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Is Liturgy Ludic? Distinguishing between the Phenomena of Play and Ritual

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Abstract: What is the nature (or “Wesen”) of the liturgical phenomenon? It has become immensely popular to describe liturgical or ritual practice as a kind of “holy play,” whether as metaphor, as productive analogy for pragmatic or theological purposes, or even as making an ontological claim about what liturgy “is” in its essence. The present article seeks to complicate the association of the phenomena of liturgy and of play. The first part traces the origins of the notion of play and the development of its application to ritual in the most influential sources from Kant to Gadamer. The second part highlights its prevalence in the contemporary discussion and elucidates how it is being used. The third part provides a phenomenological analysis to demonstrate important differences between the two phenomena and to question the contention that liturgy is a form of play. The final part tries to ascertain the broader practical and theological aims being served by the association of the two phenomena and—via a return to the question of the nature of the liturgical phenomenon in a more theological mode—suggests that these aims might be accomplished more productively in ways that avoid the downsides of identifying ritual or liturgy with play.

Keywords: liturgy; ritual; play; phenomenology; liturgical theology



Citation: Gschwandtner, Christina M. 2021. Is Liturgy Ludic? Distinguishing between the Phenomena of Play and Ritual. *Religions* 12: 232. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040232>

Academic Editor: Edward Foley

Received: 8 February 2021

Accepted: 5 March 2021

Published: 25 March 2021

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1. Introduction

The presupposition that liturgy is a form of “play” has become immensely popular and is often simply taken for granted in treatments of liturgy or ritual. Recent discussions of liturgy in both theology and philosophy refer to it self-evidently as having elements of play or being of “playful” character. Going back to the early twentieth century liturgical theologian Romano Guardini and the anthropologist Johan Huizinga, made popular by Hans-Georg Gadamer’s famous discussion of the role of play in the experience of the work of art, the equation of ritual with play is abundant. The implication is that the phenomena of art, play, and ritual are sufficiently like each other to be identified: liturgy and art are experienced as one experiences immersion in a game or participation in playing. This is essentially a phenomenological claim, even if it is often employed in theological and anthropological contexts. Accordingly, the present contribution will bring phenomenology to bear on the association of liturgy and play in order to question whether these phenomena truly are the same in nature or kind or whether they ought to be more carefully distinguished, because their essential *Wesen* (nature or kind) is different. It thus seeks to make a distinctly philosophical—or even specifically phenomenological—contribution to a debate in liturgical theology and ritual studies.

In order to accomplish this, the first part of the article will trace the origins of the association of play, art, and ritual and its development in its most important representatives, from the use of play imagery in Kant and Schiller for the aesthetic phenomenon to several analyses arguing for ritual as a kind of play, culminating in Gadamer’s famous analysis of the work of art in terms of the phenomenon of play. The second part will show the popularity of the idea in contemporary liturgical theology, where it is for the most part simply taken for granted, and will demonstrate how this identification of liturgy or ritual as play is understood or what its essential features are. The third part will provide a

comparative phenomenological analysis of the phenomena of play and liturgy to show that the two phenomena are sufficiently distinct in their *Wesen* and experience that they ought to be more carefully distinguished and their facile association questioned more rigorously. The final part will return to the theological treatments to ascertain whether the purposes the play analogy is meant to serve might be reached in other—and potentially more theologically coherent—ways.

2. The Legacy of Interpreting Liturgy and Ritual as Play

2.1. Kant and Schiller: The Play of the Imagination

The notion of play has an important place already in early aesthetic thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and Friedrich von Schiller, although they do not explicitly speak of liturgy or ritual. For them, play is an essential element of the production and enjoyment of art, although in neither of these early thinkers are the phenomena of play and of art as experiences equated entirely, in the way in which this will be the case for later thinkers. Kant speaks of play especially in the context of reflecting on the role of the imagination. In the case of the beautiful, the imagination “plays” freely and this is what produces the feeling of pleasure in the encounter with a work of art (Kant 1790, §9, pp. 74–76). The play of sensations (*Empfindungen*) in the *Gemüt* (the seat of affect and emotion) provides pleasure (*Reiz, Lust*).¹ The imagination “plays” in a “purposive” (*zweckmäßig*), albeit free, fashion, an important tension that will recur in other thinkers and be crucial also to the alliance of liturgy and play.² Imagination is “tempted” (*Reiz*) by something beautiful, inasmuch as it engages in “free play” (1790, p. 109).³ In the creation of art, the power of imagination plays freely with ideas; this play gives the tone to (or tunes) the sensations (1790, pp. 210–12). Poetry strengthens and broadens the *Gemüt* via its play of semblances (1790, p. 214). The different kinds of play give different types of pleasure, reviving the *Gemüt* either via mere interest or via sensations or via aesthetic ideas (1790, p. 220).⁴

Schiller’s letters on aesthetic education, published a mere five years after Kant’s third *Critique*, speak even more explicitly of a play-drive (*Spieltrieb*) that he thinks is able to mediate between two more fundamental drives, which he calls *Formtrieb* and *Stofftrieb* (Schiller 1795, pp. 232–33).⁵ One is the (initiating) drive of reason and objective thought that tries to transcend time and abstracts to the universal; the other is the (receiving) drive of affect and sensation that fills time with the content of particularity. The play-drive is able to bring the two together by putting force on the *Gemüt* via both reason (the moral force of the *Formtrieb*) and nature (the physical force of the *Stofftrieb*), thereby liberating the human being from the subjugation of nature and turning reason from hatred to enjoyment. The *Formtrieb* aims at form or figure (*Gestalt*), the *Stofftrieb* at life, the *Spieltrieb* at both together and thus at living form and therefore beauty (1795, p. 234). Art is this combination of life and form. When we see something beautiful, our *Gemüt* is in a happy medium between law and need; life becomes lighter and less serious (1795, p. 236).⁶ He insists that this is not “mere play,” “not only play,” not a degradation of the beautiful, but rather an elevation and expansion: the good we “only take seriously” but with the beautiful we play (1795,

¹ Kant distinguishes between form or figure (*Gestalt*) and play (*Spiel*). This can be a play of forms (as in dance) or of mere sensations (*Empfindungen*) (1790, pp. 85, 89). It is also worth noting that the communal sense (*Gemeinsinn*) is created by the free play of our cognitive powers (1790, p. 101).

² The idea of purposiveness (*Zweckmäßigkeit*) is absolutely crucial to Kant’s discussion. In the case of the beautiful, an object of pleasure or desire has purposiveness without a clear vision of its purpose (*Vorstellung eines Zwecks*). Cf. the conclusion to the “third moment” of the explanation of the beautiful (1790, p. 99). The power of imagination is both free and underlies rules (1790, p. 105). That means that it must play in a purposive fashion (1790, p. 107). Kant distinguishes between (lower) aesthetic forms where play is arbitrary and the gaze quickly tires and higher forms of art where imagination engages in purposive play.

³ One should note that this playfulness of the experience of the beautiful is quite different from the seriousness at stake in the feeling of the sublime, elicited by wonder at the grandeur of nature rather than pleasure in the beautiful.

⁴ Kant explicitly appeals to the playing of games at a dinner party in this context (1790, p. 221), analyzing the affect of pleasure or even laughter created by such play (1790, p. 222).

⁵ The fullest discussion is in Letters 14 and 15, although the *Spieltrieb* is mentioned briefly in a couple later letters (e.g., Letters 26 & 27) as well.

⁶ This idea will reappear in a different way in Hugo Rahner’s treatment of play.

p. 237; emphasis his). Thus, we are “only wholly human” if or when we play.⁷ Like Kant he also speaks of the free play of the faculty of imagination. Initially, there is a free play of mere images from nature without form or organization, but the power of imagination can leap to a game of free forms, which makes it explicitly aesthetic. For a crude or raw taste this play is still arbitrary, fleeting, attracted by the superficially exciting, adventurous, bizarre, or gaudy, while a cultivated taste can focus on true beauty (1795, pp. 281–82).

In both Kant and Schiller, the idea of play (*Spiel*) is hence used in metaphorical fashion to refer to a free and spontaneous movement that creates sensations in our affective faculties, such that we are enabled to enjoy various aesthetic forms. It is an interior movement that permits the work of the faculty of the imagination and enables the overcoming of certain dualisms (nature and culture, sensation and reason, physical and mental or spiritual). There is no explicit link in either thinker to the play of children or to the staging of a play in the sense of drama or to games (sports or otherwise) in any traditional sense, all connections made by later thinkers. Yet, the tension between freedom and purposiveness, spontaneity and rule-boundedness, creativity and combination of other forces will continue to mark subsequent treatments, which often rely on their work, especially when they have aesthetic interests.

2.2. Guardini and Rahner: *The Serious Play of Children*

The earliest extensive description of liturgy as play is that of Romano Guardini (Guardini 1930).⁸ Guardini tries to investigate why so much careful ceremony and ritual is needed when the central action of liturgy could be performed with much less effort. To address this he draws a fundamental distinction between purpose and meaning, arguing that something can be purposeless, in the sense of having no point beyond itself, and yet be “full of meaning,” thus drawing on Kant’s tension between freedom and purposiveness (1930, p. 90). Liturgy is “free from purpose” in any instrumental sense and “has no thought-out, deliberate, detailed plan of instruction” (1930, pp. 93–94). Instead, it “creates an entire spiritual world in which the soul can live according to the requirements of its nature” (1930, p. 95). In this sense, it is an “end in itself” (1930, p. 96). Guardini suggests that as the figure of wisdom “plays” before God, so children play or artists create without purpose but in youthful pleasure and exuberance (1930, p. 98).⁹ He concludes from this: “That is what play means; it is life, pouring itself forth without an aim, seizing upon riches from its own abundant store, significant through the fact of its existence” (1930, p. 99). An artist expresses life in such abundance. The liturgy does the same in a “higher” way: “it is in the highest sense the life of a child, in which everything is picture, melody and song” such that “it unites art and reality in a supernatural childhood before God” (1930, p. 102). Thus, liturgy “has one thing in common with the play of the child and the life of art—it has no purpose, but it is full of profound meaning. It is not work, but play. To be at play, or to fashion a work of art in God’s sight—not to create, but to exist—such is the essence of liturgy” (1930, p. 102). Thus, “the liturgy has laid down the serious rules of the sacred game which the soul plays before God,” which turns us “into living works of art before God” (1930, pp. 104, 105). Aside from reiterating the paradox of freedom and purposiveness, Guardini adds several new elements: he explicitly posits play in contrast to labor, clearly links his notion of play to that of children’s play and drama, while also connecting liturgy and art via the medium of play.

