

An Appraisal of the Inter-religious and Ecumenical Relevance of the Oberammergau Passion Play in the Light of Post-Vatican II Theology

Wijith Rohan Fernando. P

*Department of Western Classical Culture and Christian Culture,
Faculty of Humanities, University of Kelaniya.*

wijith.rohan@gmail.com

Abstract -The main aim of this article is to trace the ecumenical value of the Oberammergau Passion Play concerning the Catholic-Protestant and Jewish-Christian dialogue in the light of the Second Vatican Council teaching on Ecumenism. This aim is achieved through a comparative study of the pre-Vatican II and the post-Vatican II scripts of the Oberammergau Passion Play. Though the term ecumenism is an innovation of post-Vatican II theology, the Passion Play of Oberammergau was the main instrument for the cordial relationship between the Catholics and the Protestants who lived in this village when the whole of Europe clashed with each other on the grounds of Christian religious extremism which resulted from Protestant Reformation in the 16th century CE. The subsequent editions of the Passion Play scripts of Oberammergau in 2000 and 2010 were directly influenced by post-Vatican II theology on the renewal of the relationship between Jews and Christians. Hence, the relevance of the Passion Play of Oberammergau in an ecumenical sense is immeasurable.

Keywords - *Oberrameergau, Passion play, Reformation, Vatican II, Ecumenism*

Introduction

“The starting point of drama is religion.” (Quillian, 1975)

Oberammergau is a beautiful village situated in the Bavarian province of Germany. It can easily be reached by train from Munich. When the plague, the “Black Death,” claimed the lives of many of the villagers of Oberammergau, they made a vow to perform in 1633 the tragedy of Jesus’ passion every ten years. Since then, the Passion Play of Oberammergau has continued uninterrupted. The last performance was in 2010. The Covid 19 pandemic prevented the performance planned for 2020. The ecclesiological context in which this Passion Play started was a volatile period of the Lutheran Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. However, from the inception of this Passion Play, both Catholics and Protestants have participated in its performances with ecumenical unity. The term ecumenism

is a result of post-Vatican II theology. However, the Catholics and the Lutheran Protestants of Oberammergau have been actively involved in the play's performance since its inception in 1634. This is the uniqueness of this Passion Play.

A good number of studies have been published on the historical and dramatic aspects of the Oberammergau Passion Play (Moses, 2010).¹ But the theological aspects of this Passion Play are yet to be the subject of a careful investigation. My dissertation for the Degree of Master of Arts in Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion, entitled 'The Influence of Augustinian Theology of Original Sin on the Passion Play Script of Oberammergau 1960' (Rohan, 2013),² was an attempt to offer a better insight into the theology of that Play in the period of the post-Vatican II Council. During this research, I discovered that there are several versions of the Oberammergau Passion Play in circulation. I thus want to pay attention to how theology attempts to contextually re-interpret a Christian heritage rooted in mediaeval drama. Indeed, as I made clear in my thesis, contexts and the change of contexts clearly influenced the subsequent versions of the Play.

Every ten years in Oberammergau, the Passion Play is performed by peasant villagers. In other words, it is a play that is "translated" by a people without a theological background but is performed based on developments in theology. Hence, this Passion Play is a good example of the interaction between popular belief and theological reflection. The theological evolution influenced by the teaching of the Second Vatican Council considerably impacts the ecumenical relevance of the Oberammergau Passion Play.

Hence, the main focus of this article is to examine the theological evolution of the scripts of this Passion Play in relation to the ecumenical plays and inter-religious relevance in the light of post-Vatican II theology.

Historical Background

The origin of the Oberammergau Passion Play is historically traced to the thirty years of war in Europe and the Black Death plague, which devastated the Bavarian Alpine village in 1633. According to a chronicle of 1733, the villagers assembled and vowed to re-enact the tragedy of the Passion every ten years. They

¹See also Lang, G. O. and Lang, M. B. (1984).

