

Is Mime Appropriate in the Christian Church?

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### **Abstract**

Throughout this paper I will discuss the current trend of mime in the Christian Church and attempt to answer the question of whether or not it is an appropriate form of ministry for the church. Proponents of mime claim it is acceptable and gives young people a new opportunity to worship. Opponents of mime feel that because of its pagan roots it has no place as a valid ministry. In particular I will look at the history of mime, masks, make up, and movement in religious ceremonies, share insight from both critics and supporters, and consider whether mime as used by the church is mindless entertainment or a valid, Christ honoring ministry. This research draws upon mostly interviews, primary sources including books, articles, and other publications.

Keywords: *mime, pantomime, clowns, Christian, church, entertainment, ministry*

## Introduction

My interest in this subject began with a simple child's plea. "Mommy, it's gonna get me!" The child cried out during a worship ceremony as the mime in painted face walked out and began performing. I listened intently as my friend recounted the story of her nephew's fears and it made me wonder how this experience may have had future implications on his life and his understanding of Jesus Christ.

Marion Witcher is an author and founder of New Hope for Special Needs, a ministry devoted to meeting the spiritual needs of those affected by disabilities. Nearly a decade ago, she prohibited the participation of painted face pantomimes at NHFSN's *His Ability Over Disability* annual special event. I asked her why she made the controversial decision to exclude mimes.

Our mission is to provide Christ-honoring activities to persons with disabilities and their families. Mimes are anti-Christ in their origin and a source of confusion for many with intellectual disabilities. As visual learners, many are unable to interpret abstract activities; they just don't understand the relationship between God and what they view as scary looking clowns. (Witcher 2015)

Witcher's video "Exposing the Spirits Behind Pantomime," provides an historic account of mimes and their appropriateness in worship to a Holy God within the context of Scripture. The video warns believers that the white painted face is a death image from the ancient mime culture. Indeed, there seems to be some validity to this statement, when you consider that mimes were hired at funerals to play the part of the deceased person.

The mime's whole task was to create an eerily accurate personification of the corpse. No one is completely sure, but to possibly placate the ancestral spirits as well as to lighten the funeral gloom. To do his job, the funeral clown wore the newly deceased's clothing along with his insignia of high office. He also donned a death mask of the man's likeness. (Vicki Leon 2007, p 301, p 3).

### **What is Mime?**

Pantomime (Pantomine n.d. 2015) is a way of expressing information or telling a story without words by using body movements and facial expressions: an ancient dramatic entertainment representing scenes from life usually in a ridiculous manner.

On the surface this definition appears relatively innocuous, but there are those who believe the practice of mime is not innocent as it sounds, particularly as it relates to the trend of a form of worship and ministry in the Christian church?

Pan means 'all' and Pan was the god of the wild often found trying to force himself upon young nymphs. Moreover, the word 'panic' derives from the name of the goat-like deity. It was believed his voice alone could induce dread and "panic to anyone who was unlucky to be close enough to hear it." (Pan 2015, para 1-2).

One of the primary definitions of the word mime is farce. A farce is a foolish show; mockery; a ridiculous sham. (dictionary.reference.com.) Literally translated pantomime means *all farce*.

## History of Mime

Mime all began in Greece, at the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens. Actors wore masks and performed outdoors, before audiences of 10,000 or more, at festivals to honor the God of theatre, Dionysus. (The History of Mime p1, p1) Dionysius also known as Bacchus was the god of theatre, wine, revelry, fecundity and homosexuality. Mime performances were used exclusively by pagan cultures for vulgar shows often accompanied by music and ending in perverse and homoerotic sexual acts. So vulgar, pantomime was condemned by the famous Greek orator, author, and priest of Zeus; Publius Aelius Aristides Theodorus. (Moffett 2015 para 1).

The Greek "pantomimus" which literally translates to "imitating all" was a highly regarded form of solo dancing often accompanied by music which encompassed both comedy and tragedy. It's popularity was also widespread amongst the Romans until the Christian church forbade it's public display. (What is Pantomime? 2015, p1, p1)

However, despite its sordid history, more and more Christians are embracing mime as an appropriate form of ministry and are injecting mime into praise and worship services.