⁷ “Der Mensch soll mit der Schönheit *nur spielen*, und er soll *nur mit der Schönheit spielen*... *er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt*” (1795, p. 238; emphases his). In a much later letter (Letter 26), Schiller will add to the *Spieltrieb* a *Bildungstrieb*, i.e., a drive to education/formation/cultivation; both deal with appearances (1795, p. 275).

⁸ Interestingly, Guardini warns in a note at the outset of the chapter on the “playfulness of the liturgy”: “In what follows the writer must beg the reader not to weigh isolated words or phrases. The matter under consideration is vague and intangible, and not easy to put into words. The writer can only be sure of not being misunderstood if the reader considers the chapter and the general train of thought as a whole” (1930, p. 85). Jonathan Lewis provides a summary of Guardini on play (Lewis 2010, pp. 30–32). He summarizes the main elements of play as being (1) without purpose, (2) creative, (3) natural, (4) communal, (5) active, and (6) joy-filled. He claims that all six apply equally to liturgy. He accuses anyone who thinks (or acts) otherwise of “liturgical abuse” (2010, pp. 31–32).

⁹ Many other thinkers refer to this passage. See below for further examples.

The Roman Catholic theologian Hugo Rahner draws widely from the philosophical and theological tradition in a presentation (first delivered in 1948) to argue that we must think of God, the human, and the church as playful (Rahner 1949). Not only is play the highest achievement of culture, but we can only understand “homo ludens” if we realize “Deus ludens”: “because God is *deus vere ludens*, therefore the human must be *homo ludens*” (1949, pp. 16, 26). God is playful because creation is both meaningful and unnecessary (1949, pp. 15–27, 44). As regards the human, Rahner interprets play primarily as the tension between the joyful or humorous and the serious (“ernstheitere”) that he grounds in the Greek term *σπουδογέλοιοις* and applies to the paradox of nature and grace, realization of one’s finitude and one’s redemption, freedom and necessity, or even the relation between laughter and patience (Isaac and Rebecca). (This unification is not unlike Schiller’s *Spieltrieb*, which brings together opposite movements in the *Gemüt*). Much of the text is an accumulation of references to and quotes from philosophical, theological, and spiritual texts meant to justify this “playful” combination of joy and seriousness as the highest telos of the human. Church is the play of children, because of the rebirth of redemption (1949, p. 47). Thus, the essence of church is playful dance, even if actual dance moves no longer appear regularly in the liturgy (1949, pp. 47–49).¹⁰ Rahner makes no particular claims about liturgy—or even about liturgy as play—although this is implied in his broader analysis of the church as playful.¹¹ Church must be play, because only thus is the human combination of soul and body taken seriously (1949, p. 50). He predicts that heaven will be similarly characterized solely by play (1949, pp. 56–57). Thus, “the end will be like the beginning: eternal infancy” (1949, p. 57).¹²

Guardini and Rahner become absolutely central for subsequent interpretations of the Christian life in general or liturgy specifically as play, including the parallel to childhood. They are always cited approvingly and their claims about play as the highest telos of the human and childhood as a preferred state of sanctity are rarely challenged. Although both are very short treatments, drenched in piety, and setting forth an inspiring vision rather than posited as a contribution to serious scholarship, this vision is often simply taken for granted in subsequent treatments. It is compounded by the anthropological studies of Huizinga, Kujawa, and others, as well as the philosophical treatments of Fink and Gadamer, which serve to cement the idea that play is somehow the highest achievement of human culture and that the expression of its playful essence finds its apex in religious ritual.¹³

2.3. Huizinga and Fink: Primitive Ritual and Festival

In his 1944 analysis of the “play-element” in human culture, Huizinga repeatedly argues that ritual is a form of play.¹⁴ It is curious that Huizinga’s account has become so popular with liturgical theologians, because he is rather dismissive of ritual, thinks of it as primitive superstition, and certainly does not see it at work in the present educated and civilized world. His account of play does not match liturgy; in fact, the perfunctory remarks he makes about ritual contradict his own definition of play, despite his insistence otherwise. Huizinga begins by stressing the importance of play in human culture: “It is a *significant* function—that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something” (Huizinga 1944, p. 1). Myth and ritual are “especially rooted in the

¹⁰ The final chapter argues that heaven/the eschaton is also characterized by dance.

¹¹ That is certainly how he is read by commentators (cf. below).

¹² One wonders whether all these men with their idyllic images of childhood have forgotten their own childhood and never actually interact with children.

¹³ Aside from Huizinga, there are also studies by G. Bally, F. J. J. Buytendijk, R. Caillois, K. Gross, J. Heidemann, G. von Kujawa, A. Rüssel, H. Scheuerl, and P. Slade, all published in the space of roughly 15–20 years (from Buytendijk’s *Wesen und Sinn des Spieles* in 1934 to Scheuerl’s work in the fifties; Gross’s work is slightly earlier). Psychological studies in the early 20th century also often investigated the role of play, especially in childhood development studies (e.g., Piaget, Rüssel, Slade, Zullinger). Huizinga’s treatment has become the most famous and is the one cited by far the most frequently in theological treatments, so I focus on him as representative here.

¹⁴ Huizinga explicitly refers to Guardini in his treatment (1944, p. 19). Oddly, Huizinga argues that sexuality, including flirting, does not have anything to do with play, while ritual is all about play (e.g., 1944, p. 43).

primeval soil of play" (1944, p. 5). In myth, "primitive man seeks to account for the world of phenomena by grounding it in the Divine" via "wild imaginings," in which "a fanciful spirit is playing on the border-line between jest and earnest," while in ritual "primitive society performs its sacred rites, its sacrifices, consecrations and mysteries, all of which serve to guarantee the well-being of the world, in a spirit of pure play truly understood" (1944, p. 5). He suggests that in the case of ritual, play is "bound up with notions of obligation and duty" (1944, p. 8). This seems to imply that they are different notions, that maybe ritual is not so playful after all, but this is not the conclusion Huizinga draws: "Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground" (1944, p. 10).¹⁵

Huizinga sees the festival as especially emblematic of the play character of liturgy.¹⁶ "What, then, is the attitude and mood prevailing at holy festivals? The sacred act is 'celebrated' on a 'holiday'—i.e., it forms part of a general feast on the occasion of a holy day. When the people foregather at the sanctuary they gather together for collective rejoicing. Consecrations, sacrifices, sacred dances and contests, performances, mysteries—all are comprehended within the act of celebrating a festival. The rites may be bloody, the probations of the young men awaiting initiation may be cruel, the masks may be terrifying, but the whole thing still has a festal nature. Ordinary life is at a standstill. Banquets, junketings and all kinds of wanton revels are going on all the time the feast lasts. Whether we think of the Ancient Greek festivities of the African religions to-day we can hardly draw any sharp line between the festival mood in general and the holy frenzy surrounding the central mystery" (1944, p. 21).¹⁷ He claims that the importance of the festival ends up hiding its play character.¹⁸ Commenting on the example of the potlatch, he says: "I am inclined to put his argument the other way about and say that they pertain to the realm of the sacred precisely because they are genuine games" (1944, p. 61). This clearly shows that his equation of ritual and play undergirds his treatment as a fundamental presupposition rather than arising from careful analysis as a conclusion.

For Huizinga, play always is a kind of "make-believe" or "pretending."¹⁹ He thinks that this is true even in the case of liturgy or ritual; the participants are always aware that they are "pretending" (1944, p. 14). He concludes: "Hence our ideas of ritual, magic, liturgy, sacrament and mystery would all fall within the play-concept... The ritual act has all the formal and essential characteristics of play which we enumerated above, particularly in so far as it transports the participants to another world" (1944, p. 18). Yet, they do not actually match his initial definitions of play: "Let us enumerate once more the characteristics we deemed proper to play. It is an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth, and relaxation follow" (1944, p. 132). As we will see later, these characteristics do not necessarily apply to liturgy in any straightforward fashion: is not always visible, it is not about freedom but often about necessity, it is not always in the mood of enthusiasm, and mirth is not an essential or required feature. Yet, he insists: "The

¹⁵ He reiterates this multiple times: "The participants in the rite are convinced that the action actualizes and effects a definite beatification, brings about an order of things higher than that in which they customarily live. All the same this 'actualization by representation' still retains the formal characteristics of play in every respect" (1944, p. 14).

¹⁶ On the topic of the feast, see also Josef Pieper's *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, which culminates in an analysis of the celebration of the feast ("the core of leisure") as "the basis of worship," which is thus the supreme activity of leisure (Pieper 1952, p. 65). While he does not employ the language of play in this context, his discussion of leisure parallels the claims made by others about play: its opposition to work, its freedom, its finding its use in itself rather than something beyond it, i.e., it is done for its own sake (1952, p. 72).

¹⁷ Most of his claims rely on Greek festivals: "The *agon* in Greek life, or the contest anywhere else in the world, bears all the formal characteristics of play, and as to its function belongs almost wholly to the sphere of the festival, which is the play-sphere" (1944, p. 31).

¹⁸ "From very early on, however, sacred and profane contests had taken such an enormous place in Greek social life and gained so momentous a value that people were no longer aware of their play-character" (1944, p. 31).

¹⁹ "Genuine play possesses besides its formal characteristics and its joyful mood, at least one further very essential feature, namely the consciousness, however latent, of 'only pretending'" (1944, p. 22).

ritual act, or an important part of it, will always remain within the play category, but in this seeming subordination the recognition of holiness is not lost" (1944, p. 27). Countless aesthetic and liturgical scholars will appeal to Huizinga as *the* authority on the role of play in human culture, including in the ritual act, often filtered via Gadamer's account of the phenomenon of play as central to the experience of the work of art.²⁰

The same year that *Truth and Method* appeared, Eugen Fink, maybe Husserl's most faithful disciple, published a book on play (*Spiel als Weltsymbol*), in which he analyzes ritual, cult, and liturgy as play, albeit again thinking here of "primitive" cultures and "superstitious" practices (Fink 1960).²¹ What is interesting is that Fink links this also to symbolism; the title of his book rendered into English is *Play as Symbol of the World*. He interprets two fundamental elements of human culture as play: metaphysics and myth. To speak of play as a possibility is to emphasize that human existence is open for itself (1960, p. 16). It is a "speculative symbol" of its worldhood (*Weltwirklichkeit*). Play has the significance of world inasmuch as it shows the special connection between human and world (1960, p. 22). In this way, human life gains meaning and significance. At the same time, play always has a dimension of "irreality," a sort of "as if" character (1960, p. 32). Play is without purpose, inasmuch as it involves total freedom and special creativity (1960, p. 78). Like Huizinga, he suggests that it has elements of unreality, of pretense, and of imitation, although it cannot be reduced to any of these dimensions (1960, p. 85). Play "presents" (or represents) and produces semblance (*Schein*) (1960, pp. 110–11).

