

Article

Toward Witnessing the Other: Syria, Islam and Frans van der Lugt

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Abstract: This article addresses issues and questions at the intersection of religion and theatrical drama from the perspective of Muslim-Christian comparative theology. A case study approaching an actual performance of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* from this disciplinary point of view also takes into account the Syrian context, develops a framework for "mutual witnessing", and the practice of drama therapy. Accordingly, the case-method proceeds to address two interrelated challenges. The first is how to relate to the adaptive praxis and theological sensibilities of performers who inhabit a political and religious situation that is radically different from one's own. The second regards in a more specific way of reframing a case of Christian martyrdom in terms of witnessing that remains open and hospitable to religious others, and particularly in this case to Syrian Muslims. As an exercise of comparative theology, this case-method approach focuses on notions of "witnessing truth" that appear and are cultivated in the work of liberation theologian Jon Sobrino and in Ibn 'Arabī's *Fusūs al-Hikam*, specifically the chapter on Shuayb. In conclusion, this exercise turns to the performance itself as a potential foundation for shared theological reflection between Muslims and Christians. As such, this article attempts to render how theatrical action creates a "religious" experience according to the structure and threefold sense that Peter Brook observes.

Keywords: Syria; witness; martyrdom; theatrical drama; *Romeo and Juliet*; Frans van der Lugt; comparative theology; William Shakespeare

1. A Case Introduced

On 14 April 2015, the organization Souriyat Across Borders (SAB) hosted a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* in the attic of its Amman-based hospice¹. As the primary base of operation for the organization, which was established by Syrian women in the Za'atari Refugee Camp, the rehabilitation center has become a refugee space and a place of recovery for those wounded (in the broadest sense) as a result of the war. While typically focused on physical therapy, issues of mental health increasingly have become a concern due to trauma as a result of the war and difficulties of life in exile and in refugee camps. For the past three months, the production's director Nawār Bulbul has rehearsed with his actors. Bulbul, once an established television-actor in Syria, became a public critic of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in 2012 and subsequently was forced to leave his hometown of Homs for asylum in Jordan. This production is neither his debut nor his first adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedies. In 2014, Nawār Bulbul used Shakespeare's *King Lear* as the basis of a sprawling epic, commingled with select scenes from *Hamlet*.² Whereas in that previous performance one hundred children were

¹ For more information, see Souriyat Across Borders, <http://souriyat.org/>. As the name states, the nonprofit organization is founded and operated by Syrian women (*sūriyāt* is feminine-plural form of Syrians).

² See (Hubbard 2014). Vimeo broadcasts a 2018 video documentary called "Shakespeare in Za'atari", directed by Maan Moussli, of Nawār Bulbul's production and the 2014 performance in Amman's Roman amphitheater.

assigned and cast into the roles of that sprawling production, in this case, Bulbul only worked with four war-affected children as actors. Meanwhile, in Homs, four other children as actors have rehearsed and practiced for their roles in this production. With respect to children wounded as a result of the Syrian war, his theatrical experiments are particular instances of “drama therapy”, which is premised on the notion that theater can become a medium oriented to and capable of addressing problems that arise due to violence and trauma. To this end, as a primary focus of SAB, the production serves as a collaboration between an artistic endeavor and a health-care facility that specializes in recovery for war-based trauma. Interestingly, moreover, the setting for the “Verona” of their *Romeo and Juliet* is not limited to the makeshift theater in the attic of this building in Amman, but it also extends to an undisclosed site in Homs. As the action unfolds, the tandem performances are mediated through a screen that divided and yet also connects the performers and audiences via Skype.

Fundamentally, theatrical drama can draw some interesting parallels with religious phenomena. On the other hand, the difference between religion and theatrical drama can become blurred so that the tension that holds them apart temporarily collapses. In an interview (Brook 1979), famed British theatre director and avant-garde student of the stage, Peter Brook characterized theatrical action in its truest form as “religious”. He claimed: “The ancient theater clearly was, and theater must always be, a religious action: it is that by which fragments are made whole”. For Brook, who does not believe “an entire society can heal itself, or be healed by one person or group of people”, theatrical drama instead performs a crucial role and offers a potent medium for addressing open wounds of conflict, division, and fragmentation. As such, with these conditions, Brook acknowledged the requirement of a tragic element that dramatized political reality and the historical situation. In almost the same breath, however, he pivoted attention toward a proleptic quality that such events possess, when he stated: “The great force of artistic events is that they are temporary glimpses of what might be, and there is a healing process attached to these glimpses”.³ With respect to these events, according to Brook, a group of performers and audience do not stand apart as separate. Rather, on occasion, theatrical drama brings them together “into a form of communion” when simply storytelling is “recognizable”, which for Brook is to say, “like life”. For his conversation partner, Brook elaborates this dynamic process, not of two groups “one watching and the other doing”, but rather as a “progressive heightening through which the two worlds become more sharply perceived by everyone who is present”.⁴ As such, by way of Brook’s observations, there is a threefold sense by which theatrical action can be identified as “religious”: for present purposes, we can identify these overlapping dynamics as “salutary”, “anticipatory”, and “communal”.

For the sake of considering the case at hand: How does understanding “theatrical action” as potentially religious, in Brook’s sense, shed light on this adapted performance of *Romeo and Juliet*? For Syrians, given the war-torn situation, how might this event provide a momentary sense of unity and even a “spiritual communion” either despite or enfolded within the exile, violence, division, fragmentation, and separation? What does this performance contribute about the tension between presence and absence? As these are some of the core questions underlying this inquiry, this article presents (re-presents?) an actual performance of Shakespeare’s classic *Romeo and Juliet* in the form of a case study. As such, as outsiders, readers are asked to consider how we make sense of this adaptation, its appropriation of Shakespeare’s famous tragedy and its unique amendments. Subsequently, the inquiry expands to introduce Frans van der Lugt S.J. (1938–2014), a Dutch Jesuit and Christian missionary in Syria, as a key figure to whom the revised script pays homage. For the Muslim-Christian matrix of this audience and performers, what may be the significance of such a gesture? Does this not encourage public discussion about theological matters? As a complex case in its own right, the possible identification of Frans van der Lugt as a Christian martyr bears theological and ethical implications,

³ See (Brook 1979). The interviewer is not named.

⁴ (Brook 1979, p. 48).

and thereby complicates Muslim-Christian dialogue. The performance, however, ultimately provides a different angle upon van der Lugt and his example possibly contributes to the Christian understanding of martyrdom. Reframing martyrdom by Christological keys of witnessing, through case reasoning, this exercise of comparative theology learns from Ibn 'Arabī's theology of signs how witnessing truth fosters a more passionate affective response. Finally, as will become apparent, witnessing carries ethical implications. Theologically speaking, how do we witness to this performance and its aftermath? In the concluding reflection, this basic question is meant us into the performance.

As a foray into theatrical drama, overall, this case study affords an occasion for Muslim-Christian comparative theology. Thus, this article attempts to develop the basis for interpreting a dramatic moment as "religious" in the threefold sense that Peter Brook conveys. Moreover, implicitly, it contends that the discipline of comparative theology can be serviceable for such an endeavor, concluding that the performance may a glimpse of a radical and yet difficult hope. Ultimately, in the style typical of a case study, the goal of this article is to provide a starting-point for shared theological reflection between Christians and Muslims in virtue keys of solidarity, hospitality, and mercy.

2. Acknowledgements: (Mis) Uses of Theatrical Drama for Muslim-Christian Understanding

To this end, the discipline of comparative theology is serviceable given its attention to particularities, resistance to generalizations, and willingness to proceed dialogically. However, there are potential risks in employing theatrical drama for interreligious understanding. In approaching this special issue, let us consider some interlocking points in order to address how we have to do comparative theology.

First of all, there is a strong tendency for North American and European perspectives to characterize the Middle East as a whole and its various parts, including Syria, with the metaphor of "political theater". In the context of Islamic studies, perhaps no one has so masterfully pointed out the consequences for misunderstanding Islam as Talal Asad. In his seminal lecture, "The Idea of an Anthropology", he suggests, this stylized use of "political theater" might actually deflect us from reckoning with some critical questions.⁵

Nevertheless, being so culturally embedded, theatrical terminology and dramaturgical methods can also preserve interreligious misunderstandings. He critiques the particularly "dramatic" quality of anthropological portraits of Middle Eastern (read: Muslim) politics. If one turns to Ernest Gellner's mechanistic interpretation of Islam as a network of "social causation" or Clifford Geertz's more "dramaturgical" perception of Islam, as Asad states: "What one finds in effect are protagonists engaged in a dramatic struggle". In those representations, a reader finds various tribes, armed nomads, the mediating saint, embattled clerical literati, the religious fervor of the city's poor, religious reformers, and demoralized rulers as, Asad critiques, a "representation of social structure that is cast entirely in terms of dramatic roles". Regardless, whether this poses a viable means of description and as illuminating as it may be, Asad fundamentally objects to how such narrative lacks "an account of the discourses that orient their behavior and in which behavior can be represented (or misrepresented) by actors to each other". For instance, Gellner's actors are without words, Asad notices, "they do not speak, they do not think, they behave". In the end, one may get the false impression that Islam is simply reducible to an intricate choreography about power, or, to borrow his words, "as a drama of religiosity" and so Muslim conduct as merely a "readable gesture".⁶

Due to his history of misunderstanding, therefore, should we assume that theatrical drama must be cast aside? One could be inclined to interpret Asad's own position as negating or denying the usefulness of theatrical vocabulary. To be clear, this would be mistaken in two ways. On the one hand,

⁵ (Asad 2009, pp. 1–30); it is based on a paper originally presented at Georgetown University in 1986.

