

The Early Church Fathers on Questionable Entertainment

Quite often we tolerate lewd or violent entertainment with the thought that it is harmless. After all it is just entertainment. We have no intention of imitating the things we see. But exposure to certain ideas have a way, over time, of changing who we are. Put simply, the atmosphere that we live in shapes our perception of reality. And if we are exposed to something long enough, we can develop a tendency to accept it as normal. Multiply that by ten for the children who watch what we do. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: "A man is what he thinks about all day long." And that's why Paul tells us: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8).

Taitian the Syrian

What wonderful or extraordinary thing is performed among you? They utter ribaldry in affected tones, and go through indecent movements; your daughters and your sons behold them giving lessons in adultery on the stage. Admirable places, forsooth, are your lecture-rooms, where every base action perpetrated by night is proclaimed aloud, and the hearers are regaled with the utterance of infamous discourses! Admirable, too, are your mendacious poets, who by their fictions beguile their hearers from the truth! (*Address to the Greeks* 22 [A.D. 160]).

Athenagoras

When they know that we cannot bear even to see a man put to death, though justly, who of them can accuse us of murder or cannibalism? Who does not reckon the contests of gladiators and wild beasts among the things of greatest interest, especially those which are given by you [the ones in Rome, put on by the emperor, to whom this plea is addressed]. But we, because we believe that to watch a man be put to death is much the same as killing him, avoid such spectacles (*A Plea for the Christians* 35 [A.D. 177]).

Theophilus

But neither may we see the other spectacles, lest our eyes and ears be defiled, participating in the utterances there sung. For if one should speak of cannibalism, in these spectacles the children of Thyestes and Tereus are eaten; and as for adultery, both in the case of men and of gods, whom they celebrate in elegant language for honours and prizes, this is made the subject of their dramas. But far be it from Christians to conceive any such deeds; for with them temperance dwells, self-restraint is practiced, monogamy is observed, chastity is guarded, iniquity exterminated, sin extirpated, righteousness exercised, law administered, worship performed, God acknowledged (*To Autolytus* [A.D. 181]).

Irenaeus of Lyon

The "most perfect" among [the gnostics] addict themselves without fear to all those kinds of forbidden deeds of which the Scriptures assure us that "they who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." ... some of them do not even keep away from that bloody spectacle hateful both to God and men, in which gladiators either fight with wild beasts or individually encounter one another. (*Against Heresies* 1:6:3 [A.D. 180-190]).

Tertullian

Are we not, in like manner, enjoined to put away from us all immodesty? On this ground, again, we are excluded from the theatre, which is immodesty's own peculiar abode, where nothing is in repute but what elsewhere is disreputable. So the best path to the highest favour of its god is the vileness which the Atellan gesticulates, which the buffoon in woman's clothes exhibits, destroying all natural modesty, so that they blush more readily at home than at the play, which finally is done from his childhood on the person of the pantomime, that he may become an actor (*On the Shows* 17 [inter A.D. 200-206]).

Commodianus

Thou art going to vain shows with the crowd of the evil one, where Satan is at work in the circus with din (Writings 57 [inter A.D. 240-260]).

Lactantius

What of the stage? Is it more holy -- on which comedy converses on the subject of debaucheries and amours, tragedy of incest and parricide? The immodest gestures also of players, with which they imitate disreputable women, teach the lusts, which they express by dancing. For the pantomime is a school of corruption, in which things which are shameful are acted by a figurative representation, that the things which are true may be done without shame (*Epitome of Divine Institutes* [inter A.D. 303-311]).

Ambrose of Milan

Is anything so conducive to lust as with unseemly movements thus to expose in nakedness those parts of the body which either nature has hidden or custom has veiled, to sport with the looks, to turn the neck, to loosen the hair? Fitle was the next step an offence against God. For what modesty can there be where there is dancing and noise and clapping of hands? (*Concerning Virgins* 3:6:27 [A.D. 377]).

And so one must be on one's guard, lest, deceived by any common interpretation of this saying, one should suppose that the movements of wanton dances and the madness of the stage were commended; for these are full of evil in youthful age (*On Repentance* 6:42 [A.D. 384]).

Council of Laodicea

Christians, when they attend weddings, must not join in wanton dances, but modestly dine or breakfast, as is becoming to Christians (Canon 53 [A.D. 390]).

John Chrysostom

Thirdly again, in addition to this, which is the crown of all these benefits, by these very points he will be showing his own judgment, that indeed he has no pleasure in any of these things, and that he will moreover put an end to everything else in keeping with them, and will never so much as allow the existence either of dances, or of immodest songs (*Homily 20 on Ephesians* Ver 33 [A.D. 393]).

Apostolic Constitutions

Avoid also indecent spectacles: I mean the theatres and the pomps of the heathens; their enchantments, observations of omens, soothsayings, purgations, divinations, observations of birds; their necromancies and invocations.... You are also to avoid their public meetings, and those sports which are celebrated in them.... Abstain, therefore, from all idolatrous pomp and state, all their public meetings, banquets, duels, and all shows belonging to demons (2:62 [A.D. 400]).

Council of Carthage

And [it seemed good] that the sons of bishops should not take part in nor witness secular spectacles. For this has always been forbidden to all Christians, so let them abstain from them, that they may not go where cursing and blasphemy are to be found (Canon 15 [A.D. 419]).

Furthermore, it must be sought that theatrical spectacles and the exhibition of other plays be removed from the Lord's day and the other most sacred days of the Christian religion, especially because on the octave day of the holy, Easter [i.e., Low Sunday] the people assemble rather at the circus than at church, and they should be transferred to some other day when they happen to fall upon a day of devotion, nor shall any Christian be compelled to witness these spectacles, especially because in the performance of things contrary to the precepts of God (ibid Canon 61).