Fink argues that liturgy (*Kult*) is "the attempt of recreating the original light of the world onto individuated, finite things" (1960, p. 130). It separates the holy from the everyday by treating certain sacred items as symbolic of "unholy" life more broadly (1960, p. 132). Liturgy thus always involves representation (and is operated by representatives like priests). Thus, he contends that "the holy (*das Heilige*) must appear where the whole (*das Heile*) denies itself as the foundational trait of the worldhood of all things or has been darkened by the dust of the everyday" (1960, p. 135). In this liturgical context, play becomes the only possibility in indigenous cultures to work against the power of the demonic (1960, p. 136).²² Thus ultimately the world reaches beyond itself to the gods: "The play motive of liturgical play gains its deeper significance only when it is referred to the whole and thus 'transcends' interworldly processes. The truth of the play of the gods is the play of the world" (1960, p. 183). The human "drive to adoration" in Fink's view "is connected at its roots with the drive to play" (1960, p. 183).²³ He summarizes his insights on the relation of play and liturgy by stressing its magical qualities, its distance from ordinary life, the shadow cast by the extraordinary onto the ordinary via the mask of the priest (1960, p. 193). After this "holy" has become profane, play shows human understanding of the world and existence, while the world itself is without purpose and meaning.

Apart from their questionable assumptions about "primitive cultures" and the way in which "primitive peoples" supposedly experienced their sacred cults, both Huizinga and Fink stress that play is deeply meaningful for human life and culture, although loosened from serious labor, utilitarian purpose, or strict reliance on reality.²⁴ Play is free and

²⁰ For a couple of prominent examples, see Bryce (1982), Kritzinger (2005), Richter (2005), and Chauvet (2008).

²¹ Given that both books (Fink's and Gadamer's) are published in the same year, neither author refers to the other in their treatment of play, but clearly this topic was "in the air," so to speak (e.g., Caillois 1962). One should note that Fink makes some odd distinctions between philosophy and theology. He claims that it begins in religion but is now becoming secular or profane. His goal therefore is not a "phenomenology of play" but "a recognition of play as a key phenomenon of truly universal stature" ("Doch hier geht es gar nicht so sehr in erster Linie um die Erfassung einer Sache, nicht um eine 'Phänomenologie' des Spiels, sondern um die Welt-Bedeutsamkeit des Spiels, um die Erkenntnis des Spieles als eines Schlüsselphänomens von wahrhaft universalem Rang") (1960, p. 54). See also his discussion of the symbolism of bread (1960, p. 152).

²² "Primitive cult has the character of play because it is first of all magic of masks" and participates in the demonic (1960, p. 181).

²³ Interestingly, Fink thinks that contemporary liturgy is mere residue of ancient cult, having lost all its fire, hence become mere ashes of ancient ritual (1960, pp. 186–87).

²⁴ Several unquestioned assumptions seem at work in many of the German thinkers: on the one hand that labor (associated with the lower classes) is less valuable than leisure activities (such as the higher classes can pursue and which were by many at the time considered the mark of "civilization" and "culture"), on the other hand that activities with utilitarian or pragmatic ends are of less value than those undertaken solely for their own sake (maybe unconsciously influenced by the idealist bent of much German philosophy). This is coupled with a paradoxical (romanticizing) elevation and simultaneous dismissal (as "superstitious") of "primitive" cultures.

fantastical, reaching its height in the orgy of the feast. It thus serves the function of escape from the difficulties of life, supports social bonds, and allows for transcendent, mythic, and ultimately superstitious meaning.

2.4. Gadamer: Play and the Work of Art

Probably the most famous and most influential account of play is that of Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, where he employs it as a phenomenon that can be paradigmatic for understanding the nature of the work of art. Gadamer describes the phenomenon of play as one that involves seriousness and total absorption, even while the players know that they are only playing a game.²⁵ Play is characterized by a “to-and-fro” movement, which he will later interpret to be especially indicative of our participation in the work of art, which requires a similar back-and-forth (and is thus not mere passive observation). This movement of play is constantly renewed and a natural process of “pure self-presentation” (Gadamer 1960, p. 105). This *Darstellung* or presentation of the play is a self-presentation that is first limited to itself in the sense of presenting an absorbing whole, but also points beyond itself by involving the audience (1960, pp. 108, 117). Play absorbs the player wholly and thus has primacy over the player’s consciousness. It is “without goal or purpose but also without effort” and thus experienced as relaxation (1960, p. 105). Each game has its own “spirit” and draws the players into itself, even exercises a spell over them (1960, pp. 107, 106). The play (or game) absorbs us and sweeps us up into it: “The player (*Spieler*) experiences the game (*Spiel*) as a reality that surpasses him” (1960, p. 109). Thus, “the players (or playwright) no longer exist, only what they are playing” (1960, p. 111). It is the play that matters rather than the individual players.²⁶

Gadamer is not engaged in an analysis of liturgy per se, but is focused on the phenomenon of art. Yet, he makes several comments about ritual in this context. He repeatedly refers to Huizinga’s treatment favorably, especially relying on it for his occasional comments about ritual or “holy” play (1960, p. 104).²⁷ Ritual functions not as mere spectacle, but as drama, i.e., as staged play: “A procession as part of a religious rite is more than a spectacle, since its real meaning is to embrace the whole religious community. And yet a religious act is a genuine representation for the community; and likewise, a drama is a kind of playing that, by its nature, calls for an audience. The presentation of a god in a religious rite, the presentation of a myth in a play, are play not only in the sense that the participating players are wholly absorbed in the presentation play and find in it their heightened self-representation, but also in that the players represent a meaningful whole for an audience” (1960, p. 109). The liturgy thus stages a “world”: “But however much a religious or profane play represents a world wholly closed within itself, it is as if open toward the spectator; in whom it achieves its whole significance” (1960, p. 109). Gadamer especially stresses the idea of mimesis in this context, linking it to “play in the form of dancing, which is the representation of the divine” (1960, p. 113). In this, he is in agreement with Rahner who also interprets dance as the apex of play.

His most extensive discussion of ritual occurs in the analysis of the sacred festival, which he puts forward as an example of play as art in its fullest sense in a way that is very similar to Huizinga: “The originally sacral character of all festivals obviously excludes the familiar distinction in time experience between present, memory, and expectation. The time experience of the festival is rather its *celebration*, a present time sui generis” (1960, p. 121). Gadamer warns, however, of a reduction of ritual to mere aesthetic consciousness: “This is seen most clearly in one type of representation, a religious rite. Here the relation to the community is obvious. An aesthetic consciousness, however reflective, can no longer

²⁵ Guardini similarly emphasizes the “seriousness” and “absorption” of the child’s play and of artistic creation (1930, p. 103).

²⁶ Ricoeur also stresses this in his analysis of Gadamer on play, which goes on to apply this notion of play to the move of appropriation in the mimetic interaction with the “world” of narrative (Ricoeur 1981, pp. 185–93).

²⁷ “Setting off the playing field—just like setting off sacred precincts, as Huizinga rightly points out—sets off the sphere of play as a closed world, one without transition and mediation to the world of aims.” (1960, p. 107). Indeed, the religious act “rests absolutely within itself” and conveys a superior truth (1960, p. 112).

suppose that only aesthetic differentiation, which views the aesthetic object in its own right, discover the true meaning of the religious image or the play. No one will be able to suppose that the religious truth of the performance of the ritual is inessential" (1960, p. 115). He continues: "Rather, it is in the performance and only in it—as we see most clearly in the case of music—that we encounter the work itself, as the divine is encountered in the religious rite" (1960, p. 115). This claim goes considerably beyond Huizinga for whom the significance seems to be lodged entirely within the ritual and who also acknowledges no truth claims for it.

Thus, the characteristics of ritual and art as forms of play, as they emerge in these authors and find their culmination in Gadamer's treatment of the work of art, are: (1) play is engaged with seriousness and in total absorption; it thus constitutes a "closed world" (having its purpose only in itself), (2) play follows rules and an order particular to the game, but they are engaged freely and may be subject to change, (3) play is characterized by a back-and-forth movement, including calling forth repetition and continual renewal, (4) play reaches its height in presentation or spectacle (*Darstellung ins Gebilde*), displaying mimetic features of representation and staging, (5) play engages the emotions (such as exultation and mirth).

3. The Ludic Presupposition in Contemporary Liturgical Theology

The identification of liturgy and play has become ubiquitous in recent studies of liturgy or ritual.²⁸ Joseph Ratzinger (before becoming Pope Benedict) took up Guardini's book under an almost identical title in 1999 and begins his treatment with Guardini's suggestion that liturgy ought to be understood in terms of play. He summarizes: "The point of the analogy was that a game has its own rules, sets up its own world, which is in force from the start of play but then, of course, is suspended at the close of play. A further point of similarity was that play, though it has a meaning, does not have a purpose and that for this very reason there is something healing, even liberating, about it. Play takes us out of the world of daily goals and their pressures and into a sphere free of purpose and achievement, releasing us for a time from all the burdens of our daily world of work. Play is a kind of other world, an oasis of freedom, where for a moment we can let life flow freely" (Ratzinger 1999, p. 13). Ratzinger does not endorse this "analogy" entirely, although he cites the reference to children's play as "rehearsal of later life" favorably as a reminder "that we are all children, or should be children, in relation to that true life toward which we yearn to go" (1999, p. 14).²⁹ Although this play that anticipates the kingdom or another world says something true of liturgy, Ratzinger finds it a bit too vague. Unless the liturgy is focused on God, it is mere "fooling around" (1999, p. 23). (It is maybe worth pointing out that Ratzinger's is one of the few qualified endorsements of the parallel between play and liturgy. Most are far more enthusiastic and display none of Ratzinger's hesitations.)

3.1. Liturgy as a Game

JNJ Kritzinger explicitly appeals to Huizinga in order to argue "that one fundamental 'move' we need to make... is to discover (or recover) the notion of play and playfulness at the heart of Christian faith" (Kritzinger 2005, p. 71). Liturgy ought to "inculcate a sense of joyful creatureliness, inviting worshippers to become... the grateful children of God playing in the presence of their creator" (2005, p. 72). He repeatedly returns to this analogy

²⁸ A search for "liturgy" and "play" on the ATLA Religion Index yields a result of roughly a hundred articles. A couple of those are about using "play" as a pedagogical function for children's church or catechesis (e.g., Sokol 1981), but the great majority concern themselves with the idea that liturgy itself is a form of play. It is also worth pointing out that many other liturgical treatments (both in liturgics and in contemporary liturgical theology) make briefer references to the parallel between play and liturgy or assume their identification as a presupposition without further elaboration. For one example, see Power (1984, p. 85). These kinds of references are ubiquitous in the literature. I have focused here on the fuller treatments that explicitly discuss the issue rather than simply assuming it as a given.