⁶ (Asad 2009, pp. 12–13). Asad is critiquing (Gellner 1981 and Geertz 1968). The latter work remains a classic in the field of Islamic studies. For Asad's main point: "The analysis of Middle Eastern political economies and the representation of Islamic 'dramas' are essentially different kinds of discursive exercise that cannot be substituted for each other, although they can be significantly embedded in the same narrative, precisely because they are discourses" (Asad 2009, p. 10).

as already noted, Asad warns against a “fixed cast of Islamic *dramatic personae*”. If dramaturgical method should be employed, in keeping with the metaphor of dramatic play, he might be read to stress as a minimal requirement that an account that should be composed of lines, those “very lines actors speak”.⁷ Thus, as he urges, anthropological accounts of Islam as basically narratives themselves “must try to translate and represent historically situated discourses as responses to the discourse of *others*”.⁸ Relatedly, when those voices direct attention “beyond the fixed stage of an Islamic theater”, as Asad argues, they embody a particular way of enacting underlying sources of authority as “discursive traditions”. As such, those figures of authority are also bearers of history who seek to instruct practitioners as actors regarding a “conception of what is *apt performance*”. In sum, if Asad’s approach still issues a forceful reminder of the challenges and problems concerning theatrical drama, as a conceptual metaphor, and particularly the repercussions for representing Islam, at the same time, he also concedes its usefulness for illuminating Islamic traditions.

From a comparative theological perspective, moreover, another point of learning that Asad’s approach and scholarship may avail is indicative in his particular development of the notion of “apt performance”. Notably, in *Genealogies of Religion*, Asad turns to *The Rule of Benedict* as a case-in-point, further developing the idea of “apt performance” specifically pertaining to a particular “programmatic text”. Focusing on particular performance, as was his objective, opens multiple avenues into a set of “mediating practices”. Nonetheless, concerning this Benedictine tradition, he wishes to disabuse his readers that meditations, chants, and—we might add—hospitality is not “theatrical”, at least not “in the sense, to which we are now accustomed with all its implications of artful impersonation”. Rather, he writes:

The program is performed primarily not for the sake of an audience but for the sake of the performers, who are learning to exercise and to develop the Christian virtues, to replace unlawful desires with virtuous ones, not to appreciate an aesthetic representation.⁹

Yet, thirdly pertaining specifically to the current issue, should we not be prepared to accept that theatrical drama has proven to be a very productive genre for Christians and Muslims in order to relate theological truths? Interwoven into the literary fabric and creative sensibilities, theatrical drama helps elucidate and make manifest religious realities. For Christians, the classic script about martyrdom seems to have followed the basic outline and template of the “Passions of the Martyrs Perpetua and Felicity”, as the resistance of Perpetua (d.203) was staged as a spectacle in the Roman amphitheater.¹⁰ Inaugurating a new form of Christian narrative that enacted for its readers a defiant faith in the face of religious persecution, the text seemed to summon Christians in the Roman Empire to emulate their example. As for Muslims, on the other hand, heroic accounts of those who died courageously in battle against the aggression of the Qurayshī are enshrined in the biographical accounts (*sīrah*) of the Prophet Muhammad.¹¹ As Michael Cook is right to point out, among Sunnis there is not “anything remotely so dramatic to aid in the commemoration of the martyrs” as the *ta’ziyeh* (“passion plays”),¹² a tradition reinvigorated in the 1960s that rehearses and re-enacts the paradigmatic sense of suffering, sorrow, and redemption that the martyr’s death of Imam Husayn (626–680) signifies. In sum, theatrical drama has proven integral for select discursive traditions of both of these religions.

At another level, fourth, theatrical drama might even disclose certain possibilities for interreligious understanding. Let us return, by way of illustrative example, to the observations of Peter Brook, who

⁷ (Asad 2009, p. 15).

⁸ (Asad 2009, p. 10).

⁹ (Asad 1993, pp. 140–41). For the Christian source of historical theology that Asad credits and from which draws in this exposition, see (Leclercq 1979).

¹⁰ (Musurillo 1972, pp. 106–31). For historical context, see (Heffernan 2012).

¹¹ (Ling 1983).

¹² See (Cook 2007, pp. 133–34).

cites *ta'ziyeh* performances as the “most living form of mystery play that still exists”. To illustrate the threefold sense of theatrical action, in 1979, he recalled,

I saw in a remote Iranian village one of the strongest things I have ever seen in theatre: a group of 400 villagers, the entire population of the place, sitting under the tree and passing from roars of laughter to outright sobbing—although they knew perfectly well the end of the story—as they saw Hussein in danger of being killed, and then fooling his enemies, and then being martyred. And when he was martyred, the theatre form became a truth—there was no difference between past and present.¹³

Many scholars of Islam, including Talal Asad himself,¹⁴ have tended generally to use these stories of the martyrdom of the first imams as a prime example of “ritual drama”. As such, they have largely focused on how the performers and enactment, and largely neglected the audience. When audience is discussed, it is usually downplayed as aesthetics or chalked up “theatrical” to a less than ethical matter to “theatrical”. What Asad’s critical approach neglects is the event character of such moments. In effect, as Brook’s account is meant to illustrate, by a work of theatrical action a theological truth is disclosed. As Brook himself recognizes, what these Iranian Shia villagers were witnessing is what he characterized as “an incarnation”, which is to say, “at that particular moment [Husayn] was being martyred again in front of those villagers”.¹⁵

Considering these points, I venture to suggest that “witnessing truth” provides in the multiple senses of the term an indispensable concept for developing the ethical implications of Muslim-Christian comparative theology. According to the renowned Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, witnessing not only “involves an intrinsic reference to someone else”, as a manifest gesture witnessing signifies “that in which in which someone communicates himself and, moreover, by the most intense use of his own freedom in so disposing of himself that thereby a corresponding decision is evoked in some other person too”.¹⁶ Although the term may conjure Christian missionaries, in juxtaposition to proclamation, Catherine Cornille argues a defining character of interreligious dialogue is “mutual witnessing”, which presupposes the “possible presence of truth” in another religion and “the possibility of being captivated and compelled by the witness of the other”.¹⁷ In this sense, witnessing is at its core a dialogical concept. For the sake of addressing the Syrian refugee crisis, in 2017, reformed theologian Joshua Ralston proposes “witnessing” as a theo-political framework for Muslim-Christian encounter as “an ongoing practice of bearing witness to God and God’s coming justice”.¹⁸

For consideration of this case, that is, an Arabic performance of *Romeo and Juliet* that is set between a hospice attic in Amman and a hidden theater in Homs, witnessing truth might invite shared theological reflection between Muslims and Christians. What is missing in Talal Asad’s conceptual approach, according to Muslim theologian Martin Nguyen, is the “crucial role of the Divine in the unfolding of tradition”. As such, theologians can account for the human role in constructing tradition, and also permit the possibility that it is “not merely about past and present, but about past and present in which God’s working are manifest”.¹⁹ By attending to this case, and given the ongoing Syrian crisis, the idea of “witnessing truth” not only provides a basic theological framework, it also an interpretive key that coheres this event between the performers and audiences and, furthermore, fundamentally accounts for its intercultural perspective and interreligious focus. If witnessing implies a progressive clarification of the truth, at the same time, it also should also become responsive to the demands of justice.

¹³ (Brook 1979, p. 52).

¹⁴ See (Asad 2003, p. 78).

¹⁵ (Brook 1979, p. 52).

¹⁶ (Rahner 1975, p. 153). For a dialogue with this fundamental structure of this dogmatic notion with encounter, see (Baird 2005).

¹⁷ See (Cornille 2011, cited at 63).

¹⁸ See (Ralston 2017, cited at p. 31).

¹⁹ See (Nguyen 2019, pp. 58–61, cited at 60, 61).