²This book is based on the thesis which I submitted for the Master of Advanced Studies Degree in Theology and Religion at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium in 2011.

believe they could save their lives from the devastating plague by making that vow (Koetzel, 2010).

Since 1634, the Passion Play of Oberammergau has continued uninterrupted, with two exceptions. First, the Church prohibited the performance of Passion Plays in 1770 and then in 1940 on account of the Second World War. From 1634 to 2010, there have been forty-one Passion Play performances (The Community of Oberammergau, 2000).³ Hence, as a performance that continued uninterrupted for the most part for nearly four decades, the Passion Play of Oberammergau is unique when compared with other Passion Plays of the world.

Pre-Vatican & Post-Vatican Theology – Ecumenical Relevance

The theological doctrine of the Passion Play cycle of medieval Christian drama (Rohan, 2016) is based on the doctrine of Repentance for Redemption. The primary aim of the Passion Plays is to show humankind the path to Redemption. As a result, the dramatic structure of the Passion Plays displays a Creation–Fall–Redemption doctrinal pattern. The theology of this doctrinal pattern was influenced by the teaching of the Church Fathers and, specifically, the Augustinian theology of original sin.

“The primary aim of mediaeval drama was to show man the path to Redemption, and it did so by teaching, through the eye and the ear, the doctrine of Repentance, which was the key to salvation in a society believing in Original Sin.” (Kinghorn, 1968, p.20).

The thirteenth-century reform movement after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) directly changed the liturgical theme of the Passion Play cycle from the joyous drama of Christ, the king, to the sorrowful drama of Christ Crucified (Wickham, 1963). Christian medieval drama, specifically the Passion Plays became the medium of propagating the doctrine of Repentance for Redemption. The interpretation of the doctrine of original sin in medieval theology and the mystical meditations (Rohan, 2013)⁴ on the passion of Christ also played a vital role in the introduction of the dramatic structure of the Creation–Fall–Redemption doctrinal pattern of medieval Passion Plays.

³It is also important to note that due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the 42nd performance of Oberammergau Passion Play in 2020 has been postponed to 2022.

⁴“The mystical meditations on the passion of Christ also had an impact on the dramatic structure of mediaeval drama. These meditations highlighted the humanity of Christ specifically through his Passion and Death on the cross for the salvation of humanity.”

The theology of the Church Fathers on the Passion and Death of Christ was based on the many passages of the New Testament which interpreted Christ's death from a perspective of expiation, sacrifice, and redemption. For example, Eucharistic texts such as 1 Corinthians 11: 24; Luke 22: 19-20; Mark 14: 22-24; Matthew 26:26-28 and John 6: 51-58 highlighted the motif of sacrifice, expiation, and redemption. It is also in this light that the early Christian community interpreted Old Testament passages like Second Isaiah (Second Isaiah 52:13; 53:12), identifying Christ as the suffering servant of Yahweh. Within this theological background of the early Christian community, the Church Fathers were also influenced to interpret the Passion and Death of Christ as the atonement of humanity with God after the Fall of Adam and Eve and its consequences for mankind. In other words, the atonement theology of the Church Fathers, particularly the theology of Augustine on the original sin, interpreted the Fall of Adam and Eve as the cause of the death of Christ through which the redemption of humanity was accomplished.

The ecclesiological context in which the Passion Play of Oberammergau started was a volatile period of Reformation and Counter-Reformation with the enactment of the various doctrinal decrees of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). When the Council of Trent made the Original Sin a dogma of the Catholic Church, the Tridentine interpretation of the theology of sin and redemption became dominant in Western Catholic theological reflections. Hence, the Oberammergau Passion Play was also affected by this dogma. It was thoroughly influenced by the Augustinian theology of Fall and Redemption with a great and compelling emphasis on humanity's guilt in Adam (Rohan, 2013). Indeed, it was Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) who, for the first time, used the expression "original sin" (Rotelle, 1997, p.22) to refer to the sinful condition of humanity that resulted from Adam's fall: suffering, death, ignorance, carnal concupiscence and the like that characterise human beings' lives and are considered to be a punishment for Adam's fall which affects his progeny. Therefore, the pre-Second Vatican Council scripts of the Oberammergau Passion Play are dominated by the Augustinian and Tridentine interpretations of the theology of Fall and Redemption (Daisenberger, 1960).