²⁹ For an interesting analysis of the overlap or parallels between children's play and liturgy, see Post (1995, pp. 185–214). He explicitly refers to Guardini (1995, p. 201). He also connects such play to theater (1995, pp. 198–200).

of children's play as a model for worship.³⁰ Martin Farrell also argues that children's play is serious and thus play is an appropriate term for liturgy. Liturgy is "recreation" and ought to be playful and abundant (Farrell 2001, pp. 19–20). Jack Williams similarly adopts previous claims about play and ritual fairly uncritically (Williams 2018, pp. 323–36). Relying on Gadamer, he highlights several points: "First, like play, religious ritual exhibits intended unintentionality. The liturgy is intentionally entered into by the participant: the time and location is demarcated by sacred spaces and times, or consecration" (2018, p. 327). Second, "the play-character of ritual requires serious involvement; to be a success, the ritual cannot be regarded as 'just' ritual" (2018, p. 327). Finally, "a transformation into structure occurs which allows the mimetic presentation of religious truth, and ultimately even the divine itself" (2018, p. 328). He concludes: "Play is an important concept for liturgy precisely because it connotes an activity which, if engaged in with seriousness, can make present a truth that transcends a crude description of the activity" (2018, p. 328). Thus, somehow the notion of play enables liturgy both to preserve its "seriousness" and to demonstrate levity and celebration. For Bryce, liturgy is play because it is characterized by freedom, by having its own "order," by being distinct from regular life, and by its connection to "aesthetics and creativity" (Bryce 1982, p. 15). Despite her emphasis on order, she also repeatedly stresses the analogy to children's play. Paus also highlights the importance of order and structure in the play of liturgy (Paus 1983, p. 299). For Zsolt Ilyés "liturgy is celebrated playfully, or rather, it requires a playful disposition for its celebration" (Ilyés 2009, p. 138).

Luke Timothy Johnson contends that liturgy is marked "decisively as play of a distinct and elevated kind" and maintains "formal elements of play" (Johnson 2015, p. 99). For Johnson, the fact that liturgy is play means that it "enables participants to experience a form of transcendence," that it allows participants to "internalize the patterns of liturgical play," such that they become part of the community, and that it generates a spirit of freedom, because worshipers know the formal "rules of the game" (2015, pp. 99, 100). Janet Walton uses the expression "holy play" to speak of improvisation in liturgy, which she considers "essential for effective ritualizing" (Walton 2001, p. 294).³¹ Such "improvisation or holy play intends to use engaged bodily ways of knowing to transform ourselves and our world" (2001, p. 296). She insists on a strong role for the imagination in worship: "This rationale and schema for improvisation and imagination in worship, or as I term it 'holy play' dares to suggest that we play with the story of God and our stories" (2001, p. 304). Imagination and playfulness are often associated, maybe reminiscent of Kant's notion of the play of the imagination.

Don Saliers also considers improvisation and flexibility an important element in liturgy. He argues: "Only when we learn to improvise with the prayer and work of Jesus Christ throughout all the seasons of life will we come to understand liturgy as holy play" (Saliers 1994a, p. 44). In a similar vein, Geoffrey Wainwright talks about liturgy as an "eschatological game" with rules, room for improvisation, well-trying moves, and a special purpose (Wainwright 1997, p. 19).³² Constance Parvey compares the "holy play" of liturgy both to children's play and to theater (Parvey 1986, p. 49). She argues that holy play "helps us to become responsible before God and to internalize the eschatological vision that informs our 'I' as persons and our 'we' as people" (1986, p. 50). Here the language of play seems to become tantamount to arbitrary invention in worship.

Kieran Flanagan, an important sociologist of liturgy, assumes in several places that liturgy is a form of play and tries to illuminate how that is the case, appealing especially to the notion of performance: "Thus, regardless of the credibility the actors achieve in

³⁰ Kritzinger reiterates this in the conclusion: "May the liturgies we design and perform also have such a liberating effect, as we play together in the garden of God" (2005, p. 77). See also Ponder (1998).

³¹ She relies heavily on Gelineau ("The Symbols of Christian Initiation") who challenged churches to "play" with the symbols of their liturgies.

³² Dalmais also speaks of liturgy functioning as play (in Martimort 1987, p. 235). Similarly, Gallen (1973, p. 273) argues that play is at the very heart of ritual. Like others he grounds this in the verse from Proverbs where wisdom is playing before God and the idea that God himself plays (1973, p. 274), already expressed by Hugo Rahner. Ilyés (among many others) also refers to this (2009, p. 140).

performance, the form of rite can be regarded as a *mere* form of play. Rites can be interpreted as forms of play, that embody the serious and the trivial within their social frames" (Flanagan 1988, p. 351). He sees play as especially characterized by dualisms that also characterize liturgy: "Play moves continually through dualisms that are artificial: stimulus-response; spontaneity-order; and chance-regulation. But these dualisms have to be tacitly regulated lest the ritual lurches out of balance and distorts the epiphany it routinely petitions to engage in its performance. Mistakes that disrupt the 'flow' can disorder this sacred task" (1988, p. 357). The language of play is helpful for liturgy, because it is able to restore it to its function and show it as a distinct form: "It can be used to argue for a restoration of the original language of purpose to the rite, so that by defining it as a form of play, a ritual game with the sacred, its distinctive autonomous basis can be drawn out. This would be to restore the rite to its proper systems of associations" (1988, p. 360).³³ In a later book, he treats liturgical forms "as playful means of the holy" (Flanagan 1991, p. 292). He indicates that "this approach draws out the degree to which these are ritualised games dealing in wagers, in hopes, that the players and their audience will find what they seek in the enactment of liturgy" (1991, p. 292). Here we have gone beyond playfulness in the sense of the play of children to play as performance or drama.

3.2. Liturgy as Drama

Many theologians take up the association of liturgy and drama, i.e., "play" in the sense of "staging" or "performance."³⁴ Jean-Marie Chauvet speaks of liturgy as play on the one hand in the sense of festivity or performance, and on the other hand as "having play" in the sense of maintaining the necessary distance between human and divine (Chauvet 2008). Both Huizinga and Fink had already pointed to the way in which Greek religion and piety was fundamentally expressed in dramatic staging. Jürgen Bärsch examines this relationship in regard to Christian liturgy. He distinguishes liturgical theatre-like productions (especially around Annunciation and Easter) from Guardini's more fundamental claim that all of liturgy functions as play in the sense of being free and without external purpose. Play and drama are not the same, although both have mimetic functions, albeit not in the strong imitative sense of cult that was the case for pre-Christian cultures. He points to the increasingly dramatized services especially at the holy sites, starting in the fourth century. This constitutes a transformation toward what he calls "scenic liturgy" (Bärsch 2005, p. 9). The level of drama increases during the Middle Ages, at least in the West. Relying heavily on Odo Casel, he argues that the early 20th century liturgical movement spoke of "holy play" in order to stress the need for active participation in the holy action (2005, pp. 16–17). Liturgy presents or stages the drama of salvation in Christ symbolically. Here play becomes drama: *Spiel* becomes *Schauspiel* (2005, p. 19).³⁵ The call and response structure of liturgy constitutes a playful back-and-forth (2005, p. 20). Only within liturgy are the most basic elements of play and festival in human life taken seriously (2005, p. 22). After this detour through Casel, Bärsch concludes that liturgy is play in the sense that it makes present the drama of salvation, in the sense of symbolic sign, representation, active participation, and in the sense that it nourishes our daily lives and transforms them salvifically (2005, p. 23).³⁶

Dillistone similarly suggests that early Christianity took on many elements of Greek drama: "The church *was* the theater; the eternal passion of God *was* the drama; the sacred ministers *were* the actors. To all intents and purposes, religion and drama had become

³³ He explicitly appeals to Gadamer in this context: "Following Simmel, one can regard choral evensong as a form of sociability, a playing at a game to effect its own transcendence, so that the social mechanism passes out of prominence to become unnoticed and insignified. Ultimately, the social seems to disappear altogether. As a form of play, choral evensong is a ritual game played with ontological significance, translating the ordinary into the realm of the extraordinary. Its form finds true expression in pursuing a task Gadamer has stipulated for play. This means finding its true perfection in being an art effecting 'the transformation into structure' of a holy ideal. Achieving this means that the form enters as play..." (1988, p. 361).

³⁴ On this topic see also Jeroense (1995).

³⁵ "Die Liturgiefeyer ist bildhaft-dramatisches Geschehen, in das möglichst alle Feiernden als Spielende einbezogen werden sollen, weil gerade das Erleben ein wesentliches Element des sakramentalen Geschehens ist" (2005, p. 19).

³⁶ Christine Schnusenbergh interprets the Eucharist in terms of ancient theatre (Schnusenbergh 2010).

one" (Dillistone 1974, p. 127). Robert Hovda speaks of liturgy as "kingdom play" and concludes: "Its 'believe demand' is not relieved, because it is not playacting but the intentional faith-expression of a believing community. It is the *power* of such 'performance' that is the point... and there the analogy does not limp at all" (Hovda 1982, p. 263). Hovda stresses "immediacy, involvement, and engagement" in liturgical play (Hovda 1986, p. 42). Speelman tries to differentiate liturgy and theater, but speaks of both of them as play, concluding: "It seems that theatre, therapy and liturgy are all directed towards one goal: to restore the human person in his-and-her original integrity" (Speelman 2002, p. 208). He stresses that this does not mean that liturgy is itself theatre or therapy, although they are parallel and all are kinds of play.³⁷ Richter also draws on Huizinga (Richter 2005, pp. 248–50) and Casel (2005, pp. 145–83) to stress that liturgy is essentially playful and dramatic, arguing that it is, in fact, more performative and more participatory than a staged play (2005, pp. 275–80).

