



## **LEGITIMIZING RELIGION'S PLACE IN UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN PERSON: AN EVIDENTIAL APPROACH TO INTERPRETING THE MEANINGFUL ROLE OF SACRED PLAY**

LA LEGITIMACIÓN DEL LUGAR DE LA RELIGIÓN EN LA COMPRENSIÓN DE LA PERSONA HUMANA: UN ENFOQUE PROBATORIO PARA INTERPRETAR LA FUNCIÓN SIGNIFICATIVA DEL JUEGO SAGRADO

**Jeffrey R. Dickson** jrdickson@liberty.edu  
Liberty University, USA.

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### **Abstract**

Religion on a more institutional level and spirituality in a more personally existential way is not a respecter of socio-economic status, limited to whether or not a country is developed, or fickle about where it takes root geographically. Even the "New Atheism" movement complies with pseudo-doctrines, proves zealous for deeply-rooted beliefs, and has even started meeting in what are called atheist "mega-churches." It would seem that human beings are inclined to the phenomenon of organized religion and/or "sacred play" no matter what their backgrounds are or what historical localization they claim.

Though religion, theology, and the claims therein should be weighty in discussions concerning the human person, often these sciences are dismissed as secondary or even unnecessary. However, more are admitting that to understand mankind in general and the individual in particular, one must incorporate what these discussions afford. As Haslina Ibrahim (2008) rightly acknowledges, "to fully understand man, it is vital that we reconcile the study of religions with other sciences that fall under the study of humanities."

To this end, this argument will build an evidential case for the pervasiveness of sacred play and call readers to understand something of its legitimacy in discussions of the human person. This will be accomplished by building a compendium of characteristics witnessed in the human person that are generally observed among

social scientists and then connecting these both individually and collectively to the phenomenon of sacred play.

### **Resumen**

La religión a un nivel más institucional y la espiritualidad de una manera más personalmente existencial no respeta el estatus socioeconómico, que se limita al hecho de que un país esté o no desarrollado, o es voluble respecto del lugar donde se arraiga geográficamente. Incluso el movimiento del “nuevo ateísmo” obedece a pseudodoctrinas, demuestra entusiasmo por las creencias profundamente arraigadas e incluso ha empezado a celebrar reuniones en lo que se llaman “megaiglesias” ateas. Parecería que los seres humanos se inclinan al fenómeno de la religión organizada o “juego sagrado” independientemente de su extracción o de qué ubicación histórica acusen.

Aunque la religión y la teología y sus correspondientes postulados deberían tener peso en los debates relativos a la persona humana, a menudo estas ciencias se desestiman como secundarias o incluso como innecesarias. Sin embargo, más personas están admitiendo que para entender a la humanidad en general y al individuo en particular se debe incorporar lo que ofrecen estos debates. Como Haslina Ibrahim (2008) reconoce con razón: “Para comprender plenamente al hombre, es vital que reconciliemos el estudio de las religiones con otras ciencias que están incluidas en el estudio de las humanidades”.

Con este fin, esta argumentación va a ofrecer una justificación fehaciente de la omnipresencia del juego sagrado y convocar a los lectores a entender un poco de su legitimización en los debates sobre la persona humana. Esto se logrará al construir un compendio de características que se observa en la persona humana y que los científicos sociales suelen observar y luego conectarlas tanto individual como colectivamente al fenómeno del juego sagrado.

### **Keywords**

religion; sacred play; anthropology; psychology; human constitution; soul; mankind; community; Juego sagrado; constitución humana; alma; humanidad; comunidad

## **The Constitution of the Human Person as Perceived in the Sciences**

What follows is a survey of some of the anthropological considerations that pertain to the human constitution. These characteristics represent a grouping of the psychological assertions that are widely held in the secular community.

Not only that, but the scope of this compendium is limited to those considerations that can be connected in ways that are pertinent to the present discussion on sacred play. Though this survey does not summarize all of the secular anthropological findings in any or all of the issues involved in spirituality, these will explain why religion is pervasive and delineate something of its importance.

