

AUSTIN PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

PLAYFUL: A CHRISTOLOGY OF PLAY

SUBMITTED TO DR. CYNTHIA RIGBY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
TH 306: CHRISTOLOGIES AND ATONEMENT

BY  
ADAM W. ANDERSON  
FEBRUARY 15, 2017

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Playful: An Introduction .....	1
Background.....	1
Defining Play and Not-Play .....	1
Theological Presumptions: Rules to the Enterprise .....	5
A Christology of Play .....	8
The Life of Christ: The End of Transaction.....	8
The Death of Christ: The End of the Reign of Spoilsport .....	12
The Resurrection of Christ: Not I DO, but I AM.....	15
Issues, Concerns, Next Steps .....	16
Implications and Conclusions: True Compass, No Magnets .....	18
Works Cited .....	19

## PLAYFUL: AN INTRODUCTION

In 1979, Charles W. Kegley, at the time a distinguished professor of philosophy, stated at the end of an overview of the Theology of Play that “there is no hope for the future of play theology.”<sup>1</sup> This damning pronouncement is especially disconcerting considering that the book containing Jurgen Moltmann’s essay on the subject had only been printed seven years earlier. However, Kegley’s premonition seems to have proven true – a review of the ATLA religion database on “theology of play” yields only 44 articles, a quarter of which are reviews of *Theology of Play*. Yet what would the world gain by revisiting a theology – and more specifically Christology – of Play? This paper will attend to that question, provide theoretical and theological frameworks, and develop Christology of Play from Moltmann’s work with implications for today. Finally, the paper will consider limitations of the Christology of Play outlined and lay out some next steps. In the end, the aim of this work is that there may be a renewed interest in a Christology of Play, and perhaps allow all the children of God feel as though they may live a life of hopeful playfulness.

## BACKGROUND

### Defining Play and Not-Play

In the broadest sense, play is typically defined as activities done for recreation and enjoyment. Johan Huizinga, in *Homo Ludens*, a landmark book on human play in society,

---

<sup>1</sup> Kegley, “Theology,” 124.

further identifies five characteristics of play: “play is free, is in fact freedom... play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life... play is distinct from ‘ordinary’ life both as to locality and duration... play creates order, is order. Play demands order absolute and supreme... play is connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it.”<sup>2</sup> However, as he later states, “when speaking of play as something known to all, and when trying to analyse or define the idea expressed in that word, we must always bear in mind that the idea as we know it is defined and perhaps limited by the word we use for it.”<sup>3</sup> This seems especially true when considering play within the context of theology and Christology, as our tendency is to associate play with frivolity: “in societies with a strong streak of puritanism, play, by virtue of being unrelated to survival, production and profit, stood outside and inferior to the processes of work. This attitude is still strong. The word ‘just’ is regularly added to ‘play’ to indicate that the behavior is not only noncritical but also trivial.”<sup>4</sup> Given Huizinga’s characteristics of play, it is nearly impossible to both seriously consider the work of Jesus Christ in the world and to entertain a Christology of Play. Therefore, a wider scope of what defines play is required.

MJ Ellis, in his book *Why People Play* provides three main categories of definition: by motive of the player, by content of the play, and as undefined.

First, Ellis notes that people define play by motive. Generally, these definitions and theories take a form of “play is the behavior motivated by ‘x,’ where ‘x’ is the presumed motive... given the required situation and the assumed motive, play is the behavior produced.”<sup>5</sup> For instance, a child may be at play because she is excited. Play, then, is defined by the motive of excitement; the child is motivated by her excitement to play. Ellis further notes that for these

---

<sup>2</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 8–13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>4</sup> Ellis, *Why People Play*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

definitions, “they are not really definitions of what play is, but statements of belief about why play occurs.”<sup>6</sup>

Play defined by the content, by contrast, is more interested in the attributes of human action, and that by evaluating them, one can determine if an individual is actually playing. Many people intrinsically are able to define play in this way – we have observed others in play, and can find ways to distinguish play from other activities. A swing of a bat against a ball in a game in a field is not the same as a hammer against a nail in a workshop, for instance. Moreover, a swing of a hammer against a nail in a home workshop may be different and a form of “play” in comparison to a carpenter swinging a hammer against a nail in a house in order to receive payment for her services.