Roger Grainger draws even more explicit parallels between liturgy and theatre. Liturgy is a drama in which "we are the players, and God himself our *metteur en scène*" (Grainger 2009, p. 19).³⁸ He highlights several parallels between ritual or liturgy and theatre, such as the use of the imagination, its "safety" (because it is "only a play"), the focus and attention, and the emotional distance involved (2009, p. 41).³⁹ The essential point is that "ritual celebration, ritual demonstration, ritual games [are] all aspects of ritual used in order to discover the truth of a dramatic situation... as worshippers try out liturgy for size" (2009, p. 72). Only by "experiment[ing] in this way" with liturgical practice can "the heart" be put "back into our worship" (2009, p. 72). Liturgy is "divine play," "liturgies may be seen as theological dramas," and "deprived of its dramatic armature... liturgy ceases to have any value as a unique way of saying things which cannot otherwise be said" (2009, pp. 74, 75, 83). Nathan Mitchell compares liturgy to a musical score that must continually be exposed to "the risk of performance" (Mitchell 2006, p. 38). Karl-Heinrich Bieritz similarly insists on this parallel, suggesting that contemporary aesthetics might fulfill some of the needs that liturgy and passion plays satisfied in earlier centuries (Bieritz 2009).

3.3. Liturgy as Gratuitous

Maybe the most persistent point made over and over again is the idea that liturgy is done for its own sake and therefore gratuitous. Many of the authors already discussed either stress it or at least imply it. Already Guardini emphasizes that liturgy "must learn not to be continually yearning to *do* something, to attack something, to accomplish something useful, but to play the divinely ordained game of the liturgy in liberty and beauty and holy joy before God" (Guardini 1930, p. 106). Simon Chan simply says: "Like play, the liturgy has no purpose, yet it is full of meaning" (Chan 2006, p. 54). For Williams "the treatment of liturgy as anything but an end in itself would be regarded as improper" (Williams 2018, p. 327). Ilyés also employs "the human person at play" as "a model for contemporary liturgical understanding" in this sense. In his view, the very nature of the ritual act is ludic. Losing a sense of play inevitably entails "a loss of the liturgical" (2009, p. 134). Liturgy "has a gratuitous dimension, as liturgy is also a feast, a dance, a form of play" (2009, p. 136). Liturgical celebration includes "ludic behaviour which affords levity, gratuity and the festive air of play at liturgy" (2009, p. 137). Indeed, "playfulness is not a secondary characteristic of liturgy, but is at its essence" (2009, p. 138). Because it is gratuitous, the meaning of liturgical action "is manifested in an activity that is not motivated by necessity, desire or ends, but is done for its own sake" (2009, p. 139).⁴⁰ It has no (utilitarian) purpose. At the same time, "rules are constitutive of both play and liturgy"

³⁷ "People have to be capable of playing with rites and symbols so that they can experience their meaning. The meaning of the liturgy is released by the game" (Speelman 2002, p. 214).

³⁸ He employs Kantian language of purposiveness to work this out.

³⁹ He does, however, also acknowledge several differences between theatre and liturgy (2009, pp. 42–43).

⁴⁰ He also links it to freedom, appealing to Pannenberg and Moltmann in this context (2009, p. 141).

(2009, p. 144).⁴¹ Just like liturgy, “play is taken seriously by the player, but may seem ridiculous to the observer” (2009, p. 146). “Play is characterized by an isolation or distance from daily life” (2009, p. 147).⁴² Several themes are highlighted here that we already saw in earlier thinkers: liturgy is like play in that it has no purpose or goal beyond itself; it observes rules, although it also involves levity or even mirth, especially when it is festal; thus, it is taken seriously by those involved in it but may appear ridiculous to bystanders. Paus similarly stresses the seriousness of liturgical play, which has its purpose only in itself (1983, p. 297). It is removed from ordinary life, renders all other being insignificant, and becomes absorbed solely in itself. It becomes a “presentation” (*Darstellung*) of the “primordial religious idea” (*religiöse Uridee*) (1983, p. 298). He highlights that ritual “is in essence (*Wesen*) without purpose (*zwecklos*), aims for no goal or future” (1983, p. 302).

This idea that liturgy is gratuitous and without purpose is affirmed even by scholars who do not use the play analogy. Robert Taft says that liturgy “serves no purpose beyond itself” in that “it has the gratuitousness and uselessness of all symbol.” That is to say: “It doesn’t mean something; it simply means. It has no more use than art, or poetry or a kiss” (Taft 1997, p. 53). Paul Westermeyer reviews a whole slew of liturgical theologians who all make this claim and goes on to show his fundamental agreement (1998, pp. 193–208). He cites Don Saliers, William Willimon, and Harmon Smith who all argue that worship has no “instrumental” function and no purpose. Patrick Miller affirms that “there is no more *useless* thing we do than praise God—and *that is the reason we do it*” (cited in Westermeyer 1998, p. 194; emphasis his). Worship is an end in itself and accomplishes nothing.⁴³ Aidan Kavanagh articulates as a rule that “liturgy is never used for ulterior motives such as education” because it is “an end in itself” (Kavanagh 1982, p. 27–28). Kritzinger similarly asserts that interpreting worship as play “helps us overcome the distortion of Christian ethics into moralism” (Kritzinger 2005, p. 75). He contends that “play theory helps us realize that religious ritual is voluntary, non-necessary, and limited to specific times and places” (2005, p. 75).

The notion of play, then, has become at the very least a crucial analogy for liturgy, but in many cases even a claim about its essential nature. This involves four related claims: (1) Liturgy is play inasmuch as it has no purpose outside of itself but is undertaken wholly for its own sake. (2) Liturgy is play in that it follows rules and is engaged in with seriousness, although it also produces enjoyment and mirth. (3) Liturgy involves its participants in the way in which players are involved in a game: wholly absorbed, thoroughly enjoying themselves, and yet utterly dedicated to the game. At the same time, (4) liturgy is also a performance, a staging, a closed world, where we leave “ordinary life” behind and enter into the “sacred” world of liturgical play. Liturgy is mimetic staging in that it “represents” salvation history, while also dramatically enveloping us within such performance, thus making salvation dramatically present to us.⁴⁴

Is “play” a good metaphor or analogy for what occurs in liturgical or ritual practice? Is liturgy like playing a game or staging a play? Despite the overwhelming embrace of these identifications of liturgy and play, the final sections of this contribution will attempt to complicate this ubiquitous association and to argue that these two phenomena should be distinguished more carefully. This is obviously not to say that liturgy has no playful elements at all. Phenomena need not be different in all respects. Some similarities and areas of overlap between liturgy and play can certainly be acknowledged. Yet, there are

⁴¹ In fact, he argues that the observation of these rules is identical in both cases (2009, p. 145).

⁴² Indeed, he mentions in one breath “football, many children’s games, the liturgy of the Hours, the liturgy of the Word and the Eucharist” (2009, p. 147).

⁴³ “None of that accomplishes anything or gets us anything.” (Westermeyer 1998, p. 198).

⁴⁴ It is maybe also worth pointing out (as one of the reviewers did) that the theologians examined in this section are all operating within a Christian framework, predominantly Protestant and Roman Catholic, and are making claims about (Western) Christian liturgy. (I have yet to find an Orthodox liturgical theologian who embraces the play analogy or makes ontological claims about liturgy as play, although the language of mimesis is certainly employed by some). The phenomenological analysis in the next section will thus also focus on the experience of Christian liturgy (rather than ritual experience more broadly), although it will attempt to be sufficiently broad to account for Eastern Christian liturgical experience as well, especially given that liturgical experience is absolutely central to the Eastern Christian traditions.

enough important distinctions between the phenomena of play and liturgy to make us more hesitant in associating them quite so freely.

4. Distinguishing the Phenomenon of Liturgy from That of Play

Let us take up each of the claims made about the identity of play and liturgy in turn. As in Gadamer, the method of phenomenology will be employed for this. That is to say, the method of analyzing phenomena by depicting them closely, showing how they appear to consciousness, not as empirical instances, but in their very structures.⁴⁵ This method tries to separate what is essential to the phenomenon, what makes it what it is, from what is merely peripheral, tied to this or that particular and arbitrary instantiation (often through the method of “imaginative variation”). It helps us see the phenomenon fully for what it is (*Wesensschau*) in a way that we would have not been able to do without the investigation. While it can certainly challenge some of our presuppositions, it also must “ring true” to experience in broad fashion.⁴⁶ It is not necessary, however, for every single experience to match it perfectly, rather, it tries to get at the “nature” (*Wesen*) of the phenomenon, at what makes it the sort of thing it is and thus distinguishes it in fundamental fashion from other sorts of things. Although the focus will be on the elements and characteristics of the experience more broadly, roughly speaking the first subsection explores the parallel to children’s play, the second the analogy to games (whether board games or sports), and the third the association between liturgy and drama, although other play/games will also be considered in a section if they display the same characteristics (e.g., of “seriousness” or “order”).⁴⁷

4.1. *Seriousness and Mirth: What Is the Affectivity of Liturgical Engagement?*

Play, while often undertaken with utmost seriousness (even to the point of violence), always knows itself to be play. It is a crucial part of the phenomenon that it is felt to be play even at the most serious moments. If it becomes pure battle, as when it devolves into mere violence, when it stops being playful combat and becomes all-out war, then its nature as play has been abandoned.⁴⁸ If the phenomenon ceases to be play for the participants, then it is no longer a game, but has turned into something else. This conscious engagement in play—maybe forgotten in the heat of the moment, but always present on some level—is an essential element of the phenomenon. We enjoy play, precisely because we know it on some level to be artificial, to be not “real” life, to be gratuitous. It feels, at least to a certain extent, always profligate, as a step away from actual and serious life. This is an important part of its enjoyment. In play we can suspend our usual occupations, sometimes even our usual personalities (as in mimes or theatre).⁴⁹ We thus know play to be “artificial” or even “fake” on some level (albeit not in a negative sense). To use Platonic distinctions (but without their derogatory implications): play traffics in appearances, not in reality. It continues to have a relationship with life: children’s play prepares children for adult life, it often imitates adult life, tries out roles, develops talents, and so forth, but it is not the same as adult life and children are well aware of this.

Unlike this play of children, liturgy never posits its experience as fake or artificial. Liturgy does not present itself or manifest as mere semblance. Even when it is interpreted as a kind of representation (cf. by Germanos and other patristic mystagogues), this is not

⁴⁵ I have tried to work out the broader phenomenological structures of liturgical experience, using the example of the Orthodox tradition, in my *Welcoming Finitude* (Gschwandtner 2019).

⁴⁶ That is, it produces what in German is called an “Aha Erlebnis”; a “yes, that’s it” kind of response.

⁴⁷ It should be noted that German uses only one term (*Spiel*) for these three terms or kinds of activities, while English has at least three. Some of the German arguments sound far more tenuous in English, because the etymological connection is less obvious (which may indicate that there are actually different phenomena at work).

⁴⁸ That is why Suzanne Collins’ “Hunger Games,” for example, have ceased to be “play”; the only remotely playful element exists merely for the spectators. The same is true when riots occur at soccer games. A line is crossed once violence erupts.