**Openness.** One of the many distinguishing features of mankind that separates the human race from the animal kingdom is its openness to the world (Pannenberg, 1977; Pargament, 2007; Elkins, 1998).

In fact, historians and anthropologists alike deal with the issues of openness, or as some call it, "otherness," throughout their work. One field studies this phenomenon in space, the other in time (Cohn, 1980).

In his brief overview of historical perceptions of man's uniqueness, Wolfhart Pannenberg suggests that ever since Greek scholarship decided to answer the question of man in terms of the cosmos, the world itself was always demonstrated as inadequate to give a definitive answer for man's yearning concerning what he is supposed to be (Pannenberg, 1977).

The histories reveal that mankind has maintained from antiquity and prior an insatiable desire to reach beyond every horizon that opens to it. This openness permeates secular discussions as a unique characteristic found exclusively in the human race.

One example of this phenomenon is witnessed in the technological enterprise. William Sims Brainbridge (2007) in his compelling essay on converging technologies, provides an optimistic look toward a future when man, upon reaching a higher level of understanding, will leave planet earth entirely in order to reach a higher potential or evolutionary step.

He believes that the coalescence of technology and the human enterprise promises to grant humanity unprecedented power to change itself and the world around it. While some in the scientific community hope that caution is practiced as humans advance in this way, Brainbridge suggests that caution would stifle the program of progress.

Uninhibited, man should be released to “boldly go where no man has gone before,” and according to him, advance so far that humanity as a label will be considered obsolete (Brainbridge, 2007).

Instead of finding satisfaction in the currently inhabited world, those sympathetic to Brainbridge believe that man's unquenchable openness to possibilities will inevitably lead them to other literal worlds by means of technological advances.

The tendencies that psychologists and social scientists recognize in man, such as constantly reinventing oneself and reaching beyond oneself, have also consistently maintained association with belief in the afterlife and a host of religious/spiritual considerations.

For instance, Pieter Craffert (2009) states that for subjects in Israelite culture, religious and cultural experiences could very well have served as a basis for a firm belief that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead following this historical episode.

It is no coincidence that ever since the idea of bodily resurrection was introduced (in Israelite religious documents, cf. Daniel 12), two components of the Jewish cultural system (openness and the nature of humanity) were in alliance in producing and maintaining the idea.

Therefore, from a social-scientific perspective, afterlife beliefs in at least the Judeo-Christian framework involved the connection between cultural notions about the human body and certain experiences that resulted in the origin of belief in Jesus' resurrection.

In other words, the religious ideas expressed in the sacred writings affirmed presuppositions the Jewish and Christian people had because of their humanity (specifically as it pertains to openness) and provided for them a firm foundation for believing in the bodily resurrection of Jesus as fact after it occurred.

The uniquely human ability to look ahead or move beyond also betrays pervasive openness within human constitution. In fact, some suggest that if openness does not press man beyond the world, then man would not constantly pursue various goals (as they are shown to do even when concrete incentives are absent) (Pannenberg, 1985; Pargament, 2007).

Because the world will not satisfy humanity, no matter how free or open they are to change it, mankind finds no final satisfaction in the temporal. This presupposes that human destiny exceeds his present environment; that is every presently existing environment and that which is yet to exist.

With this in mind, it is no wonder that even in pagan societies humans appoint deity, seek answers in some infinite energy, or develop a governing philosophy.

**Exocentricity.** Another distinguishing attribute of humanity that is related to its uniqueness among the creatures and his openness to the world involves what some refer to as exocentricity.

Secular anthropologists suggest that man's exocentricity involves the tendency within the individual to anchor one's own central being in something that lies beyond this world (Scheler, 1960).

This proclivity results in the phenomena of imagination, invention, and cognitive enterprise. Kenneth Pargament (2007) even remarks, "the capacity to investigate, look ahead, think about a future, and imagine and implement ways to achieve goals is a critical ingredient of human nature."