Yet even as Christians, we should endeavor to explore truth from both spiritual and scholarly perspectives. "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." (Isaiah 1:18, KJV) God expects His people to use their intellect to make rational decisions based on the facts of both His word and the natural world around us. We must remember that at the end of the day it is about souls being won or lost for the kingdom of Christ. Because of that, we must endeavor to ensure that our good is not evil spoken of as the Bible states in Romans, "But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, how walkest thou not charitably.

Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of: For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.” (14:15-17, KJV public domain)

When Christians were being persecuted under Nero and Domitian, mimes were used to ridicule the Christian faith on stage. They mocked the Christian faith by performing naked and engaging in simulated baptisms with buttocks raised in the air. Throughout the middle ages and Renaissance eras pantomimes evolved into jesters, minstrels, bands, acrobats. So pervasive were they that in AD 791, the English priest Alcuin (Alcuin of York), adviser to Charlemagne the Great, and among Europe's intellectual elite; wrote a warning to a friend stating, “The man who brings actors and mimes and dancers to his house knows not what a bevy of unclean spirits follow them.” (The Roman Christian Church - Its Spectacular Elements Originally Published 1935, Republished on oldandsold.com)

Vase illustrations demonstrate that the representation of naked women on the comic stage was also accomplished by ‘genital tights’ with artificially represented pubic hair. Given that adultery and other sexual themes became synonymous with the mime in the Roman Empire, it seems the simulated sex of the mime would be represented with this degree of realism. The erotic component is present in descriptions of mime from the very beginning. (Brockett & Franklin Chp 3)

According to performance artist Billy Krahl, mime actors would concentrate more on the development of their characters, than the plot itself [emphasis added]. This statement takes on a new meaning when we delve more into masks/face painting and their relationship with past and modern day mime.

Krahl himself acknowledges that the Christian church showed great opposition to the “bawdy, and often indecent associations of Mime, and excommunicated all performers, and closed down all the theatres.” (Krahl para 6)

Pantomime later re-emerged as a dominant art form in France where Jean-Gaspard Deburau “immortalized” the silent Pierrot pantomimes (Lust)—*a lazy, grotesque, mischievous, male character in white*—wearing clothing similar to modern day clowns. He is credited with introducing the white painted face. (2003 para 7)

A lot of people don't like clowns. There is no shortage of clowns and masked villains who are either featured in scary movies and books; or are the central character. Have you ever wondered why? Linda Rodriguez McRobbie, in her article “The History and Psychology of Clowns Being Scary” for Smithsonian (July 31, 2013 p1) tells us that the history of clowns is a sordid one-rooted in ancient pantomime and that people have been frightened by clowns for centuries.

In her article, Rodriguez further delves into the dark history of clowns and shows us how almost every culture has had clowns (pantomime) of some sort. Rodriguez stated, “Well into the 18th and 19th century, the prevailing clown figure of Western Europe and Britain was the pantomime clown, who was a sort of bumbling buffoon.” Rodriguez further notes that Grimaldi like many other famous clowns was prone to bouts of depression and associated with tragedy.

Mime in the black church is believed to have begun in the 1980's when a Christian believer named Mrs. Donna Darwin Ilochi had a literal “vision” for a ministry where performers danced in white painted face. (Faced 2009.) However, this information is untrustworthy as most of that information is found on blogs, with no credible sources.

Throughout the 1990's mime began to slowly spread in evangelical Christian circles. The current gospel mime trend is most often credited to brothers Keith and Karl Edmonds of K&K Mime, who began to "popularize" the art form. (Detroit Free Press 2012)

### **Mindless Entertainment or Christ Honoring Ministry?**

What we are seeing today is pantomime finding its way into Christian churches of all denominations. (Patton 2008) Many churches, particularly those rooted in Pentecostalism, have embraced mime as a "way" to win souls (without preaching) and provide ministry opportunities for youth. But the Bible declares that it is the Word of God that saves and "*he that winneth souls is wise.*" (Proverbs 11:30)

It is worth noting that no other religion whose roots are based on the Abrahamic covenant uses mime in their worship ceremonies; and never before in the history of Christianity was this practice a part of worship services until today's modern era. What did the early church founders know then that is not known now?