As this case illustrates, theatrical drama invites new perspectives and can shed light on theological questions. Being profoundly dialogical, theatrical performances require an audience. As this case suggests, it creates new space and demarcates a basis for fostering a commitment toward Muslim-Christian solidarity. As the performances incarnate an open illustration of the power of theatrical action to create new possibilities, as grounded as it is, the play also takes liberties to address Shakespeare to its particular political and religious situation. Although the play will seem to flout conventional rules for staging Shakespeare, on this issue, the adaptation remains quite faithful to a basic truth that in his wisdom—and perhaps especially through his tragedies—Shakespeare “forces us to regard any perspective on human actions as deeply provisional, historically bounded and contextually determined”.²⁰

3. Reassembling the Scene: Adapting Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* in Exile

On 14 April 2015, an Arabic performance of *Romeo and Juliet* is set to stage for the fourth of what will be ultimately five performances. This run is extended from the two initially planned. In the attic of hospice for war-affected children, much of the primarily Syrian audience is constituted of patients who were carried up from their beds on the floors below. Others are themselves, like the director and actors, refugees from Syria who are living in Jordan as the Syrian civil war is entering its fifth month and when the bombardment is escalating in many parts of the country. Entitled *Romeo and Juliet Separated by War*, the production is the result of four months of rehearsals in this practice space, located above where four young actors are recuperating from their war wounds and trauma. From the original script, William Shakespeare’s tragedy about “star-crossed lovers” provides a lens by which performers and audiences alike can observe the dilemmas that they are facing. While the script itself furnishes themes like family feuds, bloodshed, vengeance, this play concentrates upon the love and longing at the heart of the relation between Romeo and Juliet. Although implicit, still, the war is front and center and none needed a reminder from Shakespeare of the siege in Syria, “where civil blood makes civil hands unclean” (1.i.2).²¹ In this version, the Juliet and the “Capulets” perform in the shadows of secret stage in Homs, while Romeo and the “Montagues” are acting in Amman. In Amman, where a screen faces the stage and connects performers and audiences and, in turn, a camera captures the theatrical action in Homs for transmission to Amman. As for the satellite equipment that the production uses in Homs, according to rumor, it was a gift of the Syrian Free Army that had stolen it from the government.

The love and conflict at the core of Shakespeare’s tragedy plays out as the action unfolds in this performance and, of course, is further intensified across this geographic divide. According to an eyewitness account, twelve-year-old Ibrahim, the actor who plays the young Romeo, had lost his mother and three sisters to government bombardment.²² For a year, he has lived as a patient at SAB. Several surgeries rescued his leg from amputation, and, for the majority of the performance, he traverses the stage on crutches. Disabled, he acts without the full use of his right leg. Nevertheless, for one of the play’s crucial scenes, a duel with the “fiery” Tybalt, he tosses one of the crutches aside and wields the other as his “sword” to the applause of his audiences. Himself a native of Homs, Ibrahim is allowed to look homeward through this digital connection. Along with Romeo, the Amman audience encounters in Homs his Juliet, a thirteen-year-old girl, who is wearing a *hijab* and also a mask, which conceals and protects her identity from government surveillance. For Romeo, in Amman, in order to interact with Juliet he needs to face a screen as Juliet, trapped in Homs, returns his gaze.

²⁰ See (Kottman 2013, p. 246). For a similar challenge to hegemony of Aristotelian tragedy, see (Burrow 2013, pp. 1–22). On the regnant theory of drama, see (Aristotle 2012); this theoretical approach seems to focus on doing as opposed to creating.

²¹ The in-text citations are to the critical edition of William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare 1990) and follow the standard form of citation to the act, scene, and line.

²² See (Taneja 2015). This performance did not receive as much high-profile media coverage as Bulbul’s 2014 production of *King Lear*; there are several reflections by observers available in English and French e.g., (L’Homme 2016). Some photographs and video stills are available online: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/photographs-of-a-syrian-romeo-and-juliet-2015> (accessed on 6 April 2020).

Written into this script are two narrators, one Homs-based and another Amman-based, who perform a couple of roles. The narrators not only help bridge the action between this spatial divide, they also moderate the technological disruptions. Often, already fragile, the internet connection is attenuated, and so the narrators attempt to moderate the technological disturbances that regularly interrupt the performance. The yearlong siege of Homs looms in the background. In one performance, exploding bombs, which were being dropped from Russian and Syrian planes, are audible as the sound reverberates and echoes faintly in the Homs video feed. During another performance, on at least one occasion, the audience waits as long as an hour for the action to resume. Without a reliable internet connection, circumstances sometimes demand patience. When reconnected, from Homs, the child-narrator vows, "I swear, if we are not caught by bombs or explosives, and if Juliet is not fired at by a sniper, we will still be here in the next scene".

Additionally, in this adaptation, Shakespeare's character of Friar Lawrence is renamed. At the start of the second act, the audience in Amman sees a young actor, disguised with a mask and wearing a cardboard crucifix around his neck. He assumes the name "Father Frans". In his scenes, a sketched crucifix hangs above. Through the Homs video feed, the performers and audience in Amman hear an organ solemnly accompany the actor as he prays. As the couple's sole confessor, the character in this version is an homage to Frans van der Lugt, a Dutch priest whose death in a besieged neighborhood of Homs' urban center coincides a nearly year to the date of these performances. In this version, after the first encounter between Romeo and Juliet, the action swiftly escalates to their secret marriage. Imagine, for a moment, the audience of Syrian refugees sitting in the attic of that Amman hospice, waiting with Romeo, as they behold Juliet's image as she is broadcast from Homs. Their exchanges and pledges of love attempt to bridge a vast divide, while periodically that fragile connection is interrupted without much assurance that it would be re-connected. On each occasion, the reality of war produces a sense that the audience is not simply a conscious, critical observer, but likewise is immersed in the drama unfolding before them. In the clandestine wedding scene, in Homs, Juliet kneels before Father Frans, and places a ring on her own hand. In Amman, with his vow, Romeo does the same.

What perhaps would be most notable to an outsider witnessing Bulbul's *Romeo and Juliet* would be the change in climax. Rather than following Shakespeare into the play's final act, the action comes to an abrupt halt. Instead of witnessing the series of tragic and misguided accidents that culminate in the deaths of the love-stricken protagonists, for a moment, the actors disrupt the escalating tensions and frenetic pace of the plot in word and deed. In this version, distinctively, the narrators also play a role by intervening occasionally in the action of the performance. It is the narrators, not the apothecary, who hand the vials of potion to Juliet and Romeo. There was no deception to confuse Juliet's family, no murder of Paris, no double suicide between the "star-crossed lovers", nor other tragic accidents that precipitate this "fateful" conclusion. Rather reimagined in light of the teachings of Father Frans, the couple does not venture unwittingly to the climatic violence and their eventual suicides. Rather, "to reflect Father Frans's message and the desire of all present for the conflict to end",²³ Bulbul revises Shakespeare's tragic conclusion in the third act. Drawing from the original text, with reference to the Friar Lawrence's plot to marry them, the narrator states, "The good monk Frans described what he wanted them to do". Interrupting the narrator, however, Homs-based Juliet declares, "Not true!" Seizing that ill-fated vial of sleeping potion, she hurls it to the ground. In Amman, following her, Romeo does the same. For those in Amman, next, they watch a young girl, who is acting as one of Juliet's retinue and the "Nurse, steps forward, crying: "Enough killing! Enough blood! Why are you killing us? We want to live like the rest of the world!"

Immediately, the audiences erupted in applause. After this climatic event, the players steered the action to the "curtain call". As the actors acknowledged the audience, first, they turned to bow toward the impaired, recuperated, and exiled audience of Syrians in Amman, and then turned to bow toward

²³ (Taneja 2015).

those sitting in that secret location in Homs. Chants broke out in the attic of the hospice. On this evening, many in this primarily Syrian audience—the director included—reacted to the performance in tears.

If the Palestinian people are best described as a “telephonic” people, as Mourid Barghouti²⁴ put it in his memoir to characterize the diaspora as a network of disembodied voices, Syrians may find some poetic resonance in the fragile, virtual, attenuated, interrupted communion that survives despite separation this performance attempts to convey. The appearance of “Father Frans”, on the other hand, also raises questions regarding the figure behind the character, whose influence presumably shaped this adaptation. What might this performance suggest about him and his character?

4. A Key Player Remembered: Frans van der Lugt’s *Vita* in Summary

As a beloved figure in Homs, in the most basic sense, the performance offers a way of introducing the story of Frans van der Lugt. In some respects, his is a familiar one. Born into a wealthy family in Den Haag, Netherlands, on 10 April 1938 van der Lugt received his schooling through Jesuit education until he entered the Society of Jesus as a novice in 1959. Once in the novitiate, he undertook his philosophical studies in Nijmegen through 1964, after which he was assigned to missionary fieldwork in Lebanon. In Bikfaya, he studied Arabic and was eventually transferred to work at a Jesuit secondary school, St. Jean Damascène in the Homs neighborhood of Bustan-Diwan in the late 1960s. During his theological studies at the Jesuit scholasticate in Fourvière (Lyons), he earned a graduate degree in psychology. In between another advanced degree in psychology, he returned to the Levant. As his adopted home, Homs became the place where he initiated a range of ministerial services to meet the needs of not only Christians but also Syrians as a whole. His story, in short, is a biography of a European Jesuit missionary assigned to fieldwork at moment of significant religious and cultural transformation.²⁵

If the Second Vatican Council represents a specific theological event that for Catholics, as Massimo Faggioli claims, “teaches us to look at the global and cosmic *katholon*, but especially to understand the global and cosmic through the poor, through ‘the margins,’”²⁶ the life of Frans van der Lugt might yield important lessons. A few idiosyncratic aspects may distinguish his own vocation. For instance, while in Belgium for his tertiate formation in 1974, he began to develop an interest in Zen meditation, a practice not typical for his missionary province in Lebanon and Syria. Once back in Syria, he became an active organizer and exponent of developing communities and care facilities for the mentally disabled, adopting the L’Arche model which Jean Vanier founded in Trosly, France. Outside Homs, he established an institute called al-’Ard (“Earth”) that focused this mission locally as it developed to serve roughly fifty disabled people from nearby families, both Muslim and Christian. The center became the site for Muslim-Christian service that was directed toward environmental problems. A central component of that organization was *Dar al-Salām* (“the House of Peace”) where all were invited to develop their spiritual practice. Five years later, in Damascus, he replicated this mission under the aegis of L’Arche. Through these initiatives, Frans van der Lugt helped bring Muslims and Christians together through concrete projects of collaboration and social justice.