Inasmuch as imagination is mankind's proposition of the non-real or non-present, it is an exocentric characteristic of humanity. According to Arnold Gehlen (1958), imagination constitutes the principle creative feature in human behavior.

Gehlen emphasizes that imagination is required for even simple acts of human movement and perception. For instance, a small child, whose present reality involves crawling, must first imagine his/her ability to walk before any steps can be made.

Similarly, an infant is unable to speak until he/she imagines the possibility and awards that thought with attempts at forming words. However, on a more impressive scale, invention as well as philosophical speculation, is another natural result of man's desire to achieve beyond his present reality.

Two examples of this are worth mentioning. First, Descartes's method of seeing the universe as a mathematical and logical structure came specifically by doubting everything and forging the empirical method of observation and logical method of formal reasoning.

In his distrust of the imagination, Descartes imagined the universe away until he came to the most base and fundamental of assertions. Upon this foundation he constructed an entire philosophical framework. Interestingly, seeing little contention between this and his religious beliefs, he remained a devout Catholic all of his life.

In a similar way, Newton's method of combining mathematics and experimentation came neither from observation nor deduction alone. Instead, his discovery of the law of gravity required creative imagination alongside his belief in God (Barbour, 1966).

Some recognize this tendency for exocentricity as rooted in the biological processes of the brain itself. Ashbrook (1989) explains that belief is a transformation of biological experience to conceptual explanation and that these beliefs give conceptual focus to the person's



sense of destiny. Destiny as far as it is future-oriented and not presently realized is an exocentric feature within mankind.

This capacity to believe in a proposed reality other than that which already exists and the desire to reach that reality help contribute to the idea of destiny within each individual. Historically, whether expressed in institutions like the state (as proposed by Plato), German idealism, the American dream, or heaven itself, man's exocentric tendency is heavily connected to man's imagination of his own potential and permanence.

As demonstrated by Pannenberg (1985) and Ashbrook (1989) theological consideration is required to explain this exocentricity and understand mankind completely. Others like LeRon Shults (2003) even speculate that the longing for eternal life and imagining its reality (common in nearly all cultures in all times) is intimately connected to the idea of being human.

Therefore, exocentricity, imagination, invention, and cognitive enterprise inevitably instigate curiosity about the divine and a desire to mimic that which is imagined either consciously or subconsciously. The most developed expression of this desire is to become the sum of all things, or the god of one's own life.

Most agree with Robert Emmons (1999) when he writes that "Human beings are by nature goal oriented" and that this betrays their exocentricity.

That most recognize human enterprise toward higher ideals and greater achievements (in response to centering themselves in something greater or beyond) suggests that humanity is at least curious about something greater than itself.

That there is a desire (either consciously or subconsciously) for the divine or other-worldly (because the present world as it is seems unsatisfactory) suggests that man knows something of its reality and, perhaps, even resembles it in discreet ways.

**Tension.** However, openness and exocentricity inevitably yield tension—the third compelling characteristic of the human person involved in this discussion. Tension within mankind (which may be explained by observing man as presently existing yet eschatologically oriented) is said by many to be an indicator of man's spiritual struggle (Pannenberg, 1985; Plessner, 1928).

The cause of this tension is discovered in the juxtaposition between openness to the world (described above in points one and two) and self-centeredness, i.e. when exocentricity meets egocentricity (Hill, 2002). Although men and women naturally pursue an answer to what lies beyond themselves, through openness and exocentricity, they interrupt

this pursuit in order to establish who they are. In so doing, they temporarily forget the question about what is beyond and preoccupy themselves with the self as it presently exists—as the ego is infatuated with one's own purposes, conceptions, and familiar customs.

Because man exists in this tension, there is an ever present pursuit of satisfying the conflict between mankind's ego and its exocentric predisposition. Such a quest has proven to be the creative agent behind all kinds of cultural institutions, political organizations, and artistic journeys that have been established to deal with the negative implications of this tension.