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth." (1 Timothy 4:1-3 King James Version)

On the surface, it might seem that this scripture warns Christians not to be quick to "reject" the idolatrous meat offered to idols; and indeed, many Christian mime artists use it to affirm the practice of "Christian" pantomime. Christopher Montgomery, author of *Mime the Next Dimension: A Guide to Ministry in Mime* equates mime to the same thing as raising your

hands in reverence to God, pointing the finger upwards to be excused from service, swaying with the choir with mime stating that they are “subsets of mime.” (Montgomery 2012, p 13, p 3).

But in truth, this scripture is warning Christians against engaging in idolatrous acts and false religious practices designed to place them in bondage. This liberty was never designed to give Christians free reign to practice Baal worship in its myriad forms. Patton declares, “Israel, the source of Christian beliefs and practices, did not participate in the ways of the heathens whose use of pantomime can be traced all the way back to Egypt and Babylon. Pantomime performances were not accepted among the first Christians even as this Hellenistic debauchery had been rejected previously by the Jews.” (2008)

In his book Montgomery further states that both Jeremiah and Ezekiel were “two old testament prophets who performed pantomime in the Bible by “painting” their faces with ash or clay. (Montgomery 2012 p 15 p2).

He quotes Jeremiah 13 to defend his positions stating:

God cleaved Jeremiah’s tongue to the roof of his mouth and he was only able to speak when he said ‘thus saith the Lord’ and then he conveyed exactly God had said. Jeremiah bound himself. He lay on his side for seven days, then on his other side for seven days. He repeated this routine for 40 days as a nonverbal sign that Israel was going into bondage. (Montgomery 2012, p 15)

There are a few things wrong with his argument. First, he equates an Old Testament practice of an open show of repentance with the pagan practice of pantomime. Secondly he quotes a scripture that makes no reference whatsoever to his argument. It may be that Jeremiah did what Montgomery claims, but it is not found in Jeremiah, Chapter 13. Even if it was, it is not a valid

proof of his claim that Jeremiah performed pantomime. A prophetic act, orchestrated by God for the purpose of bringing a word of warning cannot be equated with the current practice of pantomime in the Christian church.

### **Masks, Make Up, and Movements in Religious Ceremonies**

According to historian Paul S. Wingert (Encyclopedia Britannica 2013, sec. 10, p1), masks are intended to represent the true nature of characters in theatrical performances. *“It is most impressive because it can be seen as a reality; it expends itself by its very revelation. The mask participates as a more enduring element, since its form is physical.”* When we remember that mimes focus on the “character/persona” rather than the plot, one must consider what “character” is being conjured up. To gain a deeper understanding, let’s look at the traditional uses of masks and/or painted face.

Ashtoreth was a popular goddess who attracted the Israelites during their Canaanite years. Like the worship of Dionysius, worship of Ashtoreth was also centered on fertility or fecundity "forces/features." (Gods and Goddesses, Pagan para. 2)

If we look at the pagan worship God warns us against, what we find are erotic practices, rooted in Baal (i.e. satanic) worship. The mask in theater stems from these pagan worship ceremonies. Even today, those who engage in the practice of “swinging” will often wear masks to remain anonymous, or to take on a new persona.

In Exodus 20 verses 1-5, God warns his followers who He is and what He did for them, then He continues to state, "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a

jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.”

According to writer/historian Wingert, masks were used to worship Dionysus. Communicants’, “attempt to impersonate the deity by donning goatskins and by imbibing wine.” This eventually developed into the sophistication of masking. “When a literature of worship appeared, a disguise, which consisted of a **white linen mask** [*emphasis added*] hung over the face, enabled the leaders of the ceremony to make the god manifest. Thus symbolically identified, the communicant was inspired to speak in the first person, thereby giving birth to the art of drama.” (Wingert 2013, sec. 10, p 2.)