Finally, Ellis notes a category that argues that play is undefinable: “behaviors then are not defined as play, but playful. By so doing the problems inherent in partitioning human behavior into work and play are eliminated and we are left with the problem of discriminating playful from non-playful activities.”<sup>7</sup> A carpenter that truly loves her job, is jovial and happy – all attributes of play – could still be performing work on a house. Her activity as work could be playful, even if not play *per se*. This definition provides relief from the issue of “play as frivolity” that is part of Western puritan culture. Even the most serious of activities could be performed playfully. In this move, a Christology of Play can have its grounding, because it allows play (and playfulness) to move away from ontic to ontological attributes in the Heideggerian sense. The goal of interpreting play becomes less about what a person is *doing*, and more about how a person is *being*.

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 21.

If we move to a definition of play that is more interested in “playfulness,” then we also need to consider what the opposite of “playful” may be. Typically, “work” is presented as the opposite of “play”, but as noted before, one could playfully attend to work. It is difficult to argue that a group of children engaged in the depth of game design and implementation, or amateur football players in a highly-contested game in the backyard that play are not serious.<sup>8</sup> A better option is “spoilsport.” Gadamer argues that the spoilsport is someone who does not take a game seriously, and that

Play has a special relation to what is serious... play itself contains its own, even sacred, seriousness. Yet, in playing, all those purposive relations that determine active and caring existence have not simply disappeared, but are curiously suspended. The player himself<sup>9</sup> knows that play is only play and that it exists in a world determined by the seriousness of its purposes. But he does not know this in such a way that, as a player, he actually *intends* this relation to seriousness. Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play. Seriousness is not merely something that calls us away from play; rather, seriousness in play is necessary to make the play wholly play.<sup>10</sup>

Play and playfulness have made sense in humanity because they are approached seriously. A personal anecdote of this is when my son, Abraham, asks me “what do you want for ‘dinners’” as he plays in his toy kitchen. He sets about as both chef and entrepreneur, cooking felt eggs with wooden boxes of butter, delivering each to my waiting hands. After I’ve ingested his creation with great gusto, I hand him a used-up gift card which he gladly swipes in his Ikea children’s register as remuneration for our transaction. Even at the age of three, I doubt he believes that we will be able to live on felt and wood alone (as evidenced by his satisfaction at

---

<sup>8</sup> See: Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary vs. The Seminary of the Southwest in the holy battle of the Polity Bowl.

<sup>9</sup> Over the course of this paper, I have made the decision to preserve quotations as written in order to minimize the use of brackets which may detract from the intent of the author. However, it is with the recognition that these texts were written in a time that was unfortunately and unnecessarily sexist.

<sup>10</sup> Gadamer, Weinsheimer, and Marshall, *Truth and Method*, 106–7.

his home-cooked meal shortly after), but there was no doubt of the seriousness that he – and surprisingly, I, too – engaged in the activity. We “lost” ourselves in the moment. To be a spoilsport in this moment would have been for either of us to have not taken the interaction seriously. If I had commented on the fake eggs, or that there would be no real currency transacted, I would have “spoiled” the purpose of the play itself.

The concept of spoilsport as opposite of play dovetails nicely into focusing on “playfulness,” in that it continues to put an emphasis on *being*. It’s not out of the realm of possibility, for instance, to imagine that I could have commented to Abraham that the egg was felt, perhaps to add a new dimension to the play – the chef realizing he was given the wrong type of item. The difference between the two lie in their intent and their willingness to stay “lost” within the play.

