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TOWARDS A THEOLOGY FOR COMPETITIVE SPORT

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ABSTRACT

Current research such as that of Sagar and Stoeber (2009) confirms how common amongst perfectionist sportspersons is the fear of failure with its attendant sense of worthlessness and shame (Sagar, Boardely & Kavussanu, 2011). In the face of this bleak reality, many see holy play as the only credible Christian alternative. In this paper, however, I disagree. After taking a fresh look at the roots of holy play as well as the contemporary magisterial work of Shirl Hoffman, I will argue for a more nuanced theological appreciation of sports competition.

Keywords: Competition, Theology, Play, Hoffman, Huizinga

Introduction

For many today, sport as holy play has great appeal, for it enables participants to avoid the emotionally unhealthy effects of a performance-based identity normally associated with competitive sports. As implied in the word “re-creation,” its proponents argue that sport in its essence is play and that play is a divinely given release where the unmediated rhythms of the spirit of creation flow through a person’s body and soul (Miller, 1970; Moltmann, 1972; Johnson, 1997). Because spontaneous freedom is a constitutive characteristic of the Creator, His presence can be powerfully experienced in the direct, Dionysiac exuberance of unbounded, recreative “playtime.” As Wheaton philosopher Arthur F. Holmes has succinctly expressed, human beings can come to know “*the image of God in play*” (1983, pp. 288–289).

Proponents of “holy play” are absolutely right about the dark, destructive side of competitive sports. So many factors encourage athletes to base their self-worth on what they are able to prove they can do. More often than not, they are trained to feel good about themselves only when they are winning. As one athlete told a researcher, “If you lose, you’re nothing” (Hoffman, 2010, p. 210). Or as a common locker-room wall poster warns: “Defeat is worse than death because you have to live with defeat.” When they do lose, competitive athletes are expected to internalize a deep personal dissatisfaction with themselves. For only if their emotional experience of losing is sufficiently horrendous will they find the willpower to make every sacrifice necessary to claw their way back to self-respect by winning the next time. At age 10, a well-meaning coach told Andre Agassi (2009) how to harness his shame for success:

You’re hurting right now, hurting like heck, but that just means you care. Means you want to win. You can *use* that. Remember this day. Try to use this day as motivation. If you don’t want to feel this hurt again, good, do everything you can to avoid it. Are you ready to do everything? I nod. (p. 55)

Current research such as that of Sagar and Stoeber (2009) confirms how common amongst perfectionist sportspersons is the fear of failure with its attendant sense of worthlessness and shame (Sagar, Boardely & Kavussanu, 2011). In the face of this bleak reality, many see holy play as the only credible Christian alternative. In this paper, however, I disagree. After taking a fresh look at the roots of holy play as well as the contemporary magisterial work of Shirl Hoffman, I will argue for a more nuanced theological appreciation of sports competition.

Advocates for holy play depend heavily on the study by a Dutch historian of culture, Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*. He sought to understand “what play is in itself and what it means for the player,” including how the experience of play could inspire such intensity and absorption (1950, p. 8). According to Huizinga, authentic play provides freedom from the pressures of ordinary life precisely because it has no connection to it. Since playtime offers a thoroughly engrossing alternative, it brings release and relaxation to its participants by successfully and satisfyingly distracting them for a time from their problems in real life. Of course, competitive sports today have the exact opposite effect. Because the rewards of winning are so great in real life, even for youth sports, athletic activities do not release participants from stress and strain. In fact, they greatly intensify the pressure on them. If authentic playtime is only about escaping from the pressures of ordinary life as is routinely attributed to Huizinga, it is hard not to agree with the holy play activists that the current system of competitive sports is a gross distortion of play’s true purpose.

Yet, Huizinga (1950) was the first to admit that this description of play was, in fact, not all there was to the matter. On the final pages of *Homo Ludens*, he acknowledges that human logic could only go so far in explaining human existence and behavior: “In our heart of hearts we know that none of our pronouncements is absolutely conclusive” (pp. 211–12). In the final analysis, human beings have to turn to something greater than themselves to find meaning and authenticity, to the ultimate, in fact. For Plato that means recognizing humanity as God’s plaything. While that might suggest that humanity is simply subject to the whims of an unpredictable superior power, Huizinga turns that evaluation on its head by quoting Proverbs 8:30. Wisdom says: “I was with [God] forming all things: and was delighted every day, playing him at all times; playing in the world. And my delights were to be with the children of men” (p. 212). Ultimately, as Huizinga tantalizingly hints, life is God’s play, an orderly existence within a chaotic greater reality, where God’s rules resolve tensions and his great joy is to participate with humankind in the process. If so, play may have a greater role in God’s ordering of Creation and his plan for redemption than just being an opportunity to disconnect from the pressures of daily life.

