

PLAYING IN THE CITY OF GOD

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This article puts forward the idea that play is the essential and ultimate form of relationship with God. A playful attitude lies at the very heart of all spirituality and is critical for the whole of life. The article explores the notion of play in terms of the City of God; various interpretations of play and the need to relate a playful attitude with the reality of pain and suffering.

*The true object of all human life is play.
When we are really holy we may regard
the universe as a lark.*

- G.K. Chesterton

Play is the essential and ultimate form of relationship with God. A playful attitude lies at the very heart of all spirituality and is critical for the whole of life. With a thesis such as this it will, of course, be difficult to be taken seriously! But the great theorist of play, Johan Huizinga argued that only a playful way of living does justice to the seriousness of life.¹

Explaining the connection between play and the way one lives as a Christian has not always been easy. Although everyone understands the spiritual significance of serious concepts such as 'servanthood,' 'sacrifice,' and 'commitment,' the concept of 'play' is apparently so lightweight that it is more difficult to see the connection it has with the Christian life. After the initial surprise, however, it soon becomes an interesting proposition for most people because of the fun, the freedom, the pleasure and the adventure associated with play. The downside is that there are also a number of negative dimensions associated with play: it is often considered to be

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¹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1950).

frivolous, sometimes inappropriate and, almost inevitably in our culture, it is always seen as secondary in value to 'work' and 'service.' Our cultural presuppositions about play are ambivalent, to say the least.

On top of this there are a number of unhelpful assumptions about the metaphors that can appropriately be used to describe God. There is never a problem with the more transcendent terms such as 'Creator,' 'King,' 'Lord,' and 'Master' but, for some people at least, it is more difficult to work with the more immanent descriptions of God as 'Lover,' 'Friend' or even as 'Playmate.' Consequently, any explanation of this concept has to involve the deconstruction of certain assumptions.

Despite this difficulty there is actually nothing very original involved in developing an understanding of 'the playful dimension' of life or spirituality as this is an attitude to God and life that is found in both ancient philosophy and the biblical tradition. There is little claim for originality here except that there is a focus upon the needs of the present day. In the contemporary world it is a rare thing to find *any* sustained theological reflection upon play or the spiritual importance of a playful attitude (or associated concepts such as humour, dance, creativity, relaxation, spontaneity, and joy).

Nonetheless, considering our relationship with God in terms of play involves some important implications for the way that we live with others. I want to suggest that Christians should take much more seriously the traditional understanding of the church which interprets the future kingdom of God in terms of play, laughter and dance.

I. The City of God

God's promise to the people of Israel, through the prophet Zechariah was that Zion, the city of God, would one day in the future be called the City of Truth and become a place of peace where 'men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets... and the city will be filled with boys and girls playing.' (Zechariah 8:5) This imagery of the future City of God is closely connected with the emerging field of child theology, which is not simply a theology of childhood but a child-orientated view of theology. This is a view that theologians need to take seriously – or perhaps playfully - because Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.'

(Matthew 11:25-26) Those who claim to be wise and learned among us need to be very careful that they have not become so learned that the truth has been hidden from them. ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.’ (Luke 18: 15-17)

Jesus affirmed the way that children live and play. Adults have much to learn from children about the way that life in the kingdom is to be lived. The playful life of children is an example for everyone. But, unfortunately, there has been significant resistance to this ‘childish’ and ‘playful’ approach to the kingdom. People have persistently resisted the subversive wisdom of Jesus which not only insists that ‘the first shall be last’ and that ‘the greatest among you will be the least’ but also that adults should learn from children (rather than the more customary state of children learning from adults). It seems that a spirituality of play is to be preferred to one of self-denial.

II. Interpretations of Play

The philosophical interpretation of life understood in terms of play goes back as far as Plato, one of the principal founders of western thought, who described humanity as being ‘God’s plaything’ and thus as having a responsibility to live playfully (‘Life must be lived as play’) with others and God.² The poet, playwright, and philosopher Friedrich Schiller famously argued that ‘man is only fully a human being when he plays’ and composer and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche utilized the term “play” to characterize a life that transcended the ethical categories of ‘good’ and ‘evil.’³ Martin Heidegger used the metaphor of ‘play’ to explain the unique nature of human being,⁴ and Hans-Georg Gadamer used it to overcome the polarity of subject and object.⁵

Theological interpretations of life and relationship with God in terms of play are, however, relatively rare. It has been, at best, a

² Plato, ‘Laws,’ Book 7, 803d in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vols. 10 and 11 trans. R.G. Bury (London: William Heinemann, 1967-1968).

³ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 107.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 111-113.

