind Christian rites. Of these he could form no conception except that their purpose was subversive. The Emperor would not consent to the proposal to be merciful to the Christians. George having declared himself a Christian faced torture and death with a faith from which he never flinched.

Behind this record of martyrdom there are domestic scenes involving the saint's mother, sister and a faithful slave. There were also two friends, ready to make any sacrifice to save George's life. In this, of course, they failed, and after the martyrdom they proclaimed without fear the glory of Christ. Thus was the Church of God built upon the blood of martyrs. This is a very ingenious account of St. George. Its only flaw is that it taps sentimental sources to lend romantic colour to the Saint's life. He may have been more than a Saint, slaying the dragon to rescue the princess but his pre-eminence is by no means reinforced by a domestic background. Apparently, the time is mediaeval and a life of simplicity seems to be the aspect in which the characters are sought to be revealed. The Emperor is not a cruel man by temperament. His acts of ruthless suppression of Christianity by massacre and oppression reflect only a state of mind, confronting the unknown and being terrorized by its uncertain implications.

The cause explaining Diocletian's whimsical nature exploding in acts of cruelty is stated to be the fact that he rose from the ranks: "Diocletian began as a nobody from Dalmatia, and now what is he? - a god to every Roman with an easy knee. Could I stand such sudden glory? Could you? No. No man could. It makes them mad - especially when they happen to be afraid!" 17

17. Ibid., pp. 55-56.
7. "Man's Estate" by Robert Gittings. The play is in verse and one of the characters is an angel. It is written in morality tradition. An angel describes Richard, now a famous man as originally a farmer's son. The parents left their children unprovided at their death. The latter thought with the exception of Richard that the only course open to them was to sell the farm and go elsewhere to try their fortune. Richard opposed the plan and insisted that each member of the family, however, young should contribute to prosperity. The little sister and brother should dance to scare off the birds and make the soil fit for the reception of the seed. Their songs would also be a diversion while the elder sister could feed the cattle, the elder brother mind the stable and Richard himself turn up the soil for sowing. The team work proposed by Richard won general approval. The angel now came to try him disguised as an old rich man and offered an attractive price for the farm land and pointed out how the hazards of the climate including snow and frost might interfere with the prospects of a good crop. Richard did not lose heart. He believed in the saying of the Bible, that everyman should labour truly where God meant him to. The old man went away and the angel appeared foretelling his good fortunes and the trials awaiting him. He would be rich.

famous, he would build a church and enjoy universal popularity. Yet he would incur the King's wrath and be an exile from his country. But never should he lose faith in God. The angel left with these words and the play came to an end.

The scene is a mediaeval farm and the morality element therefore, is in perfect accord with the situation. What it says represents the teaching in "Piers the Plowman", that salvation came through honest labour and faith in God.

The play is in blank verse, with the rhymes varying the general pattern. But whether rhymed or unrhymed, the verses maintain a smooth flow using a diction which is simple and almost colloquial in its accent. No attempt seems to be made to introduce archaisms by way of recreating the historical atmosphere.

8. The Days' Beginning by Willis Hall. The hill of Calvary is the scene of the play's opening. It is an Easter play in a mixture of verse and prose, published in 1963. The actual crucifixion is not shown. What is said by the soldiers, officers and the high priest is a comment upon the death at the cross. The soldiers take up the common view that it was pretentious to claim to save the world when one could not save one's own self. Claudia, wife of Pontius Pilate struck a different note in her insistence that Jesus was innocent and that the act was, therefore, wrong.

Pilate, however, takes the official attitude. If a man opposes the emperor he has to die. Others also will pay the same penalty for the same offence. Elaborate precautions are taken to safeguard the body and to prevent the resurrection from taking place. Yet the watchful guards could do nothing when a sudden mist came and the apparition of the angel Gabriel "all white and horrible" showed itself, the body then disappeared how they could not tell. This story would confirm the words of Jesus and death penalty was threatened by Government should one repeat it. The official version that the tired guards fell asleep would make no mystery of what happened.