⁴⁹ This also enables us to make other kinds of distinctions: Certainly mimes or theatre can send subtle political messages, but to the extent that they remain art and have not yet become politics, such implications remain playful. When they cease to be playful, it ceases to be theatre and has become propaganda.

mere imitation or semblance—and certainly is not considered artificial or just pretense. Liturgy also does not constitute simply a childish training for an “adult”—heavenly?—version that would be more “real” in comparison with it. Despite Huizinga’s claim that anyone engaged in ritual knows they are only pretending, precisely the opposite is true: the conviction that this is not mere pretense but that the participants are engaged in something “real” is absolutely essential to the experience of liturgy.⁵⁰ In fact, experiencing it as fake or as something one has to “put on” for others but does not genuinely “feel,” precisely often becomes a reason for abandoning it and no longer participating in it. Liturgy is neither the fake imitation of the real world nor is it a mere anticipation of the actual world or some sort of training for it. Although there are certainly moments when liturgy can feel artificial, this artificiality detracts from its “enjoyment” rather than the enjoyment lying within it as is usually the case for play.

What is interesting is that both Huizinga and Gadamer claim on the one hand that play is engaged with utter seriousness and on the other that it produces mirth, although neither distinguishes very carefully how these elements play a role. Rahner explicitly combines both elements in his insistence on the “ernstheitere” dimension of the ludic nature of the church. Clearly, liturgy does have more serious and more joyful elements; to some extent the alternation of fasting and feasting in many liturgical traditions highlights these two “sides” of liturgical experience—and, indeed, holds them together. Yet, it is less clear that the kind of seriousness and joy experienced in liturgy is like the seriousness and mirth one experiences in playing a game, that they have the same phenomenological “flavor,” so to say.⁵¹ There is enjoyment in the celebration of a festival and it can surely include laughter, but this seems qualitatively different from the sort of hilarity involved in playing a game. It is entirely okay to be silly when playing a game—even to engage in such silliness with a certain kind of seriousness in the sense of full investment—but such silliness seems out of place in liturgy. This is not meant to imply that liturgy must be stiff or boring; it can certainly be joyful. Yet, the nature or type of the joy or seriousness is different than that experienced in playing a game or even going to the theatre.⁵²

It would obviously require a more fundamental examination of the role of affect in liturgy (and maybe also in play) to show this more fully, but one might at least say that the dominant “affects” that liturgy seeks to induce in its participants through its ritual cycles and actions are unlike those produced by either children’s play or even in drama.⁵³ Liturgical affect is characterized especially by contrition, consolation, gratitude, and celebration. Practices of confession (whether individual or within communal settings) and lenten liturgies constantly exhort its participants to awareness of faults, confession of sins, and repentance of life. These induce, are accompanied by, or are expressed via affects of sorrow and contrition. Practices of anointing and many other aspects of liturgical practice, such as the visual and auditory presentation of “examples” to emulate, are marked by affects of consolation, compassion, and the challenge to follow these examples. The eucharistic meal and many other elements of liturgical practice are affectively colored by gratitude or thanksgiving. Feasting allows for celebration and release of more joyful emotions. Overall, liturgical practices often evoke awe, veneration, and even adoration on multiple levels. Obviously such affects are calibrated differently in different traditions and some emphasized or expressed more fully in one than in another tradition. Yet, none of these affects seem important dimensions of play, which neither induces contrition nor leads to repentance, does not have as one of its primary goals to provide healing or

⁵⁰ Again, I want to be clear that these are not theological (or anthropological/“scientific”) claims, but a phenomenological description of the structures of manifestation of liturgical experience in comparison with the experience of play.

⁵¹ Don Saliers, however, does argue for the importance of “hilarity” in worship (1994a, p. 41).

⁵² This is particularly obvious in Schmemmann’s analyses of liturgy, which are permeated with an emphasis on joy (a prominent theme in both 1973 and 1987). He also repeatedly insists that its symbolic nature actually means that it participates in the real, despite current misunderstandings of symbol as indicating the opposite.

⁵³ It should be noted that affectivity for phenomenology is not merely emotion, but refers to broader and more fundamental dispositions, what Heidegger terms *Befindlichkeit*, i.e., the very condition for emotions and moods, inasmuch as all our dispositions and ways of being in the world are always already “colored” in affective fashion.

consolation, and has no desire to contextualize veneration or adoration. This is not a fault or shortcoming of play; it is simply engaged in other kinds of affects—and surely “mirth” and hilarity, reckless enjoyment, even forgetting one’s cares and faults for a while, are all crucial reasons for why people engage in playful activity.

The seriousness with which one engages in liturgical practice also seems to be of a different kind or quality than the seriousness of play. The seriousness of play is one of acute attentiveness, of total absorption, of complete investment at the moment—but also only at the moment. The seriousness of liturgy is both less and more. In a card game or sport, one is engaged fully and seriously because one wants to win the game, because one is concentrating on the moves to achieve a particular outcome. Liturgy is not about winning, it is about transformation and healing—or even about confronting our faults and weaknesses. This is certainly a serious matter, but it has little in common with the sort of serious dedication required for winning a game, even in highly “ritualized” games like chess. Furthermore, because of the regularity and familiarity of liturgy (and sometimes its semi-obligatory nature), maybe even its length and the many contemporary distractions, one is not necessarily as fully absorbed in it at every moment as one might be absorbed in an exciting new game or as children are in their play.⁵⁴ When adults engage in play it precisely allows them to step out of “regular” life for this special absorption. And we are of course absorbed also in many other activities in our daily lives (political, educational, aesthetic, etc.). Is the type of absorption in liturgical experience really that much closer to the kind of absorption in play than it is to other sorts of full immersion?⁵⁵

While one might not always be engaged in liturgy with full absorption, there is seriousness of a different kind or quality. The moves of liturgy are not playful; they carry more and a different kind of weight than the moves in a game. In a game many different moves can be made, one move is as good as another, if it is permitted within the rules and accomplishes what it is trying to effect.⁵⁶ In liturgy, the moves themselves carry weight, we must do them in this way rather than in that way, we cannot simply dispense with the anaphora at will or by popular consent. Although some leeway is certainly permitted and moves can be changed, there is a strong sense that the moves themselves matter and are not purely arbitrary. And this goes for the whole experience: not just the texts but the music or melodies employed, the physical movements of the clergy, the actions of the people, and so forth. This brings us to the issue of rules.

4.2. Rules and Moves in the Game: What Is the Structure of Liturgical Practice?

Liturgy’s penchant for rules is an element often highlighted as a parallel to play. The rules of play are internal to the game; everyone knows the rules, otherwise one cannot play. New rules can be invented but they must be agreed upon or the game devolves into chaos. Similarly, there are certainly rules for liturgy (rubrics, service books, canons, etc.) and yet these rules are interpreted somewhat creatively in the actual performance, just as may well be true for board games or sports.⁵⁷ As is the case for many games, not all of

⁵⁴ One only has to look around in the average parish on a Sunday morning to realize that this sort of attentiveness or absorption is not always present in liturgy. More importantly, that does not mean that liturgy ceases to function. While a game may not work if the players are not fully devoted to it, liturgy can work on its participants, even when they are not fully conscious of or completely attentive to it.

⁵⁵ That is to say, maybe “pedagogical” imagery would ultimately be more useful than “athletic” or “playful” imagery. In a quite different sense, James Smith applies the idea of pedagogical formation to liturgy and even draws a parallel to playing war games that shape subjects’ dispositions such that they are willing to sacrifice their lives in battle (Smith 2013, pp. 16–20, 138–39). While this does indeed say something important about how bodies, affects, and dispositions are formed, one should be careful with loaded metaphors.

⁵⁶ The moves do have a high stake in something like gambling, but those are quite different stakes: those of obsessions or addiction that maybe distinguish gambling from other playing in an essential fashion. The specific nature of the moves certainly does matter in performance or drama, which may point to an important distinction between children’s play or games on the one hand and “a play” in the sense of theatrical or musical performance on the other. When play crosses over into performance the moves are more weighty, not as easily replaceable, and often judged by their beauty or grace, although in that latter case the judge or spectator is no longer involved in the game.

⁵⁷ Here I am obviously speaking of more “traditional” liturgy or at least stable forms of liturgy (such as in main-line Protestant, in Roman Catholic, and in Orthodox contexts). Some of the arguments about spontaneity and freedom laid out above (e.g., Walton, Wainwright, and others) clearly presume a more free-form style of worship, as in many evangelical or charismatic Protestant worship experiences, although even there the practices can usually not simply be changed arbitrarily and are governed by certain recognizable formats that permit the people to participate.

the liturgical rules are written down and some shift over time, sometimes with explicit agreement, sometimes just by tacitly “going along” or eventually getting used to such changes, yet in neither case can the rules be changed completely at will. The practices of liturgy evolve over time and thus the “rules” can be said to develop like those for playing games, not wholly fixed, yet not simply arbitrary. So there is admittedly a parallel between the two phenomena in this respect. Yet, in this regard liturgy is parallel not only to play but to countless other human activities that are also bound to rules that shift slowly over time, such as political activity and structures of governance, the legal system, many crafts and technologies, the development of languages and literatures, and so forth.⁵⁸ Is the parallel of having slowly-shifting guidelines for its successful exercise sufficient for speaking of the liturgical phenomenon as a game or as “playing” by rules and does doing so add anything productive to our understanding of the liturgical phenomenon? The insistence on rules in conjunction with playfulness often seems employed precisely to maintain that liturgy is not arbitrary, as the play imagery might suggest.⁵⁹

Furthermore, the rules and their development are experienced at least somewhat differently within liturgical practice vis-à-vis many other human activities. Liturgical changes tend to be extremely slow and have to be absorbed by the participants. They have to feel imperceptible or people revolt. Changes that are too fast, introduced too hierarchically, or produce differences that are too radical, tend to lead to protest or even schism.⁶⁰ (In this regard, the rules for liturgy seem closer to those governing the law, for example, than to those of play). More importantly, such changes are not merely alterations to the “rules of the game”; they go much deeper than that. Rules for play can shift more arbitrarily than rules for liturgy, because in ritual the stakes are much higher and the emotional and spiritual investment more fundamental. Except in certain “free-church” Protestant contexts, liturgy is not anywhere near as “free” as play or even the work of art. It does not involve the “free play” of the imagination, but is far more bound to traditional forms.⁶¹ One cannot simply invent or experiment in liturgy in the way in which one can employ the rules of art creatively for a new work or the way in which one can invent a new game. It should be acknowledged, however, that here the distinction between the two phenomena is perhaps more one of “quantity” or degree than necessarily of quality or kind.

