

Dancing for God: As if God were the only audience

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [September 6, 2003](#) issue

I wasn't sure what to make of *Frida*, a movie about the sadness, courage and indomitability that characterized the life of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. Because I wanted to know more, I watched the interview Bill Moyers did with the movie's director, Julie Taymor. I went away from their interchange with a fresh perspective on artistic creation—and a fresh perspective on how pastors and theologians do theology.

Toward the end of the interview, Taymor tells of her visit to Bali many years ago as a young artist. One day she was alone in a secluded wooded area at the edge of a clearing, quietly listening to the distant music of indigenous celebrations. Suddenly, into the clearing came 30 or 40 old men dressed in the full splendor of warrior costumes and each carrying a spear. They started to dance, and Taymor, who was hidden by the deep shadows of trees, observed them for what seemed an eternity. Suddenly she had an epiphany:

. . . they danced to—nobody. They were performing for God. . . . They did not care if someone was paying for tickets, writing reviews, they did not care if an audience was watching, they did it from the inside to the outside and from the outside in, and that profoundly moved me . . .

To Taymor, these dancing warriors became symbols of noncommercialized art, art guided by the artist's inner vision rather than art held captive to the sensibilities of its potential audiences. To her, they stood for an authenticity unspoiled by the desire for popularity. To me, they became symbols of theology undertaken above all for the sake of God and under the judgment of God.

You may think that ministers and theologians should not need to be reminded that God is their primary audience. After all, theology's main subject is the living God, creator, redeemer and consummator of the world. What ought to matter to theologians more than anything else is what God might think of their work. Yet more

often than not as we speak or write, we think to ourselves: “What will our colleagues or parishioners say? How will this or that interest group react? How spirited or how long will the applause be? How will our book do on amazon.com? Will it get this or that award?” We speak and write to get approval from an audience, to impress reviewers, to satisfy “customers.”

If we continue down this road, we are soon preaching and theologizing the way some of our elected officials govern: by polling the preferences of our constituencies. Popularity and its rewards take precedence over fidelity to God. We perform for audiences instead of dancing for God.

But doesn't “dancing for God” sound too pious? Doesn't the idea suggest a basic mistake about the nature of theology and ministry generally? Presumably the purpose of theology is to be helpful to the world, not to God. God doesn't need theology; if anybody needs it, it is the world. How can one communicate effectively without taking into account the needs and sensibilities, linguistic habits and cultural preferences of the people for whom one is theologizing? Theology in this regard is not like prayer. Hypocrites love to stand and pray in public places so that they may be seen by others; true Christians, Jesus taught, go to their rooms, shut their doors and pray in secret. You should pray the way those Balinese old men danced—with no human eye watching. But you should not do theology like that. When you pray, you speak to God; when you theologize, you speak to fellow human beings.

There is a major difference between Taymor's dancers and theologians. Unlike those dancers, theologians essentially speak to people. We interpret the world for them in the light of God's designs; we reflect on how to align our lives and our world with God's purposes. Both what we say and how we put it cannot be just a matter of movement “from the inside to the outside,” to use Taymor's phrase. We are pastors, and we must be sensitive to specific needs and situations of our parish. Neither in the way we speak nor in the content of our speaking and writing can we abstract from all audiences and just have God on our minds.

Yet the analogy to Balinese dancers applies too. As we are speaking and writing for our fellow human beings, we are dancing for God. A god for whom you can dance only when you are not dancing for people must be a false god—a god shut up in his own sphere pursuing his own interests unrelated to the well-being of people. But this is not who the Father of Jesus Christ is. God is the creator and a lover of creation; God's sphere and interests include human beings and their world. It is impossible to

dance for this God to the detriment of creation because a dance pleasing to God confers blessing upon creation. Conversely, *only* a dance that pleases God will confer blessing on creation.

A few months ago I was on a spiritual retreat in the hills of Vermont. At the end of the retreat we prayed for one another. I will never forget the prayer a musician offered for me. He asked God that as a theologian I would “play to the audience of One.” I was deeply attracted to the notion and at the same time frightened by it. Do I have the courage, I wondered, to play as if God, the lover of creation, were the only one listening? Unless I do, my fear and timidity will be revealed as a failure to trust and love God.