One can trace how the revisions to the scripts of the Oberammergau Passion Play have been influenced by the theology of the pre-Vatican II Council and the theology of the post-Vatican II Council in a comparative study. This influence has to be examined with special emphasis on the atonement theology of the pre-Vatican II era. This theology is visible in the revised Passion Play

scripts of 1662, 1674, 1710, 1720, 1730, 1740, 1750, 1780, 1811, 1860, and 1870. In contrast, the theology of redemption rooted in the Scriptures but rediscovered on the eve of, during, and after the Second Vatican Council is visible in the scripts of the Oberammergau Passion Play, which were extensively revised and published in 2000 and 2010. In the post-Second Vatican Council context, the extensively revised scripts of the Oberammergau Passion Play of 2000 and 2010 were published. This development shows the transition in the play's emphasis from the punishment of humanity towards redemption and salvation.

Protestant Influence on the Oberammergau Passion Play

A brief look at the influence of the Tragedy Passion of Sebastian Wild (1566) on the oldest text of the Oberammergau Passion play will help us understand the Protestant elements of the latter within the historical context of the Reformation. The fact that the *Christus Redivivus*, a Latin Passion play by the Oxford reformer Nicholas Grimald, influenced Wild's Passion play also throws more light on this matter.

“As a dramatist, Grimald’s work was also of no little consequences; his *Archipropheta*, a Latin play based on the life of John the Baptist, is the first tragedy known to have been written by an Englishman; again, the influence of his tragi-comedy, *Christus Redivivus*, can scarcely be ignored since it is one of the plays on which the original Passion play of Ober-Ammergau was based”. (Merrill 1922, p.217).

The Protestant influence of Grimald’s *Christus Redivivus* on the Oberammergau text is vividly seen in the prologue of the manuscript of 1662. “The prologue in the earliest existing manuscript of the text from 1662, with a Protestant introduction: Salvation and mercy from God alone [...]” (The Community of Oberammergau, 2000). L. R. Merill, with historical evidence, proves that Grimald was an ardent champion of the Reformation, a bitter enemy of the Papacy and a dramatist and a lecturer on rhetoric at Christ Church, Oxford. He wrote and taught the Protestant doctrine on salvation (The Community of Oberammergau, 2000). Therefore, the most important uniqueness of this text is its Protestant elements. “From the very outset, the Oberammergau tradition never drew on the naïve but was based on a carefully structured, theologically founded ecumenical text”. (The Community of Oberammergau, 2000, p.145).⁵

⁵Though the author has used the term ecumenical text, the word **ecumenism** is a post-Vatican II term. Hence, I have used the term **Protestant elements**.

Even in the chaotic situation (namely, when both the Catholic and Protestant propagandists were using drama as medium) (Gillet, 1919) that resulted from the Reformation, the Passion Play at Oberammergau has an unbroken continuation because of this unique identity, i.e., the unity between Catholic and Lutheran Protestantism. This is clearly seen in the inclusion of both Catholic and Protestant Biblical themes in the earliest text of this play (Rohan, 2013).

From 1870 to 1990, the text revised by Othmar Weis and J. A. Daisenberger was used for the Passion Play performances. There have been several attempts to revise the Weis-Daisenberger text due to the direct influence of the new theological vision of the Second Vatican Council. It was only in the year 2000 that Otto Huber and Christian Stückl, both laymen, extensively revised and expanded the text for its fortieth performance (Huber & Stückl, 2000).

They did this with the guidance of the theologian Prof. Ludwig Mödl, who had been appointed as a theological advisor by the Catholic hierarchy of Munich and the Lutheran Bishop of Bavaria with the unanimous approval of the Passion Play Council of Oberammergau. Hence, Oberammergau's Passion Play has much relevance to the ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic and the Lutheran churches to move forward in the light of the ecumenical teaching of the post-Second Vatican Council (Pawlikowski, 2007).