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 1989), 106-114.

minor theme; yet it is far from unknown. A considerable number of writers, theologians, mystics and pastors have noted the importance of play and its relationship with the sacred, but few have systematically explored it, despite frequently describing it as significant. Maximus the Confessor observed that we deserve to be looked upon as a children's game played by God.⁶ The great scholastic theologian Thomas Aquinas argued that just as play is important for the body after it is tired from physical working so too play is needed for the soul that requires rest and relaxation from the even harder work of prayer. Thus play is to be commended. Aquinas followed one of his heroes, Aristotle, in searching for a balance in life and so, while he saw certain forms of play as sinful (when senseless, hurtful, or excessive), he also thought that a *lack* of play and laughter was sinful. He developed the theme by observing an even closer connection in that just as play gives pleasure the contemplation of wisdom gives the very greatest pleasure, and therefore is a form of play. His highest designation of God was, unusually but helpfully, of God as 'Chief Friend.' He nonetheless did not explore the metaphor in terms of humanity doing what friends do—play—with God. That was, apparently, a step too far.⁷

For the Dominican mystic Meister Eckhardt the playing of Wisdom with the Lord at creation is an indication of an eternal, Trinitarian play of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁸ Theresa of Lisieux expressed a modest desire to participate in the play of God by being a toy, a little ball for the infant Christ.⁹ Romano Guardini defended both the 'uselessness' and the profundity of play and worship in his study of liturgy as play.¹⁰ Hugo Rahner, in a rare and detailed exposition, explored the Christian life entirely in terms of a playfulness that arises from the freedom of a God who plays. 'Mere seriousness,' he argued, does not get down to the roots of things. There is a *sacred secret* in play which is the hope for another form of life. All play arises from the human longing for the vision of the divine.¹¹

The reality, however, is that the church's tradition has more commonly taken a negative view of play. Among the Fathers, for

⁶ Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*, 262a (PG 91, 1409CD)

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, II-II, Qn. 168.

⁸ Michael Bulson, *Believe What You Read* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 132.

⁹ Theresa of Lisieux, *Autobiography of a Saint*, trans. Ronald Knox (London: Collins, 1973), 171.

¹⁰ Sourced at http://fdlc.org/Liturgy_Resources/Guardini/Chapter1.htm

¹¹ Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 65.

example, Ambrose of Milan frequently quoted the Lord Jesus as saying 'woe to you who laugh, for you shall weep' (Luke 6:25) and told his people that all games should be avoided. The great preacher and Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, wrote,

This world is not a theatre, in which we can laugh; and we are not assembled together in order to burst into peals of laughter, but to weep for our sins. But some of you still want to say: 'I would prefer God to give me the chance to go on laughing and joking.' Is there anything more childish than thinking this way? It is not God who gives us the chance to play, but the devil.¹²

In short, the Christian focus has tended to fall upon service and work rather than play, and upon activity in general (rather than rest). As the well-known saying puts it, 'the devil finds work for idle hands.' But playfulness, delight, and joy *ought* to characterize the nature of the Christian and his or her relationship with God. While there is every reason to affirm and maintain concepts such as ministry, service, obedience, sacrifice, duty, work, and responsibility it is unhelpful, in our perceptions of our lives and relationships, to *substitute* them for those dimensions of life and relationship that are central to the future life of the eschaton. In seeking to describe the future life, the Christian tradition consistently turns to the metaphors of play, music, and dance.

But it is difficult for many people to take seriously the significance of this eschatological play for the believer's present relationship with God. Consequently, there is a tendency to downplay the playfulness of the kingdom. This occurs in various ways. It can happen when the Christian life in the present is characterised solely in terms of service, sacrifice, obedience and faithful ministry, without sufficient reference to joy, celebration, pleasure, or play. When that happens, it can be extremely hard for Christians to accept that the disciplines that they have focused on are not the ultimate goal/form of life. There can also be a downplaying of the playfulness of the kingdom when the purpose of Christ's return is understood primarily in terms of judgment, or when there is an emphasis upon eternal life as simply being the absence of sin and suffering.

These are, of course, usually unconscious errors that are simply the result of stressing one aspect of the Christian life more than

¹² Chrysostom, *Commentary on Matthew*, Homily 6, cited in Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 98.

another, often influenced by other factors, such as those cultural mores that stress work more than play and authority more than relationships. Service, sacrifice, and ministry are critically important Christian ways in which Christians express their faith in God and live out the life of the kingdom but in biblical imagery the *final* state of life for the believer is not characterized in terms of work, ministry, service, or sacrifice but in terms of joy, gladness, laughter, and play.

Indeed, the common designation 'the kingdom,' by which, in short-hand fashion Christians identify the reign of God, the Lordship of Christ and the presence of the Spirit both present and future could easily be replaced by 'the party.' This would point much more clearly towards the play, joy, and laughter that are an essential, central, part of the future life that Christians are called to live in the present. It is very important, therefore, to help Christians understand and express their new life in Christ in terms of intimate, joyful, playful relationship with him as well as in terms of obedient service and sacrifice. The latter may initially appear to be nobler and more worthy of encouragement, but the former expresses even more radically the amazing grace of God. And it is not only the world that needs to see these qualities expressed; the believer does as well, because without the joy, play, and laughter of intimate relationship, obedient service and sacrifice easily become formal obligations or legal responsibilities rather than joyful sharing. Consequently, God becomes more a distant Master to be obeyed than a close Friend to be loved.