#### Theological Presumptions: Rules to the Enterprise

In counter-response to three essays meant to act as companion to his “The First Liberated Men of Creation,” Moltmann’s defining essay of a theology of play, he lamented “the premises from which these replies have been written are not the same as my own – not in the least. We are perhaps not even talking about the same thing... the authors and I live in the same one world, and yet in completely different inner spaces. A painful realization.”<sup>11</sup> If Moltmann’s title of the essay, “Are There No Rules of the Game?” is any indication, then he seems to articulate that others are not taking God and God’s sovereignty seriously. Given the content of the three essays – God slipping on a banana peel, what seems to be an earnest yet limited attempt at creative poetry, and an argument that the freedom of Christ was losing – he may have had a point. To

---

<sup>11</sup> Moltmann et al., *Theology of Play*, 111.

take an honest attempt to a Christology of Play, then, is to try to play by the same rules as Moltmann.

The most important rule for Moltmann is that he “oriented all his theological excursions around the fundamental theological premise that God is sovereign... [he believes] play is possible only because, and appropriate only when, it is engaged by the creation in relationship to the sovereign Creator.”<sup>12</sup> Moltmann argues that sovereignty means God is a God of freedom, and made a choice to create and enter the world, even as God is complete in Godself. This freedom was not one of losing or loss, but for God’s own pleasure: “the world as free creation cannot be a necessary unfolding of God nor an emanation of his being of God nor an emanation of his being from his divine fullness. God is free. But he does not act capriciously.”<sup>13</sup> God is not a flitting being, nor is God somehow becoming more God through Creation. God is. This is a type of stability that gives further meaning to human play. If the ultimate Game Maker and Rule Designer is complete and free, not prone to whimsy, then rules have stability as well. This does not mean that they are not dynamic, but they have a consistent aesthetic.

The iterative rules of Creation in its relationship to God and itself were set forth in and through Jesus Christ, also in God’s total freedom: “God was not compelled by human misery to come in the flesh, but he came because of his own free and uncaused love. In this love God does not merely react to the misery of his creatures but creates something new for them as well.”<sup>14</sup> God, in God’s sovereignty, chose humanity through Jesus Christ, not because of our brokenness, but because God made an independent choice. God loves. This mean that the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and living into the rules set through Jesus Christ is not “coercive; it does not come

---

<sup>12</sup> Rigby, Cynthia L., “Beautiful Playing,” 102.

<sup>13</sup> Moltmann et al., *Theology of Play*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

about by either authoritarian pressure or the force of logic. It presupposes liberty. Being aware of God is an art and – if the term may be permitted – a noble game.”<sup>15</sup>

All of these free choices lead to liberation for humanity. To presume that God is not the center of the active works of Creation, and that all of what happens within it is an active relationship between God and humanity, limits humans to an existence predicated on utility: “When we ask, For what purpose do I exist?, the answer does not lie in demonstrable purposes establishing my usefulness but in the acceptance of my existence as such and in... ‘demonstrative value of being.’”<sup>16</sup> Humanity becomes free to no longer just *do*, but also to *be*. The freedom to be means humanity can be liberated from the fear of personal non-being, and liberated towards others. If one is has been liberated from their own existential crisis, she is free to participate in the continued liberation of others.<sup>17</sup> This, for Moltmann, is the work of ushering in the Kingdom of God, enabling a true sense of serious playfulness. However, humanity also has the freedom to not choose playfulness, as the “joy in human freedom does not *compel* us either to play or not to play. To play or not to play – that’s not the question.”<sup>18</sup> One could choose anxiety and crisis over freedom and playfulness.<sup>19</sup>

However, there is one place where this Christology of Play will deviate from the rules set out by Moltmann. He makes clear that “we should literally and sincerely leave the cross out of the game... though we must not understand his death as a tragedy in the classical sense, still Jesus did not die as a ‘fool.’”<sup>20</sup> This, in part, seems driven by Moltmann’s exhortation to not make everything play, for if “everything turns into play, nothing will be play. If everything

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>17</sup> For more, please see Tillich and Gomes, *The Courage to Be*, 32–40, 86–112.

<sup>18</sup> Moltmann et al., *Theology of Play*, 112.