A decade later, the German Jesuit scholar Hugo Rahner (2019) took up the task of fully fleshing out Huizinga’s suggestion. In his equally landmark work, *Man at Play* Rahner seeks to make explicit “the theological and religious interpretation of play” (pp. 5–6). He begins by returning to Plato’s understanding of humanity as a “plaything of God.” Although he will later note the aging Plato’s own “secret melancholy” about this description (p. 17), Rahner also sees something more positive in the description. On one hand, to call humanity “God’s plaything” means that the attributes of play are the highest possible expression of authentic humanity (p. 15). Freedom of spirit, an instinctive assured command of the body, and elegance in thought as well as in the execution of abilities; these are the fullest expression of what it means to be human. On the other hand, if we are God’s plaything then we must speak of a God who plays. Indeed, in the very structure of the universe, the Creator has embedded an inner rhythm in its

various parts, from sub-atomic particles all the way to starry constellations. As a result, everything in creation derives its ultimate meaning by taking part in the divinely designed cosmic game which God orchestrates. Even human spirits returning to God exhibit this process of realizing their full potential only in accordance with his divine plan for them. For humans are hard-wired to long for eternity, which only God's presence can provide (pp. 16–17). According to Plato, then, to embrace the best of play allows humankind to participate in the divine. Through playing, a person can recover on Earth “an original unity he once had with [God in Heaven]” (p. 15).

Rahner (2019) next considers how early Christian theologians used the Bible to adapt this pagan Greek understanding of humanity to fit the church's teaching. Just like Huizinga, Rahner identifies Proverbs 8:27–31 as the key scriptural passage for the Christian tradition of a God who plays with his creation:

When he established the heavens, I was there . . . when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a little child; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men. (*The New Jerusalem Bible*, 1985)

The church fathers interpreted this Old Testament personification of Divine Wisdom in the light of such New Testament passages as John 1:1–3:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (*The Holy Bible, ESV*, 2001)

Consequently, the fathers understood the passage from Proverbs 8 to be describing Jesus at work ordering the world. Here was, in their view, a crucial insight into the inner workings of the Trinity. From the delight of the Father in the Son came an overflowing love from which emerged Creation, and humanity was their greatest work. Eventually, the seventh-century theologian Maximus the Confessor built a highly influential mysticism about the playing of God (Louth, 1996; Maximus the Confessor, 2014). He argued that through a fully free and spontaneous act of divine love, God imparted to his creation a meaningful purpose so that humanity could come to know him in the wonder-filled play of his works. All the many aspects of this world are only bright shining toys that catch our eye. Like Moses and the burning bush, God uses them to draw humanity to himself. For only in playing with God can we begin to grasp the true meaning of our earthly activities and experiences. For only in the divine play of eternity will all the sour notes of this life be resolved into an enduring harmony. Indeed, only in the light of the glory of the wonders to come can we perceive that our own current existence is but a children's game played by God (Rahner, 2019, pp. 27–31).

Hence, for Rahner (2019), a God who plays requires authentic humanity to be people who play. But Rahner does not mean merely that humanity is designed instinctively to enjoy games, even in adulthood as “an eternal child,” although that is indeed true (p. 80). Rather, he first focuses on something larger, that the whole of human existence is a game which God orchestrates. Consequently, play serves as a paradigm to help Christians understand the totality of their lives. Just as play is serious but not ultimate, Christian discipleship requires full

commitment to relationships and activities in this world, while recognizing that life's full meaning and purpose can only be understood in the light of eternity. Therefore, mature Christians should always be both earnest and light-hearted, giving their all to the tasks at hand, while still carrying them out with joy, even in the midst of difficulties. After all, Christians should be buoyed up by the knowledge that God is ultimately in charge. Imitating God by pursuing excellence with wholehearted execution, while still keeping God as the ultimate focus for meaning and purpose; that is how Rahner thinks play should shape Christian discipleship in this world and enable followers of Christ to experience His presence through the imitation of the God who plays (pp. 35–59).

Yet Rahner (2019) digs deeper still. The play of the God revealed in Jesus Christ is specifically a free and spontaneous game of love begun by offering himself as an unmerited gift and returned by human beings, the only earthly creatures capable of freely and spontaneously offering themselves in loving response. In this “game of grace” Jesus becomes the playmate of humanity. By focusing on the vision of a loving God in the midst of the comedy and tragedy that is human existence, Christians can become his little children again. In the age to come, they will be effortlessly secure in his love, playing forever on the streets of heaven with Him, as the prophet predicted long ago: “The streets of the city shall be full boys and girls playing in the streets thereof” (Zech. 8:5). For did not Jesus say that being a little child again is the essence of heaven (Matt. 18:3)?