In these enterprises, men and women placate their ever-present tension by searching for new and creative solutions to this problem that include but are not limited to technological domination, intellectual constructs, and aesthetic beauty. Some even suggest that man's tense environment is the reason for the development of technology (Burhoe, 1977).

Secular anthropologists recognize that one way many attempt to stifle this natural struggle between the self-realized and the self-desired is to pursue the supernatural. In fact, a coping mechanism for this tension that has been supported by many in the scientific community is religion.

In order to satisfy the need for relief in the constant struggle between the ego and exocentric, rituals and belief systems have been propagated, in part, to assure proper self-awareness. Many propose that part of religion's draw and permanence in all kinds of cultures is that it provides satisfaction in the midst of man's unrelenting war within this tension.

Although religion, in part, has been effective in temporarily relieving man's problem and drawing attention away from this battle, ultimately what is required to permanently annihilate this tension is freedom from the struggle altogether.

According to Muller (1849) and other modern theologians, freedom, in the biblical sense of the word, is congruent with the true nature of the human being. Inasmuch as man is in bondage while under tension, freedom describes the liberation from the struggle that man continuously faces as he deals with his openness to the world and his unrelenting ego.

That there is some limited understanding of the infinite/beyond that cannot be presently satisfied both legitimizes the presence of the sacred and even encourages it on some level (Pargament, 2007).

That there is tension between the human's ego and his/her exocentric disposition suggests that he/she, while existing in the present, has not yet reached his/her intended goal—satisfaction and peace.

**Identity.** The problem of this tension has also created much unrest in man's journey to understand his true identity.

This unrest might be illustrated most succinctly by a brief look into the many psychological proposals that have been argued throughout modern history concerning human selfhood.

Behavioral schools observe the human being as similar to animals in the areas of learning, responding to reinforcements, trainability, and absence of true freedom or dignity outside of mythical inventions (Skinner, 1971).

Cognitive schools assert that the human is an intelligent thinker whose thoughts produce the phenomena that are often referred to as emotions and values (Van Leeuwen, 1985).

Psychoanalytic schools view the human as a person in turmoil characterized by powerful internal conflicts (Freud), undifferentiated incompleteness (Jung), or misdirected strivings (Adler) (Beck and Demarest, 2005).

Humanistic schools see the human as a vast reservoir of potential that will eventually find appropriate expression if and when the environment or circumstances are conducive (Maslow, 1971).

Postmodernists in psychology view the individual as possessing numerous selves that are socially constructed (Cahoon 1992). Given this variety of opinions regarding man's selfhood or identity, it is no wonder why man cannot grasp a firm understanding of who he is.

For this reason, scholars like Rick Hoyle (1999) summarize these views in an overarching definition of self which reads, "self is a synamic psychological system, a tapestry of thought, feelings, and motives, that define, direct—even destroy us." Similarly, those of the evangelical persuasion have concluded that the human identity is not the sole product of the human reproductive forces or divine actions alone. Instead, the origin of the human is a creative convergence of nature, nurture, and interactive forces that are operative within both the human and divine, visible and invisible realms (Greggo, 2001).

Given this broad range of scholarship and the tendency toward more holistic definitions of identity, it appears that many, instead of dividing man apart into different pieces (as proposed by classical dualism and others), are concluding that the human person should be understood as a radical unity.

To be human is to possess mind, body, and soul. To negate or dilute any one of these would result in something less than human.



Introducing theology into the discussion of defining humanity is one of the purposes behind Pannenberg's (1985) monumental work, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*. In it, Pannenberg asserts that theology, as well as the other sciences, is necessary to arrive at a complete view of the human person and therefore for a human person to arrive at his or her identity. Pannenberg's evaluation of identity incorporates theological consideration in order to arrive at a comprehensive look at the human race. In so doing, Pannenberg also provides more evidences for the legitimacy of spirituality in a host of discussions.