<sup>19</sup> And, if the anecdote of the Presbytery in Rigby’s essay (pg 103) is indicative of the norm, one often does.

<sup>20</sup> Moltmann et al., *Theology of Play*, 29.

becomes play, it becomes impossible to distinguish between good play and bad play.”<sup>21</sup> It also seems to be a move on Moltmann’s part to bracket events that are not liberating and joyful as not-play. However, without including the entirety of Christ within a Christology (or Theology) of Play, there is no way for it to be complete – why would a loving, free, and playful God suddenly stop being so on the cross? Does God suddenly change the rules of engagement at the penultimate moment of Christ’s liberation over death, over non-being? This seems to be against the nature of God, and given to a Puritanic, ontic view of play, which Moltmann spends significant time attempting to deconstruct. Therefore, the following Christology of Play will attempt to outline how the cross can still be part of “playfulness,” while also not turning the whole of life into play.

In sum, the rules for the proceeding Christology of Play are: God must be free, God must love freely, Jesus must be the conduit, humanity must be liberated, and the whole of Christ’s work in Creation must be included.

## A CHRISTOLOGY OF PLAY

### The Life of Christ: The End of Transaction

In the life of Christ in Creation, God created a new series of rules to guide how humanity interacts with itself and with God, no longer predicated on transactional anger and forgiveness. Martha Nussbaum, in her most recent work *Anger and Forgiveness*, provides a Foucauldian archaeological analysis of how both anger and forgiveness were operant in Jewish and Christian tradition.

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 112.

Nussbaum initially poses the question “why has [anger] standardly been imputed to God or gods, who are supposed to be images of perfection? ...it is virtually only in the Judeo-Christian tradition that we find the idea that God is both exemplary and angry.”<sup>22</sup> In Jewish Scripture, Nussbaum finds that God’s anger mirrors many of the complexities of human anger, with the caveat that because God is God, God can inflict punishment on those who inflame God’s anger. She labels this kind of anger “status-injury” anger, that is, seeing the action of an individual as a “‘down-ranking’ of the victim’s self” and that “lowering the status of the wrongdoer by pain or humiliation does indeed put [the victim] relatively up.”<sup>23</sup> This definition calls to mind the jealous God who demanded that no other God be put ahead of God, with death being the ultimate consequence. Nussbaum also notes a utilitarian God-anger, that “the fear of divine punishment deters wrongdoers, thus keeping the world safer for the good and just.”<sup>24</sup> If an individual is not doing what he should towards God and his peers, he may face judgement from not only others, but also God.

Nussbaum then explores forgiveness in the Jewish context through the *Teshuva*, a series of practices involved in the act of repentance. In particular, she points to the *Shaarei Teshuvah*<sup>25</sup> as the most complete form of how repentance operated in Judaism, written by Rabbi Jonah of Girona in the thirteenth century. In order to repent, an individual must first confess their sin honestly and then make sincere changes to lifestyle in order to avoid the sin in the future. If that sin was directed towards another person, then she “must approach the other person directly, confess the fault publicly, express regret and a commitment not to do this sort of thing again...

---

<sup>22</sup> Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 40–41.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>25</sup> “The Gates of Repentance”

and then the victim must accept the apology.”<sup>26</sup> Certainly, a portion of this process carried into Christian tradition – however, they are more functions of the church. The penance rituals in the Roman Catholic tradition, for instance, carry aspects of *teshuva*. Moreover, some Protestant strains emphasize a recognition of sin – the altar call where the pastor reminds the congregation that God is waiting to heal us of our sins, if only we acknowledge them. Others emphasize baptism specifically as an action for the remission of sins.