Finally, having addressed play as a paradigm for the Christian life, Rahner (2019) circles back to discuss play as a holy endeavor in itself, “humanity’s hope for another life incarnated in gesture” (p. 85). For to play is:

to be relieved of all weights that bear [the mind] down, to be free, kingly, unfettered and divine. Man at play is reaching out . . . for that superlative ease, in which even the body, freed from its earthly burden, moves to the effortless measures of a heavenly dance. (p. 86)

Quoting numerous ancient pagan writers, Rahner argues that dance was seen as a sacred form of play in which humanity, through gestures and rhythm, sought to imitate the joyous spirit which the Creator embedded into the fabric of the universe. On one hand, the rhythm of dancing linked the inner beauty of the soul to the outer beauty of the body. On the other hand, dancing choruses imitated the ordered movement of the stars so that participants could reflect and join in their heavenly harmony (pp. 87–96). However, Rahner acknowledges that the church officially rejected these ideas. Sacred dance was too rooted in pagan idolatry to be granted a place in its liturgies (pp. 96–97). Nevertheless, because their people evidently still longed to dance, Christian leaders urged them to do so like David before the ark (II Sam. 6:14–22), that is, as an embodiment of a life lived in Christian wisdom, the outer body expressing the inner disposition of the soul (pp. 98–102). While early church theologians could describe Eden as a time of dancing when the soul and body were in full harmony with each other, they agreed that the Fall irretrievably broke that perfect unity, and only at the end of time—not now during this earthly life—would God’s children be able to take part once again in the blessed dance of the heavenly choirs (pp. 109–111).

In evaluating Rahner’s (2019) description of play as a specifically Christian concept, we should note the profound theocentricity of his approach. First, because God plays in creation,

humankind is created to join him in the playing. Secondly, the game which people play is God's choice, not theirs. Humanity is designed for and destined to play the game of life. Yet, the flux of history, the rise and fall of empires, the chances and changes of ordinary existence, these are in the control of the divine Master of Play, not human individuals or societies. His governing participation in the process creates order, meaning, and purpose in the midst of the seeming chaos of human existence. It is precisely the recognition of this reality that frees Christians from being too closely tied to the outcomes of this world, even as they fully commit themselves to being part of the process as well. Indeed, the ultimate perfection of God's work also makes clear the insurmountable imperfection of humanity's, rendering all our efforts child's play in comparison (p. 43). Thirdly, drawn by God's gracious gift of love in Christ, the drive behind all participants in God's game is their desire to reconnect with him: "things that play, play only because of their urge to attain to the vision of God" (p. 38). While dance may have been a compelling form of holy play for the ancients, Rahner never claims that the patristic church saw dancing in this life as a means of participating in the divine now. The closest he comes is to argue that play and dance can be anticipatory of heavenly joys, since "[t]hey are a kind of rehearsal, fashioned into gesture, sound or word, of that Godward, directed harmony of body and soul which we call heaven" (p. 9). Finally, as a mere grace note, Rahner only lightly touches on the role of play *qua* play in the life of the Christian. He simply quotes Aquinas who says that while play is autotelic, the pleasure derived from it gives the soul the rest and refreshment necessary to carry on working further (p. 130).

Shirl Hoffman

A pioneer in the academic field of sport and spirituality, Shirl Hoffman has long sought to return sport to its roots in play. In 2010, he published his magnum opus, *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sport*. Building on the work of both Huizinga and Rahner, among many others, the book is indisputably a game-changer in the field. Growing up as the son of a strict Baptist minister who was also a keen athlete, Hoffman learned early that "[w]hen religion runs up against sport, it is usually religion which gets shoved out of the way" (2010, pp. xi–xii). Hence, his writings seek to make sense of the role which athletic activity has in the life of a follower of Jesus so that Christians can pursue their passion for sport and faith with mutual integrity.