**Community.** Tension within the human race (i.e. identity crises) has subsequently led to tension in interpersonal relationships.

That being said, psychoanalysts and psychologists are able to map the process by which individuals correctly associate themselves with others around them.

Beginning in infancy, babies interact with caregivers and their surrounding environment in what some refer to as "normal autism" (Beck and Demarest, 2005) or, a state of primitive hallucinatory disorientation (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975).

Naturally, as the child develops, young children begin developing an internal psychology and a unity or symbiotic relationship with their caregiver (Fitzgerald and Barton, 2000). Psychologists and psychoanalysts both recognize these beginning stages in human development and reveal that community and interpersonal relationships play a significant role in human development.

Relationships and inklings of community are also widely observed in the educational process. In fact, the school experience is arguably a proving ground for many adolescents as they grow in their ability to maintain appropriate peer relationships (social interactions with others), self-management (self-control and willingness to follow rules), academics (social interactions that facilitate learning), compliance (cooperative abilities with other individuals) and assertion (initiating relationships and activating social exchanges) (Merrell, 2003).

Failure in any one or all of these areas may reveal a severe deficiency in the individual's ability to practice community properly and therefore assimilate appropriately in society.

Many educators, in fact, are well aware that the child who participates in healthy friendships with other children has the best chance of succeeding academically. Some even go so far as to suggest that maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships is the single most salient indicator of a youth's successful development (Frankel and Myatt, 2003).

From infancy to adolescence, the concept of community/relationship is pervasive. However, as the individual continues to develop, these relational characteristics grow even more acute.

Most social behavior occurs in some kind of a group setting. Tindale (1998) poignantly suggests that “we live in families, travel in car pools, shop with friends, work as teams, worship in congregations, are entertained as audiences, learn in classes, and decide as juries.”

In fact, man's proclivity to place himself in group settings can be seen in any number of institutions and professional fields. Churches lead with pastoral teams, school districts operate by means of administrative cohorts, corporations have boards, and democracies are run by its citizens.

Therefore, from infancy through later stages of development and eventually to advanced adulthood and beyond, mankind seems to naturally pursue community with others and develop more completely by means of interpersonal relationships.

The social development of man, similar to man's search of personal identity and longing for relief of the tension within him, is another example of mankind's pursuit of attaining wholeness—a wholeness that is not possible apart from community with other humans. However, this wholeness is not attainable in the world as it presently exists.

Pannenberg suggests that instead of removing theological understanding from the realm of understanding man as communal creatures, it is theology itself that is responsible for the full development of the relations between individuals, society, and what is beyond (Pannenberg, 1985).

He is not alone in inserting theology into the discussion of man's ability to form and maintain relationships. Arnold Gehlen, (1958) in his interpretation of the organization of society suggests that religion plays an important role for human socialization. Similarly, James Beck (2005) notes that it is only through the inclusion of theology that psychologists are able to properly and most fully infer that relationality is indeed an inherent feature of human personhood.

**Sacred Play: The Apparatus on Which Mankind Can Live Out His Unique Constitution**

As has already been elucidated, man is directed toward the future and yet stuck in the present while simultaneously predisposed to goals beyond the self and yet inclined to satisfy the ego.

Although relief may be found in community, another way man has found relief is through sacred play—the natural result of the

aforementioned characteristics within humankind. At its root, “play” is a means of imitating some activity or ideal (Piaget, 1972).

Therefore, “sacred play” is a term used to describe religious rituals in which members of a community imitate what was demonstrated in the past and look ahead to the future when this imitation becomes participation in the activity itself.

The use of symbols and foreshadowing rituals has permeated anthropological discussions for centuries. In many cases, sacred play combines the elements of permanent images, such as Christ, or the Holy Spirit within the Christian worldview and the repeated symbols of what is represented, such as crosses or doves.

Pannenberg suggests that the Christian justification of images and repeated symbols in worship stems from its belief that God appealed to this tendency by imaging himself through Jesus Christ and the human race (Pannenberg, 1985).