For Syrians, probably, the most distinct of van der Lugt’s many initiatives was a youth-focused endeavor, which he developed under the simple title of *al-masīr* (“the hike”). For Muslim and Christian youth, whether a daily excursion or an eight-day retreat, he created and operated an interreligious space that was mobile. Customarily, he offered daily mass, to which Muslim youth were invited, while the shared contemplation and reflection often took the form of Zen meditations. For this and other endeavors, regardless of religious identity, many Syrians referred to him as *Abouna Fransis* (“our Father

²⁴ See (Barghouti 2000).

²⁵ For a timeline, see (Begheyn 2015, pp. 12–14).

²⁶ (Faggioli 2013, p. 816).

Frans"). What is particularly striking, in sum, is how van der Lugt fostered and exemplifies a dialogical and an interreligious commitment into his Jesuit identity.

A possible reason for the relative neglect of his story might be that he lies in the shadow of other Jesuits. Within the Society's Near East province, in recent decades, fostering a commitment to dialogue and interreligious collaboration has become a key apostolic goal. Prominently, for example, the Italian Jesuit Paolo Dall'Oglio, who received his degree in Islamic studies and has written widely on Islam from a Christian perspective, revived the monastery Dar Moussa as a place of interreligious hospitality prior to his abduction in 2013.²⁷ For the Syrian context, in contrast, van der Lugt's narrative may appear too simple and ordinary. On the other hand, given the magnitude of the Syrian crisis, his role might also seem marginal at best. Amidst increased bombardment, during the season of Lent in 2012, he gave witness to a Dutch readership of the interreligious solidarity as several dozen Syrians were becoming like a "family". As the children of an Orthodox family sit in the front row during the Palm Sunday mass, he asked the Muslim imam living with them to read a passage from the Qur'an. As Easter approached, for his readers, van der Lugt remarked how seamlessly his Muslim neighbors encountered this basic structure of death, life, resurrection ("Dood, leven, verrijzen"). What van der Lugt admires most in them is how refugees are so well received, simply stating: "The parable of the good (*barmhartige*) Samaritan is in their blood".²⁸

Nevertheless, over the course of twenty months, van der Lugt continued to carry out his ministries to Christians and Muslims. As the fighting intensified in Homs, at the turn of 2014, the United Nations exhorted foreigners to evacuate before or by February. When 1400 foreign nationals did evacuate, van der Lugt chose to remain despite the siege, with his own decisive commitment made to advocate on behalf of those Syrians still entrapped in Homs. Explicitly challenging the international community, in both French and Arabic, he initiated a series of YouTube broadcasts so as, from these margins, to be explicitly "representing the Christian people of this area" and also to address his global audience on behalf of their Muslim neighbors. Although they were enduring this suffering, he proclaims, they did not want to die of starvation, and they endure with a "divine patience". Later, amidst increased bombardment, on 6th April 2014, van der Lugt wrote to a Facebook community of Syrians scattered throughout the diaspora. In that final message, he witnessed how faith could help them bear these difficulties, "to be patient and to continue to hope". In concluding his meditation, he also shared their anticipation of "Easter, reflecting on crossing from death to resurrection". In that brief missive, he expressed, "Light shines from a dark cave feel like we are in the valley of the darkness, but we can see that light far away, leading us to life again . . . We wish this resurrection for Syria". He signed off with his distinctive slogan "*ilā' al-amām*" to console and encourage his companions "forward, onward".²⁹

On the next day, 7 April 2014, that is, two days prior to Palm Sunday, a masked gunman—whose identity and motive still remain unknown—forced his way into the Jesuit residence in Bustan al-Diwan. After van der Lugt was pulled into the atrium of the modest complex, he was shot twice.

Immediately, in reaction, the archbishop of Nijmegen declared van der Lugt a "martyr". Before a general audience in the Vatican on April 9, Pope Francis invoked his name as a reminder of the widespread suffering in Syria. In the same atrium where van der Lugt encountered his death, his funeral ceremony drew not only fellow Jesuits, neighboring Christians, but also many Muslims, including Sunni and Shia imams. In Homs, mourners gathered around his simple burial site in the garden of the Jesuit residence. To the extent possible, spontaneously, this site has served as a pilgrimage destination for a number of Syrians. For days, both Christians and Muslims prayed at his tomb. At the grave, one Muslim woman who identified as Joumana reveals, "I confided my secrets and he consoled,

²⁷ (Montjou 2006). For useful cultural context of this movement, see (Loosley 2008).

²⁸ See (van der Lugt 2012). This article's title can be translated as "Joys and Sorrows from Homs". For a reprint, see (Begheyn 2015, pp. 63–70). The Dutch term *barmhartige* is better translated specifically as "merciful" or "compassionate".

²⁹ The original Facebook post has become deactivated. For a reprint, in Dutch, see (Begheyn 2015, pp. 75–76).

he was a priest for me".³⁰ For diasporic Syrians, his name subsequently became a place to gather virtually and literally offered a source for mutual veneration between Muslims and Christians.

5. By Way of Analogy: From Christian Witness to the Crucified Peoples

As a complex case in its own right, embedded with this adapted performance, the example of Frans van der Lugt poses a challenge for Muslim-Christian comparative theology: How do we make sense of his complex *theological* performance? The first aspect of this challenge regards the Christian tendency to evaluate Christian martyrdom in terms of persecution and a restrictive conception of the term. The second is how to relate the settings and theologies of people who inhabit radically different political and religious situations. Given the apparent interreligious significance that he seems to bear, the question about *how* we characterize Frans van der Lugt matters inherently from a Catholic standpoint.

Based on a specific set of assumptions, Christians may be predisposed to a specific way of interpreting the case of Frans van der Lugt in terms of persecution. Consider, for instance, the opinion of the distinguished Catholic journalist John Allen, Jr., who asserted shortly after van der Lugt's death that he should become the "patron saint of persecuted Christians". As he tells us, due to his profile, van der Lugt's name made the headlines when others never do. Similar cases abound, he claims.³¹ For Allen and others, theologian Lawrence Cunningham confesses, the sheer difficulty to imagine martyrdom otherwise: "[it is] very difficult for me to bracket the nearly two-thousand history of the memory of the Roman martyrs".³² On the other hand, others may wish to stress van der Lugt's importance as a figure to promote a human rights agenda. However, it matters how those images either exclude or embrace certain persons. At one extreme, we might suppose, the risk is that his name is rendered so as to make its meaning unrecognizable from his life as lived and, at the other, to dilute his purpose in a way that robs his example of its special theological power.

As a general rule, from an ecclesial perspective, the core criterion for determining Christian martyrdom is death "out of hatred of the faith" (*odium fidei*). In other words, as typically stressed, the recognition of a Christian as a martyr depends on the motive of the murderer. Moreover, this stance presupposes that the martyr accepts death voluntarily. Much has been written of this internal Catholic debate that will not be reproduced here. Rather, it should be asked: But how closely does this narrative tradition and its conception of martyrdom resemble the case under consideration? Concerning the particularities of the case of Frans van der Lugt, it seems, there are a number of problems. At this point, for instance, it is impossible to ascertain the murderer's motive. The notion of an act of martyrdom, moreover, seems to overemphasize death at the expense of a wider scope. Plus, if both the funereal visitations and the performance are any indication, Syrians honor him for more than his violent death. Such a conception, furthermore, seems to highlight religious otherness at the point of violence and then to disregard otherness when shifting from moment to death to theological implications. Theological speaking, how might we respond to this penchant and also to the novel issues that the van der Lugt case poses? Case reasoning itself might offer a mode of reflection to identify similarities to standard and relevant cases that shed light on the distinctiveness of cases that present novel problems.

Responding to the political and religious reality in El Salvador specifically and Latin America more widely, the Jesuit and liberation theologian Jon Sobrino perceived a "paradoxical situation". Based on the set of assumptions regarding martyrdom, as outlined above, Sobrino observed that there are those who are attempting to live out the gospel and who model what it means to incarnate Jesus'

³⁰ See "Pleurs et prières autour de la tombe du père Frans, le 'saint' de Homs", *L'Orient Le Jour* (16 May 2014), p. 10. Available online: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/867509/pleurs-et-prieres-autour-de-la-tombe-du-pere-frans-le-saint-de-homs.html> (accessed on 6 April 2020).