While the product of a lifetime of thoughtful, sympathetic engagement with evangelical sports ministries, Hoffman's *Good Game* is also the most thoroughly sustained critique of that subculture ever to appear in print, and the conclusions are comprehensively damning (2010). With clarity and eloquence Hoffman challenges prevailing evangelical attitudes about sport in the key areas of competition, stewardship of the body, character-building, and evangelism. He argues that competition is socially constructed, not the result of a drive embedded in Creation by God himself, as Bill Bright and others have argued. Rather, competition fundamentally distorts God's intention for human relationships (pp. 157–9). Hoffman questions how the destructive violence to the human body inherent in such sports as American football can be squared with the good stewardship required for something made in God's image. He argues that the ruthless culture of self-promotion cultivated in contemporary sports will always ultimately prove corrosive for Christian character, no matter how hard spiritually-minded individuals might try to resist (pp. 162, 212). Since evangelism is the primary justification for evangelical participation in

sports, their ministries never challenge sports commodification by commercial interests—an approach famously labelled “Sportianity” by Frank Deford (1976). Indeed, Hoffman rightly points out that “Sportianity” merely adopts the same approach to evangelism, asking elite players to sell Jesus, alongside of razors and sneakers, on the basis of their being winners in sports, not theology (pp. 221, 223, 235–6). Since authentic play is always autotelic, Hoffman finds that the utilitarian approach of “Sportianity” utterly destroys the religious potential of sport. Having thoroughly described and dissected how evangelicals normally combine sport and Christian faith, Hoffman’s weighing finds their approach desperately wanting (pp. 15, 267–8). In his view, “Sportianity” has produced an ethic which is neither true to Christ nor to sport. Against the competing malpractices of commercial and evangelistic interests, Hoffman propose a truly Christian way to play sport.

He begins by acknowledging that a description as to “*What* is the purpose of sports in the Christian life?” and “*Why* should Christians play sports?” should precede any discussion of “*How* can sports be made a spiritually affirming rather than spiritually challenging experience?” He also admits that he is not really qualified to answer the theological questions and makes clear that his book seeks only “to sketch out some modest parameters that such a philosophy/theology might incorporate and follow with some implications for Christian practice” so as to begin “jump-starting badly needed dialogue on the subject” (2010, p. 265). Hoffman then grounds his answers to the *What* and *Why* questions in a fundamentally anthropocentric approach. Although he insists that the play instinct is by divine design, rendering play itself a divine gift, Hoffman insists that such an act of grace by God entails an obligation of proper stewardship on humanity in response (pp. 274, 278). Consequently, Hoffman stresses that human decisions and human actions determine the answers to these questions. Since people decide whether or not they play, sport is not an essential, but a leisure activity. Since leisure liberates people from their quotidian constraints, “players are free to pursue their hearts’ desires.” Consequently, in leisure-shaped sports “the Christian has a few moments of freedom to shed the camouflage of natural man, to polish up the *imago Dei*, to regain spiritual balance, and to recover a sense of who he or she really is.” In short, sports pursued as leisure activities offer Christians the opportunity to choose to expand “their spiritual visions” (pp. 265–6).

In Hoffman’s final analysis, since true sport both expresses authentic emotions and shapes them as well, Christians can use sporting experiences to nurture “religious affectivities” in their lives (2010, pp. 278–9). In the face of the incompleteness athletes experience in (and try to fill with) sport, Christians can find “a renewed sense of dependence upon God.” In the light of the joy that comes from game-playing, Christian sportspeople can gain “a fresh perspective on God’s grace” and respond by pouring all they have into playing as a grateful offering to the giver of the gift (p. 278). Hoffman is well aware that such a clearly religious construal of authentic sporting experiences could seem to contradict his endorsement of the essential autotelic nature of play, the very principle by which he has dismissed so much of evangelical sports culture. He argues instead that since the emotions arise authentically from the experience of true sport itself, rather than from an agenda to use the outcome of sport for some extraneous purpose, it is licit for players to interpret them in a manner which is consistent with their own worldview (p. 279). However, since a religious construal of sporting experience requires a conscious cultivation by participants, Christian players must embrace the responsibility this places on their “aesthetic and creative senses” (p. 279), and Christian institutions involved in sport must redesign their programs to facilitate it (pp. 281–92).

Because Hoffman is quite explicit that athletes and institutions must work out for themselves the religious usefulness of the otherwise generic “affectivities” of the play experience, he offers two guiding “myths” from the Christian tradition to aid them in this process. In doing so, he is simply suggesting to others what he himself has done throughout *Good Game*. Hoffman’s “canon within the canon” for a proper biblical interpretation of sport consists of “the myth of eternity—the Christian hope that the end of the present life is but the beginning of an eternal life in heaven spent with God and fellow believers with incorruptible bodies and everlasting joy—and the myth of God at play in creating the world” (2010, pp. 15, 74, 280).