Because of this constant vigilance against sin and need for repentance, “interpersonal relationships... are doubly burdened: first and foremost, by constant preoccupation with transgression against God, which takes most of life’s space; second, by the demands of the public *teshuva* process within the relations themselves.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, according to Nussbaum, “the list-keeping mentality... is tyrannical towards human frailty, designedly so. We must constantly scrutinize our humanity, and frequently punish it.”<sup>28</sup> This traditional view of sin and repentance sounds much like not-playfulness: a constant recognition of our own existential limits, and some type of ontic activity that hopes towards a change, but without any certain guarantee. God’s fundamental choosing of a relationship with humanity in this framework is ancillary – it is only when we are truly honest about our sinful nature does God and the other truly forgive, and a result we must focus on what we do in order to, for even a moment, see God’s choice of us.

In contrast, a Christology of Play largely rejects a transactional relationship, liberating humanity from its own strictures, allowing us to avoid the anger-forgiveness continuum altogether, but instead turn to unconditional love. In order to illustrate this unconditional love,

---

<sup>26</sup> Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 63.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 65–66.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

Nussbaum points to the story of the Prodigal Son. She highlights that while the son has come to some kind of epiphany regarding his behavior (prepared to perhaps engage in a *teshuva* with his father), the son is only a secondary figure in the parable. Instead, the focus of the story is the reaction of the father, excited to see his son home again: “He just sees that the son he has believed dead is actually alive, and he is seized by a violent surge of strong emotion. The Greek *esplanchnisthē* (ἐσπλαγγνίσθη) is a rare and extremely emphatic term, which means, literally, ‘his guts were ripped out,’ or even, ‘his guts were devoured.’”<sup>29</sup> God’s choice in freedom to choose humanity is visceral, superseding transactional anger and forgiveness. This is evidenced even more through a word study of *σπλαγγνίζομαι* and its derivations (including *ἐσπλαγγνίσθη*). Used a dozen times in Protestant canon (once in 2 Maccabees), and exclusively in the Gospels, nearly all express Jesus Christ’s feeling towards those following him, and nearly always precedes miraculous acts of care (feeding the multitudes) and healing (restoring sight to the blind).<sup>30</sup>

Through unconditional love, we are no longer required to keep track and make amends for each individual wrong and sin, but instead respond to God and the other with the same body-rending compassion we have been given. Our playfulness becomes the joy and celebration of welcoming one another back in from the cold that we have placed upon ourselves; self-determined prodigals all. Christ’s presence in the world and his work amongst us as the conduit in which God explains Godself demonstrates this as a reflection of God’s character, and once again are given freedom to *be*, and not to just *do*. We can enter in the world of playfulness, fully

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 15:32, 20:34; Mark 1:41, 6:30, 8:2, 9:22; Luke 7:13. The remaining cognates refer to the Prodigal’s father (Luke 15:20), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33), and in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:27). In particular, the last reference is interesting because it is a reference to the “kingdom of heaven.” In light of the Prodigal Son, this parable takes on a new emphasis – if we do not love unconditionally, moved viscerally by the pain of others, only then does God permit the weight of the load of our sin on us.

aware of our imperfections, yet given permission to suspend their weight and live into the play of the work of Christ.

#### The Death of Christ: The End of the Reign of Spoilsport

By all accounts, the events leading to the death of Christ look nothing like playfulness.

Moltmann is clear that he does not believe that the cross is within the realm of play or game. Specifically, he notes Harvey Cox and his article in *Playboy* as well as the chapter “Christ as Harlequin” in his book *The Feast of Fools*, arguing that he ultimately did not take the cross seriously enough. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Moltmann was similarly critical of the three essays that accompanied his, stating that “in religion and theology everyone play his own language game as well as his own thought game – which makes understanding difficult and challenging at the same time. Often one plays past each other – as in this book.”<sup>31</sup> To Moltmann, all four individuals act as Christological spoilsports, but it also seems that Moltmann is holding a pole on the other end of the spoilsport spectrum. In all cases, the death of Christ has caused an end to the reign of the spoilsport, both in its seriousness and in its hilarity.