Faced with a threat (the plague Black Death) that affected both Catholics and Protestants, the play contributed to a modus vivendi between the two communities, even within the tense context of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. As mentioned earlier, even the earliest text of this play (1662) is characterised by Catholic and Protestant biblical themes. The ideal of ecumenism, a direct result of the Second Vatican Council, has further encouraged the Community of Oberammergau to present this Passion Play enacted in 2010 to modern-day audiences to strengthen Christian unity (Huber & Stückl, 2010).

Pre-Vatican & Post-Vatican Theology – Inter-religious Relevance

It is known that most Passion Plays foster anti-semitic interpretations. Based on the passion narratives of the Gospels, they enact scenes condemning the Jewish people as Christ-killers. For example, the enactment of the scene taken from the Gospel of Matthew, “His blood be on us and our children” (27:25) in almost all Passion Plays, including the Oberammergau Passion Play until the year

2000 (Leonard, 2010)⁶has caused negative sentiments against Jews all over the world.

The influence of the post-Second Vatican Council teaching (Flannery, 1984) resulted in a marked departure from the Anti-Semitic interpretation of Christ's Passion and Death found in the pre-Vatican II texts of the Oberammergau Passion Play.

“In the newly revised texts, the images, and the play itself, we are encouraged to understand Jesus from within the matrix of his Jewish faith and tradition. In order to avoid any reduction to black-versus-white stereotypes and anti-Jewish misunderstandings, the prosecutors in the high council are now challenged by several councilors who demand a fair trial and the staged mob before a large group of followers of Jesus confronts Pilate. In addition, the new choice of living images with numerous references to the historical faith of Israel and especially to Moses is intended to show the continuity of both religions and encourage gratitude as we come to know ourselves as the new shoot that sprouted from the ancient root.”(Leonard,2010, p.8)⁷

This comparison regarding the scripts will provide the basis for researching the Anti-Semitism in the Passion Narratives of the New Testament, the teaching of the Church Fathers, the medieval theologians, and the involvement of the Catholic and the Protestant Churches in the Nazi Hitlerian ideology during the peak of the Holocaust (Ruether, 1974)⁸and its deviation with

⁶ “The 2000 production incorporated many changes which dealt with the issue of anti-Semitism. The “Blood Curse” from Matthew 25 was completely removed, A menorah was placed upon the table during the Passover Seder, and Jesus was referred to as Rabbi numerous times which emphasized his stature within the Jewish community.”

⁷See also, Klein, R. W. (1982) ‘Anti-Semitism as Christian Legacy: The Origin and Nature of Our Estrangement from the Jews’, presented at *The Fourth International Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People*, sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation, Bossey, Geneva, Switzerland, August, 285-301.

⁸See also, Klein, R. W. (1982) ‘Anti-Semitism as Christian Legacy: The Origin and Nature of Our Estrangement from the Jews’, presented at *The Fourth International Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People*, sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation, Bossey, Geneva, Switzerland, August, 285-301.

the emergence of *Nostra Aetate* (Flannery, 1984)⁹ at Vatican II and the strong statements of Pope John Paul II against Anti-Semitism (Pawlikowski, 2012).¹⁰

The Passion Play of Oberammergau opened a new path in 2010 concerning the Christian-Islam dialogue with the inclusion in the performance of citizens of Oberammergau who adhere to the Islamic faith. This interreligious cooperation was further strengthened with the inclusion of the Turkish Muslims of the Oberammergau community by providing them with an opportunity to act in the Passion Play staged in 2010.

The post-Vatican II performance included more female roles. This led to a new emphasis on gender equality.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to trace the ecumenical and inter-religious relevance of the Oberammergau Passion Play by comparing the scripts performed during the pre and post-Second Vatican Council eras. This comparison of the scripts shows the theological evolution of the times.