³¹ (Allen 2014). For a scholarly project with a maximally broad definition of Christian martyrdom, see (Johnson and Zurlo 2014); van der Lugt is cited on p. 682.

³² See (Cunningham 2011, p. 13).

mission and yet the church does not deem martyrs because they are killed by those who are nominally or at least believe themselves to be Christian. Since Karl Rahner argued for a “certain broadening” of the Christian conception of martyrdom beyond the restrictive sense,³³ the topic is the subject of a well-chronicled debate within Catholic theology. Plus, as Ernesto Valiente proposes, the contributions that Sobrino’s work offers is better understood in the context of Christian discipleship.³⁴ For the case under question, I want to outline briefly how similar cases help reframe the question of martyrdom in Christological terms of witnessing.

For Sobrino, first of all, the general rule determining Christian martyrdom did not fit the circumstances of the Salvadoran reality. Instead, in *Jesus the Liberator*, he argued the priority should be the choice of “setting”. For him, the war-torn situation of El Salvador in the wake of its own civil war provided the hermeneutical backdrop for his reconsideration of Christ, martyrs, and the challenge of justice. As far as his theological agenda is concerned, it will have to suffice to summarize as he does: “from the standpoint of the poor we think we come to know Christ better, and it is this better-known Christ, we think, who points us to where the poor are”.³⁵ To this end, particular figures become vital as interpretive keys for this hermeneutical circle.

As a major example, the Salvadoran Archbishop Óscar Romero (1917–1980) provides another relevant case by which reframe the theological question of Christian martyrdom. It was in light of Romero’s example that Karl Rahner posited a fundamental distinction between the classical conception of Christian martyrs and one emergent through such significant figures. Whereas the former reflect a “passive” sense of “endurance”, the latter are engaged in an “active struggle”, that is marked by “a supreme act of love and fortitude”.³⁶ From El Salvador, following Rahner, Sobrino also sought to highlight such “non-poor” intermediaries who through their witness to the “situation to the poor” exemplify how setting operates by “allowing oneself to be affected by it”.³⁷ Turning to an example like Romero, Sobrino claimed that there are “innumerable martyrs who have given their lives out of love and who are still present and active, and this helps us understand the martyr Jesus who was raised from the dead”.³⁸

Understanding martyrdom in terms of Jesus’ death does not focus exclusively on the cross, as Sobrino teaches, rather the example of martyrs sheds light on Jesus. In this manner, Sobrino starts to retrieve the Christological roots of martyrdom, as evidenced particularly in the gospel narratives. In *Jesus the Liberator*, at times, Sobrino supposes theatrical language may imply heresy and, at its worst, distance a praxis of justice from real inequities.³⁹ On the other hand, it does begin to capture the disposition of denunciation by which Jesus addresses hope and the situation of the poor: “In systematic language, Jesus has the audacity to proclaim the outcome of the drama of salvation, the overcoming, at last, of the anti-Kingdom, the unequivocally saving coming of God”.⁴⁰ In *Christ the Liberator*, having identified Jesus as the “definitive witness”,⁴¹ Sobrino elaborates how Christian “praxis”, by which he means all those activities Jesus used to transform social reality in the direction of the Kingdom of God, while “unmasking” the anti-Kingdom.

By way of analogy, according to Sobrino, certain examples cast a similar figure through their “call to struggle against the anti-Kingdom”.⁴² Just as the disciples see themselves as “witnesses” (Acts 2:32), similarly, these figures model an “imitation of Christ” (*imitatio Christi*). Like Jesus, in life and death,

³³ (Rahner 1983).

³⁴ See (Valiente 2014).

³⁵ (Sobrino 1993, p. 35).

³⁶ (Rahner 1983, p. 10). Sobrino credits Rahner for paving the way for this understanding of Christian martyrdom from a Latin American perspective.

³⁷ (Sobrino 1993, p. 30).

³⁸ (Sobrino 1993, p. 8).

³⁹ See, e.g., (Sobrino 1993, p. 118).

⁴⁰ For uses of “drama” to describe Jesus’ praxis, see (Sobrino 1993, pp. 76, 118, 239).

⁴¹ (Sobrino 2001, p. 137).

⁴² (Sobrino 1993, p. 116).

these figures shed light on both the identity and relevance of Jesus for the present political and religious reality. So Sobrino asserts: “therefore, theologically, those who today bear witness with their lives to God’s Kingdom, like Jesus, are martyrs and in them we find the *analogatum princeps* of martyrdom”.⁴³

In 2018, Pope Francis canonized Romero as a saint. For Sobrino, the importance of this figure is that “when we call these victims martyrs, we mean that they reproduce the life and death of Jesus and they shed a great light”. In a fundamentally relational sense, thus, Christian martyrs point toward a wider “constellation of witnesses” according to Sobrino, specifically to “all of those who today resemble Jesus by living and dying as he did”.⁴⁴ In his view, as a “dynamic sacrament”, the poor as victims also call Christians to conversion. If Romero’s case exemplified “martyrdom in terms of the anti-Kingdom’s response to those who struggle actively for the Kingdom”, the case of those who “unprotected masses, who are put to death in huge numbers innocently and anonymously” reveal martyrdom in terms of “bearing the sin of the anti-Kingdom”. In this sense, Sobrino refers to them as “martyred people”.⁴⁵ In *Christ the Liberator*, he adds: “And when we call these victims martyrs, we mean that they reproduce the life and death of Jesus and they shed a great light”.⁴⁶ It in this context, that Pope Francis’s appeal to Syria from the memory of his fellow Jesuit to Syria as a whole is understandable, as he identifies, Syria as “my beloved country” and a “the crucified people”. In this respect, turning to “victims”, they seek to discern a “difficult” hope between death and life.

Regarding the case of Frans van der Lugt, how close does he resemble this standard case?

Of course, his case is not identical with Romero’s. In *Christ the Liberator*, Sobrino assumes his reflections by suggesting a point about the finite and limited nature of all interpretations, and his “as an essay” and so “to write from the *reality* of faith, set in motion by the event of Jesus Christ, and from the *situation of victims* at the present time”. Although his reflections are grounded and set against the backdrop of El Salvador, he explicitly acknowledges that new Christological essays such through interreligious dialogue “introduce various forms of *otherness* into christology, not only that generated by *oppression*”.⁴⁷ Precisely with respect to this issue, the witness of Frans van der Lugt commends fellow Catholics to reconsider their Muslim neighbors as those who give witness to God’s mercy. As such, we shall turn from witnessing truth in the dramatic examples of Christian martyr to witnessing truth in the “shadow-play” of divine self-disclosure.

6. Towards a More Receptive Heart: Witnessing Signs of Mercy in Dialogue with Ibn ‘Arabī

For Muslims, the meaning of “witnessing” bears profound theological import and ethical implications. Of course, when they recite the *bismillah* in salāt prayers, Muslims witness liturgically to God’s mercy and compassion. Concerning Muslim-Christian relations, the term has also become a source for misunderstanding. In dialogue, witnessing permits the kind of nuance and opportunity to address mutual misunderstandings. “To engage in witness, then, is also to challenge and correct false witnesses”, Joshua Ralston contends, “and to invite one another into dialogue and dispute in the ‘most virtuous manner’ (Surat al-‘Ankabut, 29:46)”.⁴⁸ In the context of Muslim-Christian dialogue, the term *shahīd* tends to be associated with martyrdom on the battlefield. However, this hardly exhausts the range of meaning and depth that the term carries.

In 1890, as a matter of fact, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* debuted in Cairo under the marquee as *Shuhada al-gharam* (“Witnesses of love”).⁴⁹ Some Muslims and scholars of Islam have seen this play as traversing comparable terrain as that of *Layla wa Majnūn*, that classic Arabic fable of a lover driven

⁴³ (Sobrino 1993, p. 268).

⁴⁴ (Sobrino 2001, p. 340).

⁴⁵ (Sobrino 1993, p. 271).

⁴⁶ (Sobrino 2001, p. 8).

⁴⁷ (Sobrino 2001, p. 2).

⁴⁸ (Ralston 2017, p. 33).

⁴⁹ For background of this production and Arabic reception-history, see (Bayer 2007).

into madness for the beloved. As the love between the couple is related, many will hear a praise of God as the creator of such love and beauty. The term itself, moreover, is not limited to a “martyr”, but is embodied more widely and diversely as a literal witness to God’s mercy. In the quranic usage of *shahīd*, the “martyr” connotation rarely occurs and the basis is tenuous.⁵⁰ Within the Qur’ān, on one occasion that is especially pertinent for Muslim-Christian solidarity, the call to witness emerges in the context of the *‘ahl al-kitāb* (an honorific term for Jews and Christians as “People of the Book”). The authorial voice urges Muslims to reach out, inviting all to “come to a common word”. Yet if *‘ahl al-kitāb* should turn their backs on God, that is, “if they turn away, say, ‘Bear witness that we are *muslimūn*’” (Q 3:64). The objective here is not to provide a vast survey, more modestly, rather in what follows let us consider how a distinctive way of Islamic thinking cultivates an affective response.