The Lordship of Christ, the revelation of the sovereignty of God and the exercise of justice are rightly seen as important to an understanding of the return of Christ but these occur precisely in order to institute an on-going state of eternal playfulness, joy, and communion with God. For many people it is more difficult to imagine the King of kings or the Judge of All playing around and having a laugh. The former imagery seems more appropriate and respectful than the latter.

The notion of eternal playfulness can also be removed from its central place when there is an emphasis upon eternal life as being an eternal 'rest' that simply involves the removal of sin and suffering and relief from earthly labour. The well-known passage in the Revelation of John says that at the time of the new heaven and new earth, 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' (Rev 21:4) This is an important part of Christian hope, and a promise that believers frequently hold to very dearly. But the

absence of pain and suffering needs to be complemented with an understanding of a presence of God that is more than an absence, or a passive, static 'rest', or a quiet, earnest, serious relationship. In fact, the notion of 'communion with God' should be positively expressed in terms of glorious, joyful, engagement. Indeed, it is a 'rest' that should probably be seen as *starting off with a dance*, as Hippolytus of Rome might well have suggested. He described Christ as the 'lead dancer in the mystical round,' with the church as 'his bride who dances along.'¹³ This is not exactly the common picture - derived from stained-glass images - of the attitude of the ancient Fathers of the church, but the early liturgies described by Justin Martyr and Hippolytus describe joyful circle dances representing communion with God. For Gregory of Nazianzus dance was the 'nimble gesture of one who walks before God,'¹⁴ and for Ambrose there was 'the glorious dance of the wise.'¹⁵ R. Gagne describes the early church as seeing dance as one of the 'heavenly joys and part of the adoration of the divinity by the angels and by the saved.'¹⁶ This dance might well then be *followed by nothing other than cosmic play*. Martin Luther said that at the end people would 'play with heaven and earth, the sun and all the creatures' and all creatures would play with God - 'they shall have their fun, love and joy, and shall laugh with thee and thou with them.'¹⁷

III. Play as Communion

One of the reasons that play is the finest expression of joy in the Lord is that it is playing *together* - it is communion, sharing, mutual pleasure, the fulfilment of human desire. Indeed, all play arises from human longing for the community and joy that are truly found only in God. Importantly, the mutuality of play and dance implies that God also takes pleasure in this dynamic relationship and this is, theologically speaking, connected with the dynamic relationship of the Triune God. Play and dance are a reflection of the inter-relationship of Father, Son and Spirit. The term *perichoresis* (from

¹³ M. Daniels, *The Dance in Christianity: A History of Religious Dance through the Ages* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 36.

¹⁴ Gregory Nazienzen, *Orations*, V. 35 (PG 35, 7090).

¹⁵ Ambrose, *Epistilae* 58, 7-8, (PL 16, 1179f).

¹⁶ R. Gagne, T. Kane, T. and R. Ver Eecke, *Dance in Christian Worship* (Washington: Pastoral, 1948), 36.

¹⁷ Cited in Moltmann, 36-37.

chore - dance and *peri* - about) has been used for this relationship at least since John of Damascus and it refers to the way in which the three persons live in communion (mutual indwelling, interpenetration) without merging, although precisely what that implies for the attributes and the transfer of properties of the persons is debatable. The metaphor of dance does however say much about the intimacy and the closeness of each of the persons in the life of the other. Play and dance imply a participatory understanding of the Trinity such that people join in the life of God. This is both significant for people and important for God.

IV. Play and Suffering

But what about suffering? How can we have a playful attitude when there is so much suffering? While imprisoned by the Nazis in Tegel prison in 1944 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to Renate and Eberhard Bethge reflecting on the way one ought to live in the midst of the most difficult times one could imagine. Could one possibly enjoy music, play games or enjoy oneself in the face of evil? Bonhoeffer thought that this was only possible for some people. ‘Who is there, for instance, in our times, who can devote himself with an easy mind to music, friendship, games, or happiness? Surely not the “ethical” man, but only the Christian.’¹⁸

Only the Christian! When evil looms large then play, music and friendship become absurd for those who see these things as the means to happiness, but the Christian has a very different view. For Bonhoeffer, play, music and friendship are not *the means* to happiness; rather they are *the result* of a relationship with God. And repression, imprisonment and war are not factors that can prevent the Christian - but only the Christian - from engaging in play or music because the Christian attitude is not based on mere physical circumstances. In such a situation one’s own strength becomes irrelevant, and *the essential task* is to learn to trust in being in God’s hands. Once one has done that, then it becomes possible to live!