In support of the first myth, he appeals to Hugo Rahner’s belief that “play helped orient Christians to ‘the state of the blessed in the world to come’” and to Arthur Holmes’ use of Zechariah 8:5 to assert that “play ‘finds meaning and purpose in a place reserved for them in God’s Kingdom’” (2010, pp. 280, 327). Consequently, for Christians, sport should be played in the light of eternity, and sentiments appropriate for that approaching reality, cultivated. In support of the second myth, he quotes Ruth Caspar’s application of Proverbs 8:27–31: “‘At play,’ said Caspar, ‘[personhood expressed through playing] is most profoundly [the image of God].’” Hoffman also notes with approval Robert Johnston’s description of play “as mirroring the adventure (and play) of God himself; as such, play can be ‘a parable of the surprising reality of grace.’” Therefore, Christians should develop a “spirit of playfulness” in expectation, as Johnston says, that there “‘God can, and often does, meet with us and commune with us’” (p. 281).

In Conversation with Hoffman

In the light of the immensely thoughtful effort that Hoffman has poured into *Good Game*, how should we respond to his invitation to enter into a conversation with him about rethinking the evangelical Christian approach to sport? First of all, we need to adopt more precise terms. Theologians have long recognized the need to distinguish between how things appear to human beings and what their essential nature may in fact be. God known *pro nobis* (“for us”) is not equivalent to the totality of God *in se* (i.e., “in himself”). And what is true of the discussion of God is certainly true of play as well. The nature of play can be determined by human observation—an anthropocentric approach. However, it is equally valid, for theologians at least, to seek to define genuine play in terms of its design by the Creator via revelation—a theocentric approach. As we have seen, Huizinga took the former approach, Rahner, the latter. Consequently, while both appeal to the “autotelic nature” of play, they actually mean two different things by that term.

For Huizinga, the quality of life experienced during play is its own sole end. Yet, as we have noted, Huizinga acknowledges the ultimately contingent nature of a *pro nobis* approach. He fleetingly points the way to another, deeper explanation of the play experience gained from a theocentric perspective. As a theologian, Rahner seeks to flesh out Huizinga’s suggestion. By definition, the Creator of play could offer an accurate description of its nature *in se*. Whatever the purpose God had intended for the authentic human experience of play, that would be its own final end. According to Rahner, the ultimate purpose of play was for God to use it to draw humanity into a deeper authentic experience of himself. Thus, for Huizinga the autotelic nature of play means the experience of freedom from normal life; for Rahner it means experiencing the

freedom that comes from encountering God during play. Of course, both approaches can be true simultaneously. Like Russian dolls, Rahner's divine initiative is hidden within Huizinga's creaturely experience, but for a smaller number. Or, more accurately from Rahner's perspective, the person who plays does so within the greater game of the God who plays. Therefore, it won't do, as some do (Harvey, 2014) to dismiss Rahner and Johnston by simply insisting that their theocentric approach to play somehow violates its autotelic nature.

To his credit, Hoffman attempts to hold together the insights from both approaches. However, because he fails to appreciate their fundamentally different starting points, he engages in categorical confusion, leaving himself open to criticism from both sides. From an anthropocentric perspective, his religious interpretation of what he admits is an ultimately secular experience is guilty of importing his own agenda into sport. From a theocentric perspective, he transposes divine activities into human responsibilities for athletes, coaches and institutions. Ultimately, Hoffman sees an authentic experience of leisure sport as a way for Christians to anticipate heaven, if they will only take up the opportunity to actively pursue it while playing. Quoting Rahner again, Hoffman (2010) concludes *Good Game* by urging participants to seek

on earth to be imitators of 'the Heavenly Wisdom who plays upon the earth, co-fashioner with God.' This will only happen when Christians approach sports . . . as times and places for recovering our spiritual centers of gravity and for rehearsing spiritual truths, keeping in mind that our games are but dim images of the real game that will begin when this world has been left behind. (pp. 291–2)

Note that Hoffman does not ask how God acts during human play to transform the participants, but only how the people of sport can use a good game to train themselves, through the efforts of their creative Christian construals, to be more like God. Therefore, no matter how often Hoffman may quote Rahner, in the end he flattens the latter's thoroughly integrated theocentric vision to fit into the confines of his own two-dimensional anthropocentric perspective.