Take, for example, the notion of “witnessing truth” that Ibn ‘Arabī develops in *Fusūs al-Hikam*⁵¹ specifically one of the central chapters called the “Fass of Shuayb”.⁵² As the *Shaykh al-Akbar* (the “Greatest Master”) explains in this chapter, the heart of the one who knows is like the “setting of the stone of the ring”, and that setting corresponds, conforms, and accords with whatever shape the stone itself has. If the basic concern is attaining human wholeness, each chapter explores the perfection of the figure from it draws its inspiration. For investigating the “wisdom of the heart”, as James Morris notes, his specific chapter has served as a *locus classicus* for the essential question of discerning the human “face”, that is, whether to turn one’s face toward or away from God.⁵³ As with most of his probing reflections, it is a work impossible to summarize. At a point of departure, as he explicates, witnessing is a condition that is acquired through a wisdom that is derived from diviner mercy. In the chapter, he guides his readers through the dynamic interplay between God’s self-disclosure and the “heart of the knower”. Accordingly, Ibn ‘Arabī is elaborating theologically the various meanings of “signs” (*āyāt*) that the Qur’ān proffers. First, in the basic sense, this refers to the quranic self-reference to verses themselves as signs of deeper meaning. Second, it refers to the potentiality of what might be deemed “cosmic phenomena” to reflect divine reality. Third, with respect to the one who would inquire, it connotes the self-understanding of the seeker. This ambiguity is deepened, when the term “witness” is drawn upon not only to conjure the one who is seeking God as the beloved, but also to articulate a divine attribute of God, namely “the witness” (*al-shahīd*).⁵⁴ As each chapter reflects a different form of receptivity, the work elaborates a deepening sense of the religious reality as a “shadow-play”, the metaphorical image that Ibn ‘Arabī employs to guide the seeker in this spiritual discipline of perceiving between light and shadows, the seen and unseen. In similitude, he evokes suggestively, a dramatic sensibility to these actual occasions of divine self-disclosure.

For his readers, Ibn ‘Arabī showcases the heart in this specific chapter. Like a stage for this “shadow-play”, the heart is drawn into an act of “unveiling” (*kushf*). Occasions of such divine manifestation, as Ibn ‘Arabī sets forth, the heart “expands” and “contracts” as the play alternates between unveiling and witnessing. In moments of unveiling, as Ibn ‘Arabī states: “He raises the veil between Himself and the servant and the servant sees Him in the form of his belief”. Recognition of divine self-disclosure comes to mirror the very content of the knower’s witnessing. At the crux of the chapter, as it is revealed, inquiring into the meaning of “witnessing” is itself a function of what the Qur’ān prescribes in Surah Qāf: “Surely there is a reminder in that for whoever has a heart, or gives an ear attentively, while he is witnessing” (Q 50:37). Nonetheless, readers may notice an appreciable acceptance of play. Take, for instance, how the name Shuayb itself becomes a site for wordplay. The

⁵⁰ For a useful overview of the term *shahīd* and its variants, with suggestions for further reading in the secondary literature, see (Rippin 2005; Kohlberg 1997).

⁵¹ There are several reliable English translations: see (Austin 1980; Dagli 2004; and Abramamov 2015). Translated passages are Austin’s, unless otherwise noted.

⁵² Many Muslims claim that Shuayb is the biblical figure Jethro. For a thorough discussion of scriptural references and allusions of each chapter in Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fusūs al-Hikam*, see (Chittick 1984).

⁵³ (Morris 2005, pp. 131, 333 n32).

⁵⁴ This divine attribute is used in the Qur’ān on several occasions (see, e.g., Q 85:9).

name is rooted in Arabic with connotations of branching (*tash'ib*), diverging, and so Ibn 'Arabī uses this to point how each “belief” has a particular pathway. For him, this pertains specifically to the inspired state that each prophetic figure represents in each chapter. Regarding the wisdom that coheres this chapter, as a reminder, the verse elucidates the careful process of discernment. Regarding all the diversity of forms of divine self-disclosure, if one possesses a heart, witnessing happens. Just as in prayer, when one listens, so too witnessing happens. By attending carefully, Ibn 'Arabī's readers are shown momentary glimpses into divine mercy that shapes and perfects the heart as alternating between unveiling and witnessing (*shuhud*). In the Akbarī sense, witnessing is not to be confused with a developmental spectrum, rather it establishes as a particular spiritual “station” that opposes the state of “heedlessness”.

By contemplating this sense of witnessing truth, in the concluding reflection, Ibn 'Arabī identifies the movement of divine mercy that courses through reality as like breathing. Rather than alternating between inhalation and exhalation, however, he elevates the relation between “Lord” and “servant” as a “mutual dependence” insofar it is divine mercy breathing out in creation and, simultaneously, being inhaled from creation. For Ibn 'Arabī, one might presume, as with most cases, that the dead are more fully aware of this reality than are the living. In kind, carefully attending to the transmutation of divine mercy into all of its multiplicity of forms can shape the heart of a servant. It is an insight that, analogously, may elucidate a “constellation of witnesses”.

The comparative theological tactic usually is to return to a Christian source, typically, a text in order to show how the non-Christian source sheds new light. Indeed, regarding Sobrino's retrieval of Christological roots of martyrdom, such a move can be fruitful. Sobrino himself suggests two martyrdom traditions in the New Testament, the Pauline and the Johannine.⁵⁵ This heartfelt sense of receptivity, correspondence, and mutual dependence can highlight the prototypical characterization of the Jesus as “witness”, a martyr that Luke portrays as not quite like Socrates, rather in a “long lines of martyrs”, whose innocence and equipoise cannot be for one who “cheerfully accepted poison”.⁵⁶ Consider how, like Jesus, Stephen the one whom Luke describes as “witness” (*martos*), utters, “Lord, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:52). It is an echo of those unforgettable words Luke places on the lips of the crucified Jesus, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk 23:46). Alternatively, by returning to Sobrino's theology of martyrdom in light of Ibn 'Arabī, the key question shifts: From “How should I as a Christian disciple bear witness to truth in the face of this anti-Kingdom injustice?” to “How could these signs of mercy and compassion be received?” In other words, critically, the Akbarī notion of “witnessing” unveils and deepens an affective response. Thus, out of solidarity, this exercise returns to that crucial scene to read whether it offers a momentary unity between audiences and performers. To this end, the performance itself can serve as a foundational source for Muslim-Christian comparative theology, the goal of which is to critically stimulate a deeper case discussion. In a key of mutuality, Christians and Muslims could assist each other in reading them correctly.

7. A Theological Reprise: Romeo, Juliet, and the Crucial Moment of Truth

Theologically speaking, how do we witness to this performance and its aftermath? As of this writing, government forces have entrapped one million internally displaced Syrians in Idlib province. Millions more remain in exile, whether from Jordan and Lebanon to Germany, Turkey, and Greece. In the United States, over the course of the last few years, only a few hundred Syrians have received asylum as refugees. Aware as this essay is of its location, it must point out the danger of expropriating these child actors, their struggle, pain, and beauty, as a means to an end. Instead, a greater danger might be indifference as after nine years, cultural “fatigue” around the ongoing conflict may have

⁵⁵ (Sobrino 1993, p. 265).

⁵⁶ For philological examination, see (Strathmann 1967). For debate of this issue in academic literature criticism, see (Talbert 1982; Sterling 2001; Tabb 2015).

become habitual. Taking the performance itself as the “foundation” for this concluding reflection, thus, the goal is twofold: in the spirit of theatrical action, as Peter Brook, it is to render that crucial moment in the communal sense, specifically, to lend a “temporary glimpse” with a vision to “to make whole”; and secondly, to foster a commitment to Muslim-Christian solidarity through this work of theatrical drama to cultivate empathy, exercise mercy, and recognize the signs of hope.

While as a comparative theological reflection risks expropriating, the performance itself poses features potential risks. Chiefly, to what extent, may the director Bulbul manipulate or exploit these child actors, using them as a means to end? Is this performance used to score political points? On the other hand, due to the perilous situation in Homs, the child actors risked their own lives in order to rehearse and participate in the production. In secret so as to avoid government surveillance, on a daily basis for four months, these four actors crossed the frontlines of the war on their way to the hidden theater.⁵⁷ At a different scale of power, for further consideration, how could the use of Shakespeare possibly blind the case discussion to dynamics of cultural and power in Arab culture?⁵⁸ How can Christians and Muslims work on the basis of such a performance to ensure flowering of creative expression without such artistic practices contributing to the erasure of Arab culture?⁵⁹ Based on this case, these are a sample of urgent questions that may be raised in addition to those already considered. A priority, however, should be placed on a basic question: Who concretely stands to benefit? Turning to the basic reason and the manner in which Nawār Bulbul and his actors appropriate Shakespeare’s tragedy is illuminating not only for the suggestive style it refers to the dark corners of their political reality but also that, in spite of it all, how it focuses upon the love remaining at the core.