To start, it’s helpful to remember that if we focus on playfulness, and not on play *per se*, we remove unnecessary categorization of activities as “play” or “not-play”, and instead focus on the being of the individual performing the act. If that playfulness for God takes on the form of unconditional love that liberates humanity from its own self-imposed strictures, then where better to engage humanity than in its imposition of power and its self-imposed strictures on one another – and Godself? This is an underlying narrative of Luke 23, and helps to illustrate the playfulness of the cross.

---

<sup>31</sup> Moltmann et al., *Theology of Play*, 113.

From the outset of the chapter, we are presented with an angry crowd of priests and scribes presenting Jesus for condemnation. Their accusation is they “found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.”<sup>32</sup> The word used for “perverting”, a cognate of διαστρέφω, literally means for an object on a potter’s wheel to become misshapen – Christ had perverted the things made upon the culture’s potter’s wheel.<sup>33</sup> In particular, the crowd notes economic perversions in taxation and cultural perversions in terms of questioning power. Next, Jesus is presented to Herod, and when his power is insufficient to elicit the desired response from Jesus, he and the assembly put an elegant robe on him, another cultural perversion, reversing the reverence of the clothing with the contempt for Jesus. Afterwards, Jesus is sent to Pilate for sentencing. Twice more, he appeals to Jesus’ innocence, but to no avail. In a final perversion, this time of the self-imposed “justice” of the culture, the assembly demands Barabbas – a convicted murder and insurrectionist – to be freed in return for Jesus. Finally, Christ is crucified astride two other people. In the midst of the continued mocking and calls for Jesus to save himself, his next-to-last words according to Luke were ones of reassurance of the salvation of one of the other condemned, and not himself.

Jesus Christ went to his death displaying a type of unconditional love that to typical human sensibilities is outright foolishness. Every opportunity to engage in the rules of humanity’s game he resolutely refuses, and continues to meet the people around him with (at this point literal) body-rending love. Is he joyful? Perhaps, but that is not the most meaningful question. Better: is he playful? He is true to the rules of the game of God’s Creation, and is playing seriously. Jesus Christ’s death places a spotlight directly on our tendency to be a spoilsport, and not take the game seriously. When Jesus challenges the conventions of our

---

<sup>32</sup> Luke 23:2, NRSV

<sup>33</sup> Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, *Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*.

culture, we are just as likely to cling to our self-designed rules, to the point of perverting them in order to avoid playing with unconditional love. This, perhaps more than any other, is the reason Moltmann rightly takes umbrage with his co-essayists' interpretation of play – they don't take God seriously enough in God's choice of relationship with humanity. It was not accidental, nor was it anything but victory. God defeats the spoilsport because this is God's game. How could humanity ever expect to win by playing with its own rules?

Yet, Moltmann also seems to ignore the satire of the cross, not taking seriously the foolishness of the enterprise. Luke 23 demonstrates the voracity in which humanity sticks to its own unnecessary rules for a game they cannot even play well. Their efforts to kill a person who they perceived would lead to their destruction was literally Godself, the savior, and in the end, were unsuccessful in their pursuit of killing Jesus Christ, human-God. Their concerns of economic and cultural perversion were symbols and acts of Roman imperialism; their attempts at their own brand of mockery were futile: "like the jester, Christ defies custom and scorns crowned heads. Like a wandering troubadour, he has no place to lay his head... at the end he is costumed by his enemies in a mocking caricature of royal paraphernalia. He is crucified amidst sniggers and taunts with a sign over his head that lampoons his laughable claim."<sup>34</sup> To ignore this irony is to be a spoilsport of another type; one that presumes that God might not hoist us by our own petards if we play poorly. Indeed, if Matthew's Parable of the Unforgiving Servant possesses the unconditional love of God, it also seems to contain the consequences of being a spoilsport – being handed over to the βασιανιστής, or legal torturer, which might very well be the one and the same people. God invites humanity into a new game, but we have the choice to play.

---

<sup>34</sup> Cox, *The Feast of Fools; a Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy*, 140–41.