This applies also to the level of participation, which at least at first glance is similar in liturgical practice, but probably heightened. The nature of the participation in the game is indeed one of the crucial links often made between play and liturgy. Participation is an absolutely essential element of play. *Watching* a sports game is not engaging in play, only actually playing is. Watching and playing are not the same. Here certainly play is much

⁵⁸ Sometimes the idea of “language games” is, in fact, applied to these other activities. Yet, if everything becomes a type of game, does the analogy or metaphor still carry sufficient meaning?

⁵⁹ In this respect it is telling that Guardini added a chapter on the seriousness of liturgy after the chapter on its playfulness to later editions of his book, which clearly indicates some concern that the emphasis on play might somehow trivialize liturgy.

⁶⁰ Taft rightly says: “What ordinary people in ordinary parishes need is familiarity, sameness, the stability of a ritual tradition that can be achieved only by repetition, and that will not tolerate change every time the pastor reads a new article. The only way people are going to perceive liturgy as their own, and therefore participate in it, is when they know what is going to happen next” (1997, p. 297). Such protest can, of course, also occur when rules for certain sports are changed. Maybe in that case the commitment to the sport has become a kind of ritual commitment. (While this article focuses on whether the language of play is appropriate for liturgy, it would be interesting to examine to what extent ritual language might be appropriate for certain kinds of games. There is certainly a “ritual” dimension to many popular sports. Some of these parallels have been examined in ritual studies, but to explore them further would go beyond the bounds of this paper.)

⁶¹ To cite Taft again: “When liturgy professionals talk about spontaneity, they mean *their* spontaneity, not the community’s. The only way to secure the congregation’s appropriation of worship is to celebrate the order of worship that is theirs, and not lay on their already weary shoulders a spontaneity trip in which they have had no part” (1997, p. 298; emphasis his). Clearly, the extent to which liturgy can shift or the “rules” have to be observed strictly depends on the particular liturgical tradition under examination. Orthodox worshippers have been known to object even when typos are corrected in the service books.

closer to liturgy than being a spectator is.⁶² Yet, although a game can be engaged with utmost seriousness, although kids can be so deeply absorbed in a game that they protest at being disturbed or made to stop, the stakes of a game are never as high as those for liturgy. Liturgy is not simply a game we can interrupt at will. Although an individual service can certainly be interrupted without fundamental consequences (e.g., we may switch to doing vespers rather than vigil because there are not enough singers or the choir director is ill), more fundamental changes to liturgy cannot be as arbitrary as those of play. Thus, while the “affect” of seriousness and joy in the liturgical phenomenon seem different in kind from those at stake in playing, the level of engagement expected or its dependence on rules might be a difference of degree rather than kind.

Yet, in at least one respect, liturgical participation must go considerably further than the experience of a game. The participants in liturgy actually must not “lose themselves” in liturgy in the same way as they become absorbed in a game. Liturgy requires at least some reflection and appropriation, at least at certain times a more deliberate participation, a more conscious commitment. Many liturgical “moves” (like a baptism or the rite of forgiveness at the start of Great Lent in the Orthodox tradition or like a conversion experience in response to an altar call in an evangelical context) require not just passive “experience” but deliberate dedication and conscious commitment for their exercise. And this commitment has clear connections to people’s lives: they do not simply “play” at asking and granting forgiveness, they do not just “play” at reciting the creed or approaching the chalice, they do not “play” at dedicating their life to God. In liturgy, we precisely do not suspend our identities in order to engage in a “game” that is separate from life, but instead bring our identities, confess them, expose them, and present them for healing, redemption, and transformation.⁶³ In this respect, the nature and kind of engagement seems quite different from that of involvement in a play or game.

Although Gadamer strongly stresses the need for participation in art, its crucial back-and-forth movement (which, in fact, is one of the central elements of his comparison of art and play), the nature of the participation in a work of art is not the same as the nature of participation in liturgy.⁶⁴ While it is obviously (sadly) true that many people who come to liturgy treat it only as a spectacle that they observe dispassionately, something “put on” for them by others—e.g., the clergy and the choir or various “performers”—this is a fundamental misunderstanding and mistreatment of liturgy.⁶⁵ Liturgy is the work of the people; it is what they do together. The choir does not do it on behalf of the people and the clergy do not substitute for the people. The choir does not “perform” a work of art for observers to watch it or listen to it like a concert. Liturgy is what the community does together and if it becomes a passive spectator sport it has lost its nature as liturgy. Shared and embodied participation is essential to liturgy (which is why congregational singing ought to be encouraged and why it is not a place to feature the solo talents of particularly gifted singers). Liturgical texts are for the most part written in the plural and often in the present tense: they seek to involve *this* group of people gathered here, for *this* liturgy, who perform it together for their salvation. The fact that liturgy in most Christian traditions culminates in the Eucharist, which is meaningless without communicants, also points

⁶² Again, the degree and form this participation takes in a given liturgy depends to a large extent on the particular liturgical tradition or expression under examination. The kinds of participation evangelical or charismatic worshippers expect in their worship services are quite different from those in Orthodox liturgies. Yet, even the most apparently “passive” liturgy (e.g., one in which those up front perform everything and the congregation primarily watches or one performed in a foreign language that the congregation does not understand) expects that it is somehow appropriated by its participants, that their coming to it becomes meaningful for them, such that their lives are affected and changed.

⁶³ The Orthodox liturgy famously exhorts (in the “Cherubic Hymn” in which the eucharistic gifts are brought to the altar) to “lay aside all earthly cares.” But this is not a suspension of life, not a severance from our identity, but instead a shift in focus: instead of being preoccupied with their concerns and worries the participants are called to focus on God’s action. Yet, the litanies and petitions are constantly concerned with the “cares of life” and certainly the ritual practices of confession in many tradition assume that one’s identity and actions are fundamentally at stake. What would it mean to “play” at confession or to “perform” it as drama?

⁶⁴ Can it really be said of liturgy that the “real subject” of liturgy is the liturgy and not those who participate in it, as Gadamer does for play?

⁶⁵ This is also why it is deeply problematic to film liturgy or move it online, where it becomes wholly spectacle and “participation” is reduced to passive watching on screen. Here it has become mere appearance that no longer participates in the reality of the liturgical act. Liturgy requires the participation of bodies (in the plural and the fully corporeal); it cannot function if it is merely observed.

to this essentially participatory nature. Here mimesis and participation overlap: liturgy cannot be merely an imitative representation, performed for us, as we watch passively. This defies the very nature of liturgy. If it is mimetic, it is mimetic in its involvement of all the people: a “recreation” that we do together, not a “representation” put on for us like a play.

4.3. *Mimesis and Gratuity: What Is the Aim of Liturgical “Performance”?*

This brings us to the frequent comparison of liturgy to drama. Indeed, mimetic language has been used for liturgy from ancient times and most of the patristic mystagogues employ such language to some extent. Liturgy is said to be mimetic, both in terms of an imitation of what supposedly goes on in heaven, as a representation of Christ’s earthly life or actions, and on some level even as a recreation of an event (e.g., in the celebration of a feast). Ancient mimesis obviously had connections to the theatre (and thus also to ritual) and anamnesis is closely linked to Plato’s theory of “recollection.” Liturgy does recollect, represent, and recreate. But does it do so in the sense of either Platonic anamnesis or Aristotelian mimesis?⁶⁶ To what extent is liturgy experienced like drama or a work of art?

Following Huizinga, Gadamer describes play, including ritual, as a closed world. While it might be open to the “spectator” or audience, as in a dramatic play, it constitutes its own reality or truth, which “rests absolutely within itself” and permits no “comparison” with ordinary reality; the reality of ritual constitutes a “closed circle of meaning” (1960, p. 112). Certainly one can agree with Gadamer that ritual or liturgy brings forward a “higher truth” and is revelatory in some way, that a cognitive content cannot be isolated but that its truth is communicated only within the actual performance of the rite, yet liturgy also always maintains a relationship with the concretely lived reality of its participants.⁶⁷ It is open to the “regular” world and has important connections with it and the kind of truth it reveals about reality does take into account the lives of those who participate in it in a way that is less obviously the case for aesthetic phenomena.⁶⁸ Certainly drama or narrative can also sometimes be life-changing, but liturgy has such aim of transformation in much more insistent fashion and comes back to it again and again, especially in its cycles of fasting and feasting. If liturgy did not grapple with our most existential concerns and had no effect on the rest of our lives, why would we bother engaging in it? This relation of liturgy to life is not always clear and liturgical scholars have had a very difficult time articulating what the connection is and how it functions (a point to which the conclusion will return), but it is false to say that liturgy is closed in on itself and functions only within

⁶⁶ I have tried to work these parallels out more fully in my “Mimesis or Metamorphosis: Liturgical Practice and its Philosophical Background” (Gschwandtner 2017).

⁶⁷ It does not seem right to say, as Gadamer does for tragedy, that liturgy constitutes a “closed circle of meaning that of itself resists all penetration and interference” (1960, p. 126). Most obviously in prayers and homilies, but also in other ways, liturgy is open to penetration and even “interference” from the “reality outside” of the ritual. And liturgical acts like ordination or marriage have legal validity outside the church doors.

⁶⁸ This is probably a less important point, but it seems to me that liturgy is unlike the work of art also in that it does not produce a “work” in quite the way in which much art does. Liturgy itself is work, but it does not produce a finished work that might be admired—and in that sense it may well be experienced as closer to labor than to play. It is work that always has to be undertaken anew. Liturgy is never finished in the way in which a work of art can be completed. Although certain kinds of art, like music, surely always have to be performed anew in order to be experienced as works (in the performance), even in those cases the work of art has a quasi-finished nature in the score or in previous performances or even recordings of such performances. We surely must perform Beethoven’s 9th Symphony over and over, play it again, but these are “interpretations” or “incarnations” of the completed work in a way that is different from the “instantiations” of liturgy. Liturgy would not exist without these instantiations, the symphony would (e.g., many of Bach’s works were for lost for years and not played or even remembered. Yet, when they were found and interest in his work revived, the works could be played again, because they were “there” in the score to at least some extent). The Anglican Book of Common Prayer or the Roman Missal or the Orthodox Typikon is not equivalent to a musical score or the text of a play. They are sets of instructions to make liturgy happen, not works of art to be contemplated or admired on their own terms. Nor are these texts quite the liturgy itself in the way in which the text of *Hamlet* is the play, even though it is certainly instantiated fully only in a staging of *Hamlet*. (Admittedly, this might be different for Romanos’ kontakia or the Syriac liturgical poems, which seem slightly closer to the staging of a play or even a concert performance and also have more elements of “spectacle,” inasmuch as they were actually “performed” by liturgical actors for an audience, albeit during liturgy. Andrew Walker White argues strenuously that the service of the furnaces is not a play, has nothing to do with theatre, and does not function mimetically [2015]. This seems wrong-headed; although they are not the same, there is certainly overlap and this service does clearly have mimetic and even theatrical elements.)

its own separate universe. In this regard liturgy is like any other human activity in that it occurs within the hermeneutic context and phenomenological horizon of human life—and in some ways it may do so more clearly than other human cultural activities, given that it structures the most fundamental human concerns of life and death and also marks many other “threshold” moments like coming of age or marriage. It is less clear, however, that the language of play or even drama best expresses this connection to life, especially when it is considered as a “structure” (*Gebilde*) or “presentation” (*Darstellung*).