We have seen how the teaching of the Second Vatican Council has immensely helped the revision of the Oberammergau Passion Play scripts of 2000 and 2010. Hence, it can be concluded that a thorough examination of the pre-and post-Vatican scripts of the Oberammergau Passion Play would certainly enhance the ecumenical and inter-religious relevance of the play. This evolution is significant with regard to the Jewish-Christian dialogue as well as the Catholic-Protestant relations that took shape against the background of the Second Vatican Council on Ecumenism.

However, it is essential to mention the ‘ecumenical’ relevance of the Oberammergau Passion Play, which could be traced back to the post-Tridentine era. We have seen the appearance of Protestant elements due to the influence of Sebastian Wild’s *Tragedy Passion* (*Christus Redivivus*) on the oldest script, which is a unique feature.

⁹“Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (cf. John 19:6), neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time nor the Jews of today can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion.” Flannery, A. (ed.) *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents...* (*Nostra Aetate*) No. 4, 741.

¹⁰ . “John Paul II condemned antisemitism in several key speeches and documents, naming it a “sin” which is the strongest religious term one could use in such a condemnation. But he did not stop at the verbal condemnation of antisemitism. He also called for a joint concerted action by Jews and Christians to combat its remaining presence.

Also, the inclusion of the Oberammergau community's Turkish Muslims in the case of the Passion Play in 2010 further underlines the ways in which the Play contributes to the dialogue between Christianity and Islam.

References

Daisenberger, J. A. (1960) *The passion play of Oberammergau 1960*. Munich: Community of Oberammergau.

Flannery, A. (ed.) (1984) *Vatican Council II: the conciliar and post conciliar document (Nostra Aetate)* No.4, p.741.

Gillet, J. E. (1919) 'The German dramatist of the sixteenth century and his Bible', *Publication of Modern Language Association*, 34 (3) pp. 465–493.

Huber, O. and Stückl, C. (eds.) (2000) *Oberammergau passion play 2000*. Translated by I. Shafer. Munich: Gemeinde Oberammergau.

Kinghorn, A. M. (1968) *Mediaeval drama: literature in perspective*. London: Evans Publishers.

Koetzel, H. M., Altenbockum, A., Mayer B. M. and Walther, A. (2010) *Oberammergau life & passion 1870-192*. Munich: Hirmer.

Leonard, T. J. (2010) 'Reformist vs. traditionalists – an interview with Otto Huber on his efforts to reform the world's oldest religious melodrama: the Passion Play of Oberammergau', Fukuoka University of Education, pp.73–97.

Merrill, L. R. (1922) 'Nicholas Grimald, the judas of the reformation', *Publication of Modern Language Association*, 37 (2).

Moses, M. J. (2010) *The passion play of Oberammergau*. Memphis: General Books.

Pawlikowski, J. T. (2012) *Pope John Paul II on Christian-Jewish relations: his legacy, our challenges*. Boston: Center for Christian-Jewish Learning.

Pawlikowski, J. T. (2007) 'Reflections on covenant and mission: forty years after nostra aetate', *Crosscurrents*, Winter, pp. 70-94.

Rotelle, J. E. (ed.) (1997) *Answer to the Pelagians, the works of Saint Augustine: a translation for the 21st century*, Translated by R.J Teske. New York: New City Press. Part I, vol. 23.

Rohan, W. (2013) *Original sin in the Oberammergau passion play: a study based on the passion play script of Oberammergau 1960*. Colombo: Godage Publishers.

Rohan, W. (2016) 'The origin of the European medieval drama', *International Journal of Scientific Research and Innovative Technology*, 3(1), pp. 100–116.

Ruether, R. R. (1974) 'Anti-semitism in Christian theology', *Theology Today*, 30, pp. 365–381.

The Community of Oberammergau, (ed.) (2000) *The passion play 2000 Oberammergau*. Munich: Prestel.

Wickham, G. (1963) *Part I Early English stages: 1300 to 1660* (Vol. 2). London: Routledge.