Of course, given the dire circumstances, Bonhoeffer is careful to nuance his position. He distinguishes genuine Christian happiness from false bravado, and he does not avoid the moral responsibilities for action that the war brought. But he repudiates the view that

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 193.

people are happy as a result of play and is insistent that friendship, play, music and happiness all emerge from an attitude of trust in God.

V. Playing Together

The implication of this understanding of the eternal, playful divine-human relationship is that the church is to re-present the playful life of the future kingdom in the present through all circumstances. The responsibility of the church to be a model or microcosm of the kingdom means being the joyful people of God in the present. We are to bring this future joyful life into reality in the present. We are to 'play it' this way *as though* the kingdom was present, because in and through the church and the working of the Spirit *it can* be real and present. While ministry, service and sacrifice are part and parcel of life in the present because the end of the present age has not yet come about, the truest expression of the life of the kingdom is not found so much in successful work or achievements in ministry as in the grace-filled expressions of joy, love, laughter, and play that break into the present world and which ought to permeate Christian lives. These moments of joy are not merely moments of relief; they are anticipations of eternal life. They are the kingdom present. To really live out the kingdom means entering a completely new world of communion with God in joy and happiness.

Too often it seems that the present Christian life is about grace deferred. That is, the present life is a time to be endured rather than enjoyed as we await the glorious, future kingdom of God. The present era is, indeed, a time that mixes joy and sorrow, pain and pleasure, tragedy and triumph and we do await the final revelation of Christ in his glory, but this certainty of a future hope has implications for our understanding of the present time, for the kingdom is present as well as future and the glory of God is revealed all around us at this very moment.

So often this life is interpreted as a time of work and achievement that precedes a future rest, but it is important to question whether this life is primarily about achievement and things done. The moments of this life which abide in eternity are found in the moments of grace and faith, joy and love rather than in moments of glory due to one's own achievements and efforts. As much as this world is a *preparation* for the next it is also *present demonstration* of that life of play, dance, music, joy, and rejoicing. The biblical

images of life in the eternal kingdom of God are not ones that stress or glorify human achievement, instead they focus on child-like play and joy; and we are able to experience a foretaste of the future eschatological life as we share in this playful joy in the present.

This is famously expressed in the Westminster Shorter Catechism which asks, 'What is the chief end of man?' and answers, 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.' The enjoyment of God is not something only for the future, but for the present as well. This is expressed in the way that King David danced and played before the Lord (2 Sam. 6:12-16), an act that appeared to be irreverent to others but not to the Lord. When rebuked David insisted upon celebrating and being 'undignified' in this way. Since at least the sixth century this has been expressed in Christian art in terms of a resurrection dance. More recently the idea has been picked up by massed, public resurrection dances. On Easter Sunday in 2010, 300 young people from Faith Church in Budapest took part in an enthusiastic resurrection dance in Victory Square and, apart from it becoming a YouTube hit, the next year Christians in 65 cities did the same. This kind of joyful, playful dance which is an expression of life with God ought to be characteristic of the life of the believer. Life is misunderstood if it is only seen in terms of *working for God*, it is important to learn to *play with God* as well. Obedience and duty, sacrifice, service and self-giving need to be complemented with play and pleasure, joy and appreciation. In so doing the emphasis shifts from *service of God* to *relationship with God*.

An emphasis on this kind of spiritual life will, of course, appear either absurd or idealistic to those who are fixed within a framework of work and ministry. While nothing said here should be taken as minimising the importance of ministry, justice, sacrifice, or suffering for Christ, nonetheless these are not the ends toward which the kingdom is moving. In regard to this, Jurgen Moltmann speaks, quite strikingly, of the 'the liberation of life.'¹⁹ Hitherto life has been subject to both sin itself and to the work of overcoming the effects of sin, injustice, pain and suffering, but through Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit life is eventually liberated, sin is overcome and life is released into joyful play. This means that the present life of the church will not only necessarily involve labour, ministry and sacrifice but also ought to be seen as involving clear anticipations of the future life of joy, for in Christ, life is liberated into joyfulness and playfulness. This playfulness is not to be found

¹⁹ Moltmann, 35

so much in specific, playful activities that are engaged in from time to time, as much as in an *attitude* of mind that produces a playful approach to the whole of life. Those who have this ability to find the playful dimension in all aspects of life find it enriched. To be able to find the creative, playful dimension of work, friendships, family relationships, community service and so forth is a real blessing but in this way, God's kingdom can break into the world at any time. Tragedy, pain, and trauma are not overcome in this world by *eliminating* them (that is for the future kingdom where there will be no more pain or suffering) but by finding God and divine joy *in the midst* of them. There is no place in life where Christ is not present and playful.