Wingert further explains that masks were historically used: (and still today in many cultures and religions.) to represent potentially harmful spirits, by secret societies, as a means of discipline and admonishment, to perform and or engage in acts of terrorism, for judgement and to perform executions, in religious rituals to represent supernatural and deceased spirits, to exert spiritual power and social control, to honor spirits or ancestors, to perform rituals of initiation and other religious ceremonies, to house totem spirits for protection, in war and battle, to exorcise evil spirits, in the practice of divination, to cure disease (*by scaring it away*), **to bring spirits to life and/or become “possessed” by their spirit in the performance of the dance, and are enhanced by both the music and atmosphere of the occasion.** (*Emphasis added.*)

According to author Tetaun Moffet (Exministries 2013) pantomime was diverse as well as controversial. “Most often they were indecent burlesques unto the god Dionysus in which

female performers also took part in sexual performances. They featured dialogue, acrobatics, songs, and slapstick routines.”

Krahl in his defense of mime states on his website *Kiko the Mime*, that mime has always been used to interconnect, and later evolved into a “true theatrical form in ancient Greece, where performers enacted everyday scenes with the help of elaborate gestures.” He further states, in contradiction to other historians, that mimes “would perform to teach moral lessons.”

Moffet and others would beg to differ. Opponents like him, who argue against mime often, quote Acts 17:22-31 to defend their position, because the following sermon took place on Mars Hill, the location of a pagan temple/theatre; believed to be the birthplace of modern day mime. Paul, vexed by the worship that went on in the temple theatre, sermonized:

“...Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, ‘To the Unknown God.’ Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed anything, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things...”

(King James Version, Cambridge University Press.)

Supporters of mime argue that Christians are to take what the world meant for evil and turn it into good. However, the Bible declares in 2 Corinthians 6:14, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer

share with an unbeliever?” Paul clearly states in his above treatise, that Christians are not to partake of nor indulge in pagan worship practices.

### **Entertainment vs Ministry**

But is this real worship, the way the Bible declares worship ought to be? Moffet says, “*No.*” He argues that it is a cheap bag of emotional tricks rooted in the pagan worship of Dionysius. Many opponents argue that if you remove the music (often triggering the emotional response) you are left with nothing but evil, white, clown faces? “Listen people,” he states, “Pantomime is not worship or ministry it is entertainment.” He frowns against the emotional scenes often played out against a backdrop of scripturally unsound music and believes that it’s dangerous when ministry follows popular culture.( Moffet 2013)

Because they ministered unto them before their idols, and caused the house of Israel to fall into iniquity (perversion) therefore have I lifted up mine hand against them, said the Lord God, and they shall bear their iniquity And they shall not come near unto me, to do the office of a priest unto me, nor to come near to any of my holy things, in the most holy place: but they shall bear their shame, and their abominations which they have committed.) —Ezekiel 44:12-13

“Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.”(Revelation 2:19-21)

Proponents of mime offer no valid proof that this type of ministry it is Godly and its roots are clearly embedded in pagan worship and as such embodies the spirit of the false prophet Jezebel.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Michael Patton, PhD., in his article *The Entertainment Driven Church*, criticizes today's church for often being way over the top and having ministries that more mirror Disney World than Christianity. Patton is not against entertainment. He just feels Christians should not confuse entertainment with genuine ministry. He feels the focus on entertainment causes visitors of churches to lose focus on truth, takes resources away from training, smacks of irreverence, and creates a lack of fear of the Lord.

In Colossians Chapter 4, verses 1-2 God gives His people the formula for appropriate praise and worship. "Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness! Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!" Nowhere does it mention anything about praising Him with masks, painted faces and erotic and/or exotic movements.