How could art and theatrical drama more specifically be helpful for displaced people and especially these war-affected children? As a theatrical mediation of the crucible of tensions that define so much of Syrian experience, Bulbul’s productions are experiments in “drama therapy”. For juvenile and traumatized actors, whether living in the Za’atari, recuperating in the hospice, or besieged in Homs, “drama therapy” addresses a basic need in a context that is lacking educational resources and basic care for mental health. Although the process of drama therapy is complex, as he explicates through a communications strategist, Bulbul’s commitment is “to humanize and inspire children through art”.⁶⁰ Standing on the basic notion that theatrical arts can transform war-affected children in Za’atari, this specific play offers specific indications of the benefits. For instance, consider how Ibrahim, the disabled thespian who plays Romeo, through the play is reminded that he is still connected to Syria, and more specifically his hometown of Homs. While reconsidering this performance, let us attend to how the adaptations suggest the kinds of dispositions and possibly even virtues this performance might engender in these actors.

7.1. *Shakespeare, Interrupted: Cognitive “Therapy”*

Due to a crisis setting of this performance alone, convincingly, the performance argues for the benefits of tactful appropriation of theatrical drama and selective use of tragic elements. In this specific sense, this adaptation might be grouped in concert with other unconventional performances of Shakespeare’s well-loved tragedy about two “star-crossed lovers”. Consider as another illustrative example how a Romany theatre troupe from Macedonia staged a political statement, as Anthony Dawson frames it: “Their *Romeo* was set in Bosnia, Juliet a Muslim and Romeo a Christian; the bombed-out ancient bridge at Mostar was used as a twisted balcony for Juliet, who spoke to Romeo

⁵⁷ For an Amman-based observer account from a participant-observer, see (Pitchford 2019, pp. 140–43).

⁵⁸ For a comparative theological model that accounts for a “third position”, see (Stosch 2012).

⁵⁹ For “developmental logics”, see (Escobar 1995, 2008).

⁶⁰ The theatrical project is self-funded. For a public appeal, see the crowdfunding campaign: <https://www.kickstarer.com/projects/331042491/syrian-children-play-romeo-and-juliet-separated-by>. Hazami Barmada, a communications strategist, authored the letter.

over the gorge”.⁶¹ In this case, the religious identities of the actors are downplayed and yet the physical separation that exists in the two hundred miles between Amman and Homs is both emphasized and mediated.

If the purpose of this performance as a kind of drama therapy is for the children to inhabit as actors—albeit fleetingly and periodically—a different world, this involves learning different or new dispositions. In this regard, Peter Brook may provide an insight that differentiates theatrical action from ritual action. While ritual might involve actions that are programmatic and defined, “exercises” are radically different insofar as those actions “mean that as a beginner you do an exercise to learn”. For example, taking “dance exercises” in a monastery, he suggests still, “doing those in the way they have learned, at that moment, present an open illustration, for anyone who wants to look at it, of what it means to be in touch with another level”.⁶²

In the case of Syria, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* seems to become so useful not just to illuminate the dark recesses of the political reality that this conflict imposes, but also primarily in order to highlight the love that survives despite it all. With the war and separation so present, this adaptation de-escalates the violence that permeates the original text in favor of focusing upon the insurmountable love between Romeo and Juliet. For those familiar with the text, it should be noted that this performance takes great effort not to remove violence from the plot, but rather to push it toward the margins. Noticeably, for instance, Romeo does not kill Tybalt, but disarms him. The skirmish in the public square of Verona that opens the dramatic tensions between the feuding Capulets and Montagues, in the original version, remains off-stage. Rather, as opposed to the mistaken signals that precipitate how the action unfolds in the original texts, the resilience of love is on full display as Juliet and Romeo declare loudly their desire to live.

7.2. A Resurrection Appearance: Moral “Therapy”

How can the example of Frans van der Lugt, a corpus of a different kind, be adduced in a role suitable to the way his martyrdom resonates with Syrian identity and may reconfigure Muslim–Christian dialogue? Although there is ample room for discussion, it should be based on the premise that there might be more truth between Christian and Muslim perspectives regarding his legacy than in Christian reflections alone. The appearance of “Father Frans”, in a sense, invites a consideration of how his memory itself becomes a virtual space of healing for Muslims and Christians.

It is forgivable to find his character somewhat puzzling. Notably, consider how even his fellow Jesuit Jad Chabli, while delivering his eulogy at the funeral mass, commemorated his friend by way of critical questioning: “Why did you stay in Homs when you could have left, working with Jesuit companions who spend their days and a good part of their nights busy with refugees, to give them food? Why did you stay when you knew that you could save your very precious life that was always in service to the Syrian people whom you aided all the time?”⁶³

For Catholics, according to theological ethicist Stephen Pope, Frans van der Lugt in his concrete actions teaches “inclusive character of Christian mercy”, and specifically “a giving of oneself in a way that helps others appreciate their own dignity”.⁶⁴ Thus, he models a service ethic of compassion. Similarly, from a Catholic perspective, Hans Schaeffer recognizes in his “steadfast conviction” to remain in Homs a commitment that stems from “an agapeic love rooted in a relation with God, who is

⁶¹ (Dawson 2002, p. 186).

⁶² (Brook 1979, pp. 58–59).

⁶³ The translation is my own: “Nous pouvons poser la même question à Frans: pourquoi es-tu resté à Homs quand tu pouvais en sortir, travailler avec tes compagnons jésuites qui passent leur journées et une bonne partie de leurs nuits à s’occuper des réfugiés, à leur donner à manger? Pourquoi es-tu resté quand tu savais que tu pouvais sauver ta vie très précieuse parce qu’elle a toujours été au service de peuple syrien que tu as aidé tant de fois?”

⁶⁴ (Pope 2015, p. 142).

love". Such merciful actions, he proposes, "may function as a sign of hope in a world full of misery and evil".⁶⁵

For others, for all of his simplicity, his example might illuminate a service ethics of hospitality. Even for those some of those closest to him, van der Lugt represented a walking paradox. Tony Homsy, for example, was once one of those Syrian youths who participated in the "hikes" with van der Lugt. Having become a Jesuit, he was studying in the United States when he learned of his elder confrere's death. Recollecting the jokes about van der Lugt, he highlighted specifically his meditations, and how they were Zen, not Ignatian. "But he was faithful, I see it now", confesses Homsy. "He was passionate about life, love and not fearing death. Full of joy. I see Christ clearly in him now. In deed more than in words".⁶⁶

Listening to these Syrian voices in their affirmation of love and life, furthermore, may underscore this point. Revised as such, Juliet cannot accept the narrator's account that it is Father Frans who suggests the scheme with the sleeping potion. It is noteworthy that no character is so maligned in *Romeo and Juliet* by reviewers and critics as Friar Laurence. Many take him to be either a pitiful victim of the plot or a naïve interloper whose attempt to help the two lovers actually determines their eventual demise. Unless one were not capable of a more generous spirit toward this character, his opening soliloquy may even inspire with his praise of the earth "and from her womb children of diver kind". Moreover, for the audience, he lays forth how the theatrical action that unfolds should be observed with humility, judicious vigilance, and also magnanimity and judicious: "Many for many virtues excellent, None but for some, and yet all different" (2.iii.10–14). The friar's own "bid" to redirect the impulses of the two protagonists and so to channel the play's passions, in the end, succumbs to the overwhelming pace and intensity of the action that unfolds. "By the play's end, of course", Michael Goldman critiques, "Lawrence's intervention has proved an example misapplied".⁶⁷ As familiar as we may be with the original, however, this case does not represent the same character. Those scenes in the original do happen in this adaptation. Revising Friar Laurence's character and recasting him into the mold of "Father Frans" seems to irreversibly alter how the action unfolds.

From a Catholic point-of-view, Peter Brook's appreciation for the manifest presence of an "incarnational" moment speaks to the possibility of a deep truth this performance creates. Just as Imam Husayn emerges between the performers and audiences in *ta'ziyeh*, a communion happens that is difficult to distinguish. "Nobody could draw the line between different orders of reality", Brook remembers, "It was an incarnation at that particular moment he was being martyred again in front of those villagers". In this case, possibly in kind, the performers and the audiences of this event may have registered this intensification of affect with the appearance of "Father Frans", only one year removed from the death of Frans van der Lugt may have experienced a similar presence. The basic appeal to this figure can pose a range of questions about the influence and power of such a reference that Brook's observation may not exhaust.

Resurrecting "Father Frans" in this way, however, might also present us with something of a paradox. For those in Amman, watching the Homs video feed, the body of the young masked actor evoked anew the presence of "Father Frans". If the performance creates a kind of presence, at the same time, it also enacts an absence. As he comments on the *ta'ziyeh* phenomenon, Talal Asad offers a different chord that may pertain to this case, remarking: "that who or what is represented in both absent and present at the same time (re-presented)".⁶⁸ As a remembrance of the dead, how may the inclusion of Father Frans contribute a fuller awareness of the political and religious reality that these performers and their audiences must confront?