## The Resurrection of Christ: Not I DO, but I AM

Jesus' plea for God to forgive the people "for they do not know what they are doing"

poses an interesting quandary regarding a Christology of Play: could the people actually be playful?<sup>35</sup> Did the people who brought Jesus to Pilate not know who they were, instead leaving themselves to ontic activities? From the first moment that God revealed Godself in the burning bush, God referenced the ontological – God was not "I DO", but "I AM." God knew who God was and invited humanity into knowing God first before God's actions of liberation in Exodus.

In the resurrection, we are given a reminder of the God of Exodus once more. God incarnate in Jesus Christ is the glorious revelation of God-being in the world. John also reminds us of this at the start of his Gospel. The actions of Creation are secondary to the reality of the Word being God and with God. Humanity witnesses what it is to be fully and completely playful; completely and totally engaged with the freedom of unconditional love, and the visceral reaction when humanity chooses the ontic, doing by its own rules. We are able to overcome even death, the ultimate trajectory of the spoilsport, where we take God's game so flippantly that we "take our ball and go home," descending into chaos and ultimately anti-being itself, the exact anxiety we try to avoid. This ability to overcome and be invited into the liberation of the prodigal is cause for celebration and joy: "the Easter life becomes a free hymn of praise to the father in the midst of the sighing of creation in bondage."<sup>36</sup> Our humanity (our "first human-ness") is affirmed *in toto* – our being is good, is holy, is within Christ and the Trinity.

This is hard to remember, as our still-broken nature draws us into the pride of hoping to be more by doing, setting new rules and trying to play as opposed to living in God's playfulness. Yet God did not leave us alone, but provided the *paraclete*. Our holy counselor, the *paraclete*

---

<sup>35</sup> Luke 23:34. Some scholars question whether this was part of the original manuscript, or a later redaction to explain Stephen's comments at his death. For more see Ringe, *Luke*, 278.

<sup>36</sup> Moltmann et al., *Theology of Play*, 31.

councils us to remember who we *are* and not what we *do*. A paraphrase of John 14:15-27 in light of a Christology of Play could read that if we love Christ and keep the commandment of unconditional love and the *σπλαγγνίζομαι* of those who do not sense that love, the *paraclete* will reside with us and beside us. We will no longer play the world's game, but instead enter in a new space of playfulness – *being* in Christ and God. When we choose not to, and instead play the game like the world, we become spoilsports again, and will question God's presence amongst us.

### ISSUES, CONCERNS, NEXT STEPS

One of the primary issues and concerns of a Christology of Play is that it devolves into primarily a mode of leisure, and that emphasizing unconditional love as the *modus operandi* of playfulness is mitigated by the cravings of comfort and the ability to willfully ignore the suffering of the world. An additional issue is that unconditional love becomes “weaponized,” that is, people force one another into God's playfulness the way they see it by any means necessary, including denigration. Interestingly, these are both issues brought forth by Harvey Cox in the *Playboy* article dismissed by Moltmann entitled “God and the Hippies,” which carries shocking prescient commentary to our present day. While generally positive about the Hippie movement and its emphasis on love and the challenges it gives to both a Puritan work ethic as well as church ethical adiaphora, Cox notes “there is an element of truth in the assertion that hippie dropoutism represent a refusal to love the hungry neighbor, if that neighbor happens to be in India or Brazil. For the young people of the famine zones, no amount of LSD, pot, or barefoot frolicking will get them through the day.”<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Cox is concerned that

the greatest danger the movement must confront is that its present theology, however confused and eclectic, still contains very little corrective to just plain self-indulgence... this kind of moral chiaroscuro can lead to a terrible arrogance and to

---

<sup>37</sup> Cox, “God and The Hippies,” 209.

a pouty kind of self-righteousness. When softened by love and tolerance, it isn't so bad; but when it gets overzealous, it can be quite ugly. As one ardent young hippie once told me, "Everything I do is an act of love, even if it doesn't seem like it to anyone else." I'd rather prefer to be delivered from that kind of love and live with people who know that human motives are usually very mixed.<sup>38</sup>

Nearly 40 years hence, the same issues are at play. Any cursory look on social media will yield tweets in quick succession that claim the need for justice for the oppressed, the next casting aspersions at peers who disagree with the specific brand of justice, all the while written from the comforts of home on a smart phone, or as a part of a series of "selfies," meant to draw particular attention to oneself and not to the issue at hand.