The play is called "The Days Beginning" that is to say, beginning of life everlasting and is wound up by the song of Simon describing how he carried the cross for the Lord who was bruised, beaten, broken and bleeding. And although, He is no more, he feels that Jesus still walks beside him and he carries the cross for Him.

The play introduces many characters including some imaginary ones. The idea is to depict the situation immediately after crucifixion and to represent a variety of reactions. Even in the official world there was a feeling that Christ should have been spared. But this talk about justice is not material to the consideration of the Messianic role which
is more amply indicated by the voices which sang and the testimony of the blind man, whose sight was restored. Life everlasting is a baffling hope for mankind but Christ's advent brought this within human reach. This is the substance of what the play tells us. Written in ten scenes the play records hopes and fears in prose without ornament and in verses which could be easily sung but which seem to have at the same time an austere quality, committed to precision and bare of every kind of ornament.

9. "On A Spring Morning" by T. B. Morris represents crucifixion in a timeless dimension. No equipment or stage-property should have a period suggestion. Jesus does not figure among the characters who are all women and have biblical names. Jesus is referred to as the healer and the characters change by a look at his thorn of crowns and the torture he was subjected to. Ada reports her impression to Mary. The latter had asked what were his eyes like? Ada said: "They were like fire - like soft blue fire - like the sea and the sky and spring flowers." She also said that when she saw the healer bending under the cross she forgot herself. This is to suggest that escape from self is one of the highest things which we owe to religion.

21. Ibid., p.102.
The author by omitting any reference to Christ by name and by insisting upon an entirely secular atmosphere without any trace of historical period endeavours to create a timeless background which will serve as an aid to our contemplation of Christ and His suffering. The characters share the agony, and the reality of Christ seem to take material shape in the pained sense and self-forgetfulness with which the story of the Cross is told. The title "On A Spring Morning" is important because of the symbolism it suggests. The beginning of a spiritual life among the Christians is His achievement and the idea of such a beginning is meant to be suggested by the title.

10. "Brother Sun"22 by Laurence Housman is in prose. The subject matter is a meeting between Soldan and Francis. Francis of Assisi is a prisoner and a Christian. A Muslim ruler is little likely to grant him any special favour. He is strictly guarded and the ruler's men are unfriendly and hostile. The Soldan, although a Muslim, is depicted as a man of wide and liberal interest. He desires to meet St. Francis, who comes to him and declares his intention to make him a Christian. He said, "I would show thee Christ, Soldan"23 and explained that Christ is love and also joy and peace. In a few lines of verse which follow, Francis

23. Ibid., p.258.
gave a view of Christ which more clearly brought out the meaning of his earlier simple statement.

Oh, harken, for this is wonder.
Light looked down and beheld Darkness.
'Thither will I go', said Light.
Peace looked down and beheld War.
'Thither will I go', said Peace.24

St. Francis came to bring to an end the hostilities between the Christian and the Muslim but his peace mission seemed to fail. The Soldan, however, said in answer: "Who knows! ... Farewell, Brother Ant".25 Later he called him 'Brother Sun'. St. Francis was loved by the dumb world of birds and animals. His compassion earned for him designation of Brother Ant. It showed a humility of spirit which made him spiritually the equal and friend of the meanest of creatures. His peace mission has religious implications but it is also a mission in which the world of our time is vitally interested for the sake of simple survival.26

24. Ibid., p.258.
25. Ibid., p.263.
26. Father Guthbert, O.S.F.C. in his "Life of St. Francis of Assisi" (Longmans, 1921, f.n. p 281) quotes from Verba fr. Illuminati (Golubovich), giving an interesting episode connected with the meeting between the Saint and the Sultan. The latter ordered a carpet to be spread which was covered with crosses. "If he treads on the crosses, "said the Sultan, "I will accuse him of insulting his God; if he refuses to walk on it, I will accuse him of insulting me". Francis unhesitatingly walked across the carpet; and when taunted by the Sultan that he had trodden on the cross which he professed to adore, he replied: "You should know our Lord died between two thieves. We Christians have the true cross; the crosses of the thieves we have left to you, and these I am not ashamed to tread upon." The reply is quite in keeping with Francis' character.