⁶⁵ (Schaeffer 2018, p. 1).

⁶⁶ See (Gilger 2014) and for his own reflections see (Homsy 2015).

⁶⁷ See (Goldman 1972, pp. 33–44). This paragraph is clearly indebted to some of Goldman's insights.

⁶⁸ (Asad 2003, p. 75).

Nevertheless, when re-reading the original text in light of the adaptation, light is also shed on the original. How altered, for instance, is the sense of poor Capulet's regard for his beloved daughter Juliet as a "stranger in the world" and "the hopeful lady of my earth", an "Earth that has swallowed all my hopes but she" (2.ii.8, 14–5). So too, we might be forgiven for interpreting differently the moment when Juliet characterizes the friar in the form of "Father Frans" as her "ghostly confessor" (2.vi.21), or when the priest himself explains his own efforts to console the boy Romeo's anxieties about "banishment" as a "dear mercy" (3.iii.28). With other readers, we should feel invited to role-play these scenes, while bearing in mind the complexities and the novelty that this case poses to our self-understandings.

7.3. "I Spy a Kind of Hope": Affective "Therapy"

This leads us to the principal goal of "drama therapy", and how these child actors illustrate some of its benefits. In what follows, based on Brook's threefold sense and structure of theatrical action as potentially "religious" moments, I will propose what I take to be at least two signs of hope with three tentative and yet adequately clear lessons.

For Brook, recall, theatrical action can accomplish on occasion "temporary glimpses" that momentarily offer a radical shift in horizon between audiences and performers. In this moment, he suggests, a "healing process" is involved. Not only are such moments "salutary", in the holistic sense, they also become communal specifically between performers and audiences. With respect to this performance, conceivably, this climatic scene might provide a basis for the kind of momentary "reintegration" that Peter Brook has observed. By this, he refers simply to an occasion when this dramatic form furnishes a story and eventuates a performance with the audience "by the end of which everybody in it has actually, for a short time, experienced and *tasted* unity".⁶⁹ Peter Brook is not naïve, as he acknowledged, soon thereafter performers and audiences alike return to a "society which re-fragments itself immediately". In the case of Syria, whether concerning internally displaced and besieged Syrians or those who are refugees, this reality is current and real. As Brook presupposes, something of this "reintegration" might still remain after the fact.

First, most obviously, the adaptation offers a radically different horizon for the performers and the audiences. Consider Juliet, for example. When she interrupts the narrator, she initiates a complete reversal of the actions that catapult the original play toward its tragic conclusion. In a meaningful way, rebuking the narrator's claim, her outburst revises the original text of the play. If we turn toward the scene as it develops in the original version, we find Juliet seeking consolation from the friar, as she exclaims, "O, shut the door, and when thou hast done so, come weep with me—past hope, past care, past help!" (4.i.43–5). In reply to such despair, Shakespeare's Friar Laurence offers his "remedy":

Hold, daughter. I do spy a kind of hope, which craves as desperate an execution as that is desperate which we would prevent. If, rather than to marry County Paris, Thou has the strength of will to slay thyself. (4.i.68–72)

In the revised version, Bulbul's Homs-based narrator paraphrases this exchange, implicating "Father Frans" in this stratagem to deceive Paris and Juliet's family: "His great idea was to give Juliet a bottle of sleeping potion that would make it seem as if she was dead". In the statement that follows, Juliet implicates the narrator as either a liar or an immodest judge of intention. At any rate, subsequently, the actors submit a declarative challenge: "Enough blood! Enough killing! Why are you killing us? We want to live like the rest of the world!" For the performers and audience in Homs, the connection to the audience outside the boundaries of Syria offers a moment that restores hope: their voices might be heard. In reply to this call, the performers in Amman echo this refusal of suicide, blood, and suffering.

⁶⁹ (Brook 1979, pp. 50–51). Emphasis my own.

Second, at the same time, this moment may suggest the belief that through theatrical actions these children have become transfigured. In *Christ the Liberator*, with reference to resurrection appearances in the Gospel narratives, Sobrino proposes, “there is no adequate language in which to formulate the reality of this event and experience of it”. This poses a specifically hermeneutical problem with respect to a “language barrier”. Still, based on the New Testament, he notices a plurality of basic linguistic models: life, exaltation, and awakening. Let me briefly exposit. “The *language of life*”, he claims, “has the advantages of showing that death and denial do not have the last word in history, which belongs to affirmation and life, particularly when Jesus is said not only to live but to live ‘always’ (Heb7:24)”.⁷⁰ In a similar sense, conceivably, this might resonate with the collective declaration of the eight performers who shouted across the divide.

In a related sense, specific theatrical activities that led to this “salutary” moment might be more plentiful than can be observed. Still, Ibrahim, Bulbul’s Romeo, may suffice as an illustration. At an earlier moment in the play, as Romeo, Ibrahim tosses aside his crutch in order to play-act with his other crutch. For him and the audiences, it offers an instructive scene of resilience. In the revised script, due to circumstances, Father Frans initially discourages Romeo from seeking marriage with Juliet; however, Romeo persists. In the Homs video-feed, through dialogue, Father Frans comes to accept and envision how the marriage can bring the Capulets and Montagues together. To close that scene, Romeo abandons his crutches and hops the stage, while expressing his gratitude to the priest. Given an allowance to play, experiment, and create through drama therapy, as actors, these children are invited to temporarily “inhabit” a different world. As a mediating approach, the practice of drama therapy seems to draw focus toward capabilities and hope, instead of impairment and despair. In other words, these children who are separated by the war are no longer identified in terms of victimhood but instead as actors. This may be the more enduring contribution of this short-lived adaptation.

Still, by witnessing this case, there are some clear lessons. If audiences take the performances of these war-affected children seriously, as with any devastating or tragic event, they may never be the same again. As for the performers themselves, through theatrical actions, they seem to inhabit for a defined period and in a demarcated after theatrical drama they may never be the same again. And yet if we look seriously at the performance of these war-affected children, we might find examples, all of whom decline temptations toward hopelessness and discover new creative capabilities.

As for Frans van der Lugt, in a sense, the performance “awakens” this figure. As if temporarily resurrected, the performance makes us look back and may even refers Christians and Muslims to the historical life of Jesus. In 2019, the Society of Jesus has postulated his cause for beatification, an initial ecclesiastical step toward canonization. After nine intense years of violence, Syria remains divided and fragmented, and yet Syrians wherever and however they gather may identify special significance to his name and memory. If the performance lends any indication, the play shows that van der Lugt might be part of a foundation upon which unity could be built in Syria, whether that is inside the national boundaries or beyond. Giving refuge to Christians and Muslims, he practiced hospitality despite extreme circumstances. For Christians and Muslims, who are outsiders, this extraordinary example may shed light on lessons for cultivating empathy, exercising mercy, and ordinary acts of affirmation.

Finally, from a Catholic perspective, this performance seems to present a hermeneutical principle analogous to one that Sobrino contributes from his Salvadoran context, namely, the “difficult” nature and “survival” character of hope. On the difficulty of such hope, he suggests, “it requires us to make the hope of victims, and with it their situation, our own”.⁷¹ For Bulbul and his troupe of players are based in Amman and Homs, however, the emphasis is less on victimhood than it is on survival. Still, drawing on *Romeo and Juliet*, an inspired figure, and their own resilience, their performance indicate that hope is ultimately rooted in love.

⁷⁰ (Sobrino 2001, p. 20).

⁷¹ (Sobrino 2001, p. 45).

8. Conclusions

This case study, as an exercise in comparative theology, attempts to reassemble the structure and threefold sense of theatrical action creating a “religious” experience as Peter Brook observes especially in the *ta’ziyeh* tradition. From a Catholic perspective, first, it outlines challenges and opportunities for intersecting theatrical drama and religion specifically with concerns for fostering Muslim-Christian understanding. Thereby developing a lens for “witnessing truth”, it approaches this case that, simultaneously, mediates tandem performances that are set in a refugee space in Amman and a besieged space in Homs. The performance encourages discussion of the late Jesuit Frans van der Lugt, whose life and death this case study examines for his potential contributions to understanding Christian martyrdom and its interreligious implications. Affording an occasion for comparative theology, specifically on the notion of “witnessing truth”, this article turns toward the work of liberation theologian Jon Sobrino on the key role of Christian martyrs, and the theology of signs as found in Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Fusūs al-Hikam*, specifically his chapter on Shuayb. While former addresses the ways that Christian martyrs manifest an example like the life and death of Jesus, the latter compliments the heartfelt, affective response that the memory of Frans van der Lugt seems to register with his Syrian audience. On this comparative theological basis, this exercise returns to the performance as itself as a foundation for a concluding reflection that aims to stimulate a case discussion between Muslims and Christians. As such, overall, this article seeks to reconstruct a key moment in that performance as potentially “salutary”, “anticipatory”, and “communal” in a way outlined in dialogue with Peter Brook. Meanwhile, for outsiders, this narrative approach may offer lessons for a virtue response in keys of solidarity, hospitality, and mercy.

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