However, if there is any aspect of a Christology of Play that helps mitigate these tendencies, it is precisely the one Moltmann wanted to avoid. The playfulness of the cross and the death of Jesus Christ must serve as a reminder that when we as humanity begin to augment the rules of play that God employs – choosing the Other and seeking them with a visceral compassion that invites them into a new way of life that celebrates being and not just doing – we are spoilsports, and we will lose to the One who created the game itself.

Of course, this is a first attempt at redeveloping and reclaiming a Theology of Play through a Christology. Further exegetical work, especially into the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, as well as relationships between an ontological playfulness in Paul and the role of the *paraclete* would create a more systemic theology to partner with the Christology. Furthermore, answering the call of Liberation Theology, which would rightly argue that some of the claims made are claims of privilege would be important. This might require further development of the practical problems of being a spoilsport, and how it works against God's liberation of humanity.

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 208–9.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS: TRUE COMPASS, NO MAGNETS

As we continue to work through the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we also continue to move past the modern period and into a post-modern time. Meanwhile, the church still seems to be struggling to catch itself after the Enlightenment and positivist thinking related to God and the way we interact with one another. We still hope for enough objectivity and empirical evidence to ensure that we are doing and saying the right things. We spend a lot of time “working” towards that end. Yet we live in an era that has reduced interest in a universal, objective truth, instead yielding to narrative to understand truth across different cultures and experiences. While this has thankfully led to many new voices into discourse that had been barred from doing so, it has left us with an uneasy sense of trying to set our moral compass in a direction without an agreeable magnetic north. This is illustrated clearly in the last election and its counter-responses: who is the enemy? Who is unjust? Do we denigrate our opponent? What do we do?

A Christology of Play gives a different approach. Our compasses point true not in a specific set of things we do based on what we think is right or wrong, but instead in the recognition of the ontological grounding of each of us in God’s unconditional love. We do not have to focus on our flight from God, wallowing with the scraps left to the pigs, but that we return. We can celebrate and feast together. We are playful seriously and unconditionally, and we invite as many as we can to play the same game – justice becomes allowing everyone to come back home to our father’s awaiting embrace, and mourning in pain those who prefer to stay flung afield. We speak truth to power that creates self-imposed burdens on others, and reminded those in power that Christ can turn them on their head – in our hope to kill what we hate, we give life to what God loves.

And so, if there is any response to Kegley’s pronouncement, it might a simple, playful rewording: with the theology (and Christology) of play, there is new hope.

## WORKS CITED

- Cox, Harvey. "God and The Hippies." *Playboy*, January 1968.
- . *The Feast of Fools; a Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969.
- Ellis, Michael J. *Why People Play*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1973.
- Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*. Baker's Greek New Testament Library. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000. BibleWorks, v.8.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg, Joel Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall. *Truth and Method*. First paperback edition. translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. The Bloomsbury Revelations Series. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Angelico Press, 2016.
- Kegley, Charles W. "Theology: 1939-1979." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1979): 119–27.
- Moltmann, Jürgen, Robert E. Neale, Sam Keen, David LeRoy Miller, and Jürgen Moltmann. *Theology of Play*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.
- Nussbaum, Martha Craven. *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Rigby, Cynthia L. "Beautiful Playing." In *Theology as Conversation: The Significance of Dialogue in Historical and Contemporary Theology: A Festschrift for Daniel L. Migliore*, edited by Daniel L. Migliore, Bruce L. McCormack, and Kimlyn J. Bender, 101–16. Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2009.
- Ringe, Sharon H. *Luke*. 1st ed. Westminster Bible Companion. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.
- Tillich, Paul, and Peter J. Gomes. *The Courage to Be*. 2nd ed. Yale Nota Bene. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.