I spoke with Umm Muhammad Yasin, regarding this subject. Yasin holds a BA in Islamic Studies, from Barul Uloom of Trinidad, Tabago. Yasin, a Teacher-Alimah stated that Islam teaches that entertainment speaks to our base self and that is why it is not to be used in worship. Said Yasin, "With regard to mime, music, or any form of entertainment it's a problem because you should come to a worship service to make corrections in your life; not to be

entertained.” She further states as a premise of their Islamic beliefs that “*entertainments*” do not help believers gain any life changing knowledge or understanding that will help them on a spiritual level. “We understand that the anti-Christ will use these trivial pursuits in order to lull people into a false reality before giving his own sermons: therefore we don’t use them.”

“For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,” Psalm 101:2-3

Truth is designed to bring freedom. The truth of mime is that it is rooted in pagan worship and is designed to honor false Gods. The practice of “hiding” the face to reduce inhibitions, and remove fear is akin to the pagan practices of using drugs to lower inhibitions and reduce the fear so that revelers can engage in idolatrous acts. God does not require that His people “hide” in order to worship.

The writer and poet Paul Laurence Dunbar understood the purpose of the mask when he penned his famous poem “We Wear the Mask.” *WE wear the mask that grins and lies, It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—This debt we pay to human guile; With torn and bleeding hearts we smile, And mouth with myriad subtleties...*” (Dunbar 1896.) In writing this piece, the poet shows an understanding for one of the primary uses of the mask-to hide something. In this case the author was hiding his pain in the face of heart wrenching racism.

Mask and painted faces are also used by robbers and murderers to hide their faces during the commission of a crime. Performers of Christian pantomime acknowledge that the masks and painted faces often give introverted practitioners the courage to perform despite their fears. The “mask” allows them freedom of expression because no one knows who they are. However, God calls His followers to walk in spirit and in truth. He calls His people to walk in light and not

darkness, to be cities set on a hill. His word states in 2 Timothy 1:7 “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” God is a God who promises to help his people overcome fear. His people do not need to hide behind a mask to perform his will. Further, Christian pantomime undermines the churches ability to promote the Gospel. It erodes credibility before non-believers and leaves behind an impression of foolishness and ungodliness.

Robin Schumacher, in an online article entitled, “The Best Argument Against Christianity,” reports dismal news with regard to how the world often views today’s Christian church; arguing that the best case against Christianity “is the life lived out by a professing Christian.” David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group (a research organization focusing on religious trends and information), also believes that Christianity no longer resembles its Founder. (Page 1, Paragraph 6)

Witcher also believes the same way. “It is indeed a ministry; a ministry of demons that perpetuates itself in the House of the Lord under the guise of Christianity.” I am inclined to agree. Comments like these, found on secular sites suggest that non-Christians also are not buying it. On a website called Museum Hoaxes a subscriber placed a post confirming that Christian mime was indeed real, further stating that “When I think of mimes I usually imagine tortured French existentialist types, not Christian theater.”(Sep 27, 2005) Other post mirrored his comments in one form or another with one of the strongest being posted by Barghest. “I’m sure this is the kind of (expletive deleted) Jesus had in mind when he was dying in agony, his screams of torment muffled by a throat full of his own congealing blood. He was surely thinking, ‘It will all be worth it when they use clowns and puppets to spread my message someday!’ GAAAH!” (Wed Sep 28, 2005)

## Conclusion

After having studied mime and its close cousin the clown; and reviewed scripture on appropriate praise and worship, I am inclined to agree with the opponents of pantomime (mime). I do not believe that it is an acceptable form of worship to a holy God. It is entertainment, engineered to manipulate a counterfeit worship experience and generate a soulless, emotional response. Many of today's churches have abandoned worship in spirit and in truth in exchange for entertainment and fleshly pursuits and virtually every ministry where entertainment is a priority, mimes can be found?

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Colossians 3:17 God expects His people to pursue excellence in all that they do. There is nothing honorable or excellent about using pagan practices to worship a sovereign, Holy God.

Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. 6For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts, Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. (2 Timothy 3:5-7)

(Pantomime) “may be a practice of the world but the Church of Jesus Christ has no office or place for actors by any name or description. Therefore, the speechless skits or plays by church actors with white gloves, performing a religious theme, should not be found in any Apostolic or Pentecostal Church throughout the world.” (2015, para 1).

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