Hoffman treats the writings of C. S. Lewis and Robert Johnston in the same fashion. In his first guiding myth, Hoffman argues that athletes can point themselves towards heaven by stirring up a longing for it through sport, for playing on earth can act as a "rehearsal" for the true playing to come in heaven (2010, p. 20). In support of this argument, Hoffman quotes Lewis' *Weight of Glory*:

Play may serve the purpose in the Christian life that C. S. Lewis once ascribed to good books or music; sports are 'only the scent of the flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not yet visited.' 'Though like is not the same,' said Lewis, 'it is better than unlike.' (p. 280)

Lewis did indeed argue that the limited joys of creaturely things like literature could awaken a longing in the human heart for the eternal joy that came only from God himself. Yet, Lewis also framed that longing in the larger context of God reaching out to people through those imperfect joys. In *Surprised by Joy* (1955), he described how God, completely unsought and unexpected, had called to him through the joy he experienced when he read George MacDonald's *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance*:

It was as though the voice which had called to me from the world's end were now speaking at my side. It was with me in the room, or in my own body, or behind me . . . But now I saw the bright shadow coming out of the book into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things and yet itself unchanged. Or, more accurately, I saw the common things drawn into the bright shadow. *Unde hoc mihi?* [Why have I been given this?] In the depth of my disgraces, in the then invincible ignorance of my intellect, all this was given me without asking, even without consent. (pp. 180–1)

When Lewis eventually came to faith, the completion of the process was still as much driven by God as its beginning: “Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about ‘man’s search for God.’ To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse’s search for the cat” (1955, p. 227). In short, for Lewis, God’s use of the longing for eternity—not what human beings do to stir it up—is what proves decisive. Hoffman, however, passes over that crucial point in silence, since his anthropocentric approach has no room for the voice of God.

In his second guiding myth, Hoffman (2010) emphasizes its “prescriptive message” by including a quotation from David Naugle: “If human play is indeed rooted in divine play, then humans ought to develop our abilities at play and cultivate a spirit of playfulness” (p. 281). Naugle nicely reinforces Hoffman’s sense that a God who plays requires a Christian people to shape themselves in response. Yet, Hoffman then immediately adds two quotations from Johnston to further stress the fruitfulness of such human efforts:

And when our sports go as they could and should, they can be a means of spiritual formation that, as Johnston says, can lead to an ‘experience of the reality of God through his special revelation in the Exodus and in Jesus Christ.’ It also can be an experience in which ‘God can, and often does, meet with us and commune with us.’ (p. 278)

Johnston (1997) himself, however, is at pains to make clear that God has the determinative role in this process: “Our human reach toward the transcendent can be met by God’s outstretched arm breaking into history” (p. 74). Note Johnston’s use of “can.” He is quite explicit that connecting to God through play is a matter of divine initiative and selection. God does not meet all those who play, not even all those who might be seeking him through it:

I do not want to compromise either God’s freedom or the ‘purposelessness’ of play by suggesting a necessary relationship between our play and the divine encounter. Rather, it is enough to suggest that in play God can, and often does, meet us and commune with us. (p. 80)

In the final analysis, for Johnston, as for Lewis whom he invokes, meeting God through sport is not a matter of heeding Naugle’s call to “develop our abilities,” but the result of divine gracious love pursuing us where God can find our longing hearts (1997, pp. 75–81). Hoffman, however, never asks how God uses sport in the lives of his children, only how his children should (2010, p. xiii). Ironically, then, his proposal ultimately remains well within the current culture of

evangelical sports ministry. It is still all about a participant's performance. Hoffman just disagrees with others over what that performance should entail.

Competition as an Evil in Itself

If Hoffmann's ideal is the human imitation of heavenly play, then competitive sport is Lucifer slithering on earth as a serpent. Human cultures have introduced its inherently antagonistic spirit into the ideal play world in attempt to use sport for their own corrupt purposes (Hoffman, 2010, pp. 157–8). Despite centuries of trying to bridle it for positive purposes, competition inherently appeals to our worst instincts. Its spirit of rivalry cannot but inevitably distort human relationships, all too often inspiring hate rather than fellow-feeling (pp. 149, 151, 153, 155, 159). Winners cannot but diminish losers. Hoffman notes Lewis's concern that competitive sport could "lead to ambition, jealousy, and embittered partisan feelings, quite as often as to anything else." Hoffman goes even further: "If one were to design a social exercise that tempts Christians toward such sins, they couldn't do much better than competitive sports" (p. 148). In his view, competition in sport, like slavery, is not simply an institution that just needs good governance to make a positive contribution to society. Competition is an irredeemable evil in itself. As a result, authentic Christianity and competitive sports are mutually exclusive (pp. 11, 145, 156, 162). Hoffman is quite clear that competition destroys the spiritual refreshment available in the sacred space of leisure. Consequently, as we have seen, Hoffman is scandalized by evangelical sports ministries which have embraced competition as a divine gift (p. 157). He is rightly critical of "platform evangelism," where winners in elite sport are deemed automatically qualified and called by God to be evangelists. The only proper response Hoffman sees is a revolution in sporting culture that rids itself of this malign influence. As the title of his book suggests, Hoffman calls for the elimination of competition from sport so that young people will at last be free to play a "good game."