Also, R. Guardini (1930) and H. Rahner (1965) demonstrate how Christian liturgy is one manifestation of sacred play. They reveal that different ordinances and traditions like baptism and the Lord's Supper are ways to look ahead to the future destiny that the believer believes he/she will share with Jesus Christ (made possible by, in this case, his death and resurrection). In fact, in Luke 24, one observes the resurrected Christ “playing” along with two disciples in the sharing of the Lord's Supper.

In this episode, Jesus links his bodily presence with the sharing of a meal of bread and wine. For Christians, this activity both in this particular occurrence and others summarizes the ministry and destiny of Jesus and connects the created reality of human beings and their social life with their eschatological destiny in which they will share of this meal with Christ, the resurrected Lord, literally in the future.

Baptism is very similar. In Paul's instructions to the church in Rome, he communicates the following: “Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4).

This didactic remark teaches that baptism symbolizes a past act (being buried with Christ) and also looks ahead to a future hope (being raised like Christ). Both of these references hinge on the resurrection of Jesus and allow the individual to imitate what has happened and what is yet to occur by means of this form of sacred play.

Because the Lord's Supper and baptism involve an element of anticipation for a future event, it is fitting to interpret its place in anthropological discussions thusly (Pannenberg, 1993).

However, the phenomenon of sacred play is not limited to the Christian religion. Jewish festivals, Ramadan, Buddhist meditation, and Hindu rituals also attempt to participate in the divine by means of a multitude of practices.

Across the world, secular anthropologists and theologians alike cannot ignore that men and women, in many ways, attempt to participate in the divine by means of copious traditions and rites.

That humans involve themselves in these episodes of sacred play suggests that in some imperfect way, they resemble the sacred, or, at the very least, believe themselves to resemble the sacred. That they attempt to participate in the divine suggests that they know of it and cannot help but seek to satisfy their curiosity about it.

Theists and other spiritualists are not the only ones who recognize a place for sacred play. For instance, many psychologists and secular anthropologists affirm the crucial role religious traditions and rites play in humanity.

Gordon Allport (1950) states that all religions (or systems of sacred play), supply a world-conception that has logical simplicity and serene majesty. Freud (1964) concluded that religion began with human's fear of nature and therefore pervades humanity as a real influence.

Neo-freudians are shown to promote that every person has a religious need for an orienting frame and for something to revere (Fromm, 1950). Even some evolutionists suggest that religion should not be abandoned. They conclude that if religion is part of the brain's system that has evolved over the centuries, people live best when they live in harmony with that internal reality (Grinde, 1998).

No one can deny religion's pervasive presence throughout the world's history. Sacred play appears to be a valid part of human societies of all kinds in all places. Similarly, the vigor of faith is shown to have persisted even in hostile environments such as the state-supported atheism of the Soviet Union or the skeptical scientism of the 20th century in the west (Beck and Demarest, 2005).

Also, the amount of resources and energy allocated to religion indicates that sacred play is important and even central to the human experience. Given this survey of popular secular opinions, it is clear that religion is pervasive in anthropological thought and deserves special attention in understanding the constitution of mankind. Sacred play, by its very nature is in some ways outside the human experience as it presently

exists (appealing to humanity's openness), stimulates the imagination (exocentricity), works to alleviate personal conflict (as witnessed in pervasive inner tension), aides one's quest for a sense of self (identity), and cultivates its own unique inter-personal relationships (expressed in community—specifically faith communities).

## **Conclusions**

Given what is observed within the human person by psychologists and anthropologists —openness, exocentricity, tension, identity, community—it is clear why sacred play is pervasive throughout history and in today's context.

Understanding men and women completely requires an investigation into the faith practices they either do or do not endorse. Anyone who does not appreciate these considerations does not appreciate the entire human person.

For too long these concerns have been neglected and, to the embarrassment of many within the naturalistic community, a diluted and manila rendering of people has taken the place of more robust, nuanced, and well-informed delineations.



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