Of course, the complete elimination of competition with its corruptive power might well have an unexpected negative effect not too dissimilar from the fate of the good citizens in Mark Twain's tale, *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg*. Since the folks of Hadleyburg did not realize that "the weakest of all weak things is a virtue which has not been tested in the fire," they prided themselves on "carefully and vigilantly" keeping themselves and their children "out of temptation." Therefore, their vengeful corruptor knew he could easily destroy their long-standing reputation for sanctity by simply snaring their untested resolve in a secret lie. Those who run from a fight with the destructive power of competition in sport might well find themselves ill-prepared for the battle when the serpent raises its head in other areas of their lives.

An Alternative Proposal

In order to help competitive athletes, indeed even professional athletes, to bring their sport and Christian faith together, we need to develop a model that neither falls into the sand traps of Sportianity nor overreacts to it. We need to start with the game God is playing with human sport and understand competition in the light of his purpose for it. Huizinga (1950) ends his study of play and Rahner (2019) begins his with the notion that humanity was created by God for his own purposes and pleasure. Let's start our theocentric approach to the purpose of play with this same end for humanity, but build on how Paul expressed it in Ephesians 2:10, "For we

are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (NIV, 2013).

According to the *in se* insights of Holy Scripture, God has created humanity for the game of good works, namely, to give ourselves in love to him and others as selflessly and steadfastly as Jesus gives himself to us. God has created the rules of this game in advance and scripted our role in it. Since we are his workmanship, we have been created with all the necessary gifts for our role. Since God calls forth these good works from us, we can be confident that our lives in Christ's redemptive plan have inherent meaning and purpose. Indeed, we can be confident that all the circumstances of our lives, all our heady successes and all our heartbreaking failures, all the errors of others that impact us and all our errors that impact others and ourselves, every part of the game God has crafted out of our lives, all of it fulfills the promise Paul recorded in Romans 8:28, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (ESV, 2001). In this promise we see the greatest insight into the human condition, that each of us will experience our greatest fulfillment from God working in us through our role in his game. Since our purpose is thus caught up with Christ's purpose, we can be confident that what Paul said to the Philippians is true for us as well: "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6, ESV, 2001). In short, God has scripted beforehand our role in the game and will ensure his desired results in and through us.

Clearly, a theocentric approach to sport must begin with what God has promised to do in and through human beings and our activities. Let's then examine that key principle for understanding the Christian life that we are God's workmanship. We can better understand this concept by turning to a well-worn sports ministry chestnut, the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14–30), but examining it from a fresh perspective. The normal question for this passage is: "What does this parable tell us about what we are to do for God?" In the light of our theocentric approach, let's ask a different question: "What does this parable teach about what God is doing with us?"

First, Jesus wants his audience to see that God gives us our human abilities and resources, and they are to be used to benefit his purposes (v. 14). Secondly, Jesus recognizes different levels of ability. The Master gave different amounts of money to each of the three servants based on their ability to invest that much wisely (v. 15). This verse would suggest that different kinds and levels of ability are a part of God's advance plan. In fact, Paul's famous description of the various parts of Christ's body in I Corinthians 12:12–27 only confirms that these sorts of differences between human beings reflect divine diversity in creation. Hence, Jesus teaches in this parable that God works through different human abilities, calling forth good works appropriate to each. Thirdly, the reward for the first two was not rejoicing in the accomplishments themselves, but rather in sharing in the Master's joy that they had fulfilled his purpose for them (vv. 20–23). Consequently, Jesus is teaching his audience that the ultimate end of their own good works will not be found in the work themselves but in God's attitude toward their role in his game plan. Finally, Jesus uses a comparison of the different results as a teaching moment, to help his audience understand what was humanly possible for the servant given only one talent. Clearly, the Master had entrusted the right amount to the other two servants. Although given different sums of money, each had been able to double what he had received (vv. 16–17). Since the Master had been right about the abilities of the other two, he was surely right about what the last servant could have done, if that servant would have only trusted the Master's

judgment about his ability, rather than fearing his own failure and his Master's consequent wrath (vv. 24–25). In this parable Jesus wants his audience to understand that the example of others can help human beings better understand what God wants to bring forth from them. After all, “We don’t yet see things clearly. We’re squinting in a fog, peering through a mist” (I Corinthians 13:12, *The Message*, 2002). All too often, when we look in a mirror, we only see the hazy, blurred and distorted reflection of God’s love and glory in our face. But our neighbors may help us get beyond the limitations of our own self-centered blind spots to learn to be more fruitful in loving.

Therefore, according to the Parable of the Talents, to be God’s workmanship means that humanity has divinely designed different levels of ability from which God will call forth appropriate good works to fit God’s role for each of us. To help us understand what that can look like, God gives us examples of what others have done to help us see more clearly what his love is calling forth from us. Finally, our greatest joy is experiencing a oneness between our accomplishments and God’s purpose for our lives. Yet, the key principle on which the whole parable turns and, thus, the crucial factor in gaining a better understanding of our workmanship by God is the educative value of comparison.

In the light of this biblical analysis, we can return to the question of competition in sport from a theocentric perspective. Competition is just a specific form of comparison, as Brian Bolt has written (2018, p. 59). That being the case, we must seek to refine our terminology once again. We must first establish the context in which a comparison through competition occurs. What is being sought? Self-knowledge or self-worth? From Jesus, we learn that the Holy Spirit works through comparison to increase self-awareness. From Genesis 3, the writings of Curt Thompson (2015), and other psychologists who research performance-based identity, we see that the force of destruction active in this world works through comparison to judge and ultimately diminish self-worth, even in the winners, since only relationships, not accomplishments, give human beings a lasting sense of meaning and value. Hence, we must differentiate between competition to increase self-understanding and competition to prove our self-importance.

Despite the urgent necessity to distinguish between these two competing understandings of competition, it would be a mistake to see them as equal alternatives. In fact, they are actually two successive steps. As the Parable of the Talents teaches us, not to mention I Corinthians 12 as well, diversity of human roles and the level of gifts needed for them are included in creation’s divine design. There is nothing inherently evil for humanity to devise various means of comparison, including competition, to help each other discover what their gifts may be and so gain a better idea of what role in God’s game he is calling them to fulfill. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that God himself works through comparison, no doubt even in its competitive form, to give his children greater self-knowledge of the person he has made them to be and what good works he has prepared in advance for them to do. Since his children are already secure in their unchanging value because of God’s prodigal love for them, in God’s economy this greater awareness merely strengthens his bond with his children, leading in turn to the next step. His children can now recognize more fully how their own purpose is intertwined with Christ’s, thus, enabling them to experience a deeper sharing in the eternal joy of their Lord.

However, the serpent offers an alternative second step. As in the Garden, he uses competition’s confirmation of varying roles and giftings amongst human beings to convince societies to value people differently. Without an assurance of our worth and value established by God for all eternity through the cross, how can human beings not be seduced to believe the

serpent's lies and hop on the treadmill of performance-based identity? Here is the source of idolatry through sport. Here is the source of shame that can come through competition. Not competition itself, but the serpent's use of it in our ears and in the structures of human society, that is the source of the ills commonly associated with competition. In short, just like comparison, competition is not a *malum in se*, but the serpent's twisting of its results always is. Sadly, all too often, the descendants of Adam and Eve are still listening to the wrong voice.

Conclusion

Today, God retains his mission to restore humanity to himself, to one another and to their true themselves. For this task, he still employs comparison for self-knowledge, even comparison through competition. Nevertheless, the force of destruction is also ever present to turn competition into a hamster-wheel purgatory of endlessly having to prove one's worth. What then is God's redemptive plan? The anthropocentric approach of holy play falls decidedly short, since the various proposals still rely fundamentally on some form of human performance, the very root of the problem in the first place. However, a theocentric approach to competitive sport points back to God and his promise to complete the good work he has begun. Secure in God's love for them, Christian athletes can anticipate playing on the streets of Heaven, even while under the highest pressures of competitive sport.

What does that look like? Jack Roach, one of USA Swimming's most influential coaches, offers us a glimpse. He likes to encourage Olympic athletes by giving them this challenge:

Remember when you were ten-years-old, and you and your best friend wanted to race to the dock and back? You swam your heart out. You gave everything you had to win. When you finished, you just collapsed on the beach, exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. It mattered who won, but it didn't matter either, because you just loved doing something you loved with someone you loved to be with. The key to winning is making the most important race of your life the most fun. (J. Roach, personal communication, Nov. 2021)

Rooted in the cross, Christian athletes can receive the freedom to be ten-year-olds again in the middle of Olympic competition. Knowing God's love for them, they can experience heavenly joys in the face of the serpent's fiercest assault with fear and shame. Having grown in God through competition, Christian athletes can trust that the essence of their sporting journey has become, not playtime in the Garden, but fruitfulness through pruning (John 15:2).

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