There is actually significant controversy over the potentially mimetic dimension of liturgy in the liturgical literature (wholly aside from the analogy to “play”). Discussions about the early development of liturgy, for example, often draw important distinctions between mimesis and anamnesis (employing the terms in fairly narrow fashion), some asserting that liturgy “only” remembers, others suggesting that it “imitates” in more mimetic fashion (e.g., [Buchinger 2012](#); [Alexopoulos 2020](#); [Galadza 2021](#)). Andrew Walker White argues strenuously that liturgy had nothing to do with ancient drama at all and was not mimetic ([Walker White 2015](#), pp. 41, 46, 52), while Derek Krueger sees important mimetic features in the use of biblical examples for the formation of “liturgical subjects” ([Krueger 2014](#), pp. 7, 59, 65, 212). Rainer Warning even speaks of a “mimetic instinct” in the people ([Warning 1979](#), p. 14). He suggests that today’s “absolute distinction” between players and observers in “dramatic play” does not hold for liturgical play (1979, p. 15). He dates the origin of explicitly mimetic liturgical representations, such as passion plays, to the 7th century (1979, p. 15) and investigates their development as liturgical or “cultic” play in detail (1979, pp. 15–33). Other liturgical scholars admit that liturgy over time adopted more and more dramatic features but bemoan this as a problematic development (e.g., [Bärsch 2005](#); [Gerhards 2002](#)). While a passion play, for example, may well be experienced like a theatre performance, as its name already indicates, it is far less evident that this is a good description of the experience of the Paschal liturgy, despite some of its more “dramatic” elements. In liturgical theology, anamnesis is employed frequently ([Casel 1941](#); [Irwin 1994](#); [Morrill 2000](#); [Taft 1997](#)), while mimesis is a rarer term. Richter explores both, arguing that anamnesis (as dramatic presentation of a memorial world) and mimesis (as creative and playful recreation) are inseparable from each other and must furthermore be held together with epiklesis (in the sense of spiritual appropriation) for liturgical formation (2005, pp. 239–41, 248–53, 256, 275). While Richter characterizes liturgy as drama and even argues for “intensifying the playful-dramatic character of liturgy” (2005, pp. 280, 315–39), McCall explicitly rejects the analogy of drama for liturgy because “to fast and to feast is not to play-act Jesus” ([McCall 1996](#), p. 319). At the very least one must admit that thinking of the liturgical phenomenon as the experience of a drama can have problematic implications and that one ought to exercise great care in any such association. What exactly is served by speaking of liturgy as “drama” or as a “play”?

The most crucial point that seems at stake for many thinkers (from Guardini to Gadamer and in most contemporary authors) is the notion that liturgy is without “why,” that like play or art it exists for itself, has its own purpose rather than being utilitarian or performed on account of something else. Obviously liturgy is not merely utilitarian. Yet it is rather misleading to speak of it as purely gratuitous and as having no purpose at all: most ritual—even the “primitive” kind so often dismissed as “superstitious”—was supposed to accomplish something. It did have at least some “utilitarian” functions, such as calling on the gods or invoking their power, even if these do not exhaust the purpose of ritual. Liturgy exists for itself on some level, albeit not in the sense that one could simply perform it in a vacuum. Even enjoying it purely for its own sake turns it somehow into

mere musical performance or spectacle.⁶⁹ And liturgy certainly is undertaken in order to do or effect something, namely to shape us into the people of God and—at least for Byzantine liturgy—to establish harmony in the cosmos, to bring together heaven and earth, to effect incarnation and theosis, to unify heaven and earth. It does not exist purely for itself, as entertainment engaged only for its own sake. It is also not true that liturgy involves no “effort” or labor. In fact, it requires lots of effort and preparation. Such effort, training, and preparation are an important element of its performance or instantiation.

It is thus decidedly not the case that liturgy has nothing to do with truth and that it is irrelevant to virtue and vice, as Huizinga claims for what he calls “primitive ritual”: “Play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil. Although it is a non-material activity it has no moral function. The valuations of vice and virtue do not apply there” (1944, p. 6). The valuations of virtue and vice most definitely *do* apply to liturgy, which is meant to form our virtues, to confront and heal our vices, and to transform our character. In this respect, too, liturgy does have a purpose beyond itself; it is not mere entertainment but meant to produce repentance, healing, and transformation. In this sense also it is engaged in and performed for and with a purpose (or even for multiple purposes on personal, social, political, and cosmic levels). That is not to say that the purpose of liturgy can be exhausted in the moral dimension; it is not just a colorful way of doing ethics. Liturgy is not an ethical system and has a goal higher than doing good works, but formation of character is at least one of its purposes.⁷⁰ While art and drama can certainly also affect people’s characters and shape dispositions, this is not usually an explicit aim of art.⁷¹

This returns us to what is maybe the most fundamental question at stake in this entire discussion. What is served by speaking of liturgical practice in terms of the phenomenon of play? Is this “merely” a metaphor and what sort of work does this metaphor do? Is it a significant analogy between two human experiences or activities—and what is the import of the analogy? Or is it meant as an identification of the two phenomena, as a description of the fundamental nature of the liturgical phenomenon? If so, how does it illuminate this phenomenon and provide a good description of the experience of liturgy or ritual? Does speaking of liturgy as play reach the nature or *Wesen* of the liturgical phenomenon? Does identifying liturgical practice with playing help us understand better or more deeply the kind of activity or experience it is?

5. Conclusions: The *Wesen* of Liturgical Practice

What are the theologians that employ this imagery trying to accomplish? Some make primarily historical claims for the association between liturgy and drama (Bärsch, Chambers, Dillistone, Warning). For others, it functions only as an interesting or productive metaphor (Chauvet). Some go further, speaking of it as a “model” or important analogy (Guardini, Hovda, Lewis, Mitchell, Paus). Others are convinced that play is at the core of human identity and therefore must be found in ritual (Bryce, Gallen, Rahner). Finally, some do identify the two so completely that they speak of play as the “essence” of liturgy or liturgy as a “form” of play (Flanagan, Ilyés, Richter, Saliers, Walton, Williams, ultimately Paus). Yet, several thinkers are also at pains to point out its dangers. Chauvet, for example,

⁶⁹ A good example of this is the difference between listening to religious music composed for worship versus listening to it within the setting of a concert or on a recording at home. It may be beautiful and even moving, but it is a different kind of experience than the use of music within the liturgy. Flanagan is sharply critical of this: “No longer does one have to wait to hear a Hayden mass. One can play it with ease, instantly, and anywhere, on a CD player, or a video, in a way that makes no demands that might unsettle with a reciprocal gaze. We do not permit the sacred object to ask a question. The CD player asks little except to be switched on. It respects privacy without staring back in a way that makes uncomfortable obligations. A gin and tonic can be had while stretched out on the sofa, giving the Sanctus an uplifting effect. One can recline secure in the knoweldge that no manners are violated in this civil right to private listening to sacred music with no holy strings attached” (1991, p. 333).

⁷⁰ A reviewer pointed out—quite rightly—that this is also true for some types of play. Surely both children’s play and many types of sports form moral character. So maybe here there is actually a parallel that is to some extent denied by the literature that makes the association. The question is, of course, whether this parallel is sufficiently strong to justify considering the liturgical phenomenon as a phenomenon of play and whether the “moral” aim of sports or children’s play is like that of liturgy.

⁷¹ In fact, moralizing plays or explicitly political “art” are often considered propaganda and thought to be of less aesthetic value than art that does not have such clear pedagogical or political aims.

employs it as a metaphor in order to maintain proper distance to the divine in a sort of negative theology, but also insists that liturgy is not theatre and the priest not a comedic actor (2008, pp. 74–76). Speelman highlights “structural differences” between liturgy, theatre, and therapeutic play: “Let us not confuse the issues: Liturgy is not Therapy is not Theatre!” (2002, p. 210). Flanagan similarly has significant hesitations; despite arguing that “liturgy is a form of play” (1988, p. 346), he repeatedly points to the risk of misunderstanding it as “mere play” (1988, p. 351) or the danger of trivializing “what is a serious endeavour” (1988, p. 358). Yet ultimately he thinks that defining the “ritual game” as a “form of play” allows its “distinctive autonomous basis” to emerge more fully (1988, p. 360). Even in the most enthusiastic endorsements of liturgy as play some of this hesitation can be felt when liturgy is designated as “distinct” or “elevated” play, as “serious” or “holy” play where the rules are not “arbitrary,” or when it is implied that the analogy might “limp” in some respects. In general, the spectre of triviality, illusion, or “play-acting” always threatens the association with play and at least some of the treatments try to guard against such misunderstandings.

Yet, if the imagery harbors such dangers, what is to be gained by it? Hovda stresses that liturgy is not “play-acting” yet contends that this analogy makes “the liturgical experience more real, more participative, more communicative, more beautiful” and “more effective,” although he does not explain how it manages to accomplish all of those things (1982, p. 283). Dillstone thinks the association is required for grappling successfully with “perennial human concerns” (1982, p. 131), although it is not clear how its success in this regard would be measured. Richter sees it as playing an important role in formation or education (2005). Bieritz suggests it allows us “to overcome the dichotomy of presence and sense” (2009, p. 58). Kritzinger argues that “an attitude of playfulness” will make liturgy more aesthetically attractive and “culturally relevant” (2005, p. 71). Although he also admits that “theatrical play approaches reality as an illusion,” he thinks that the sacraments similarly deal with what seems “non-real” (2005, pp. 73–74). Ultimately, “play theory helps us appreciate that religious ritual is voluntary, non-necessary, and limited to specific times and places” (2005, p. 75). Williams argues that it “can facilitate a real encounter with God” although he warns that it also “runs the risk of inappropriate God-play” (2018, p. 332). For Bryce the child and the clown “best model the religious-player before the Lord” (1982, p. 20), because play is free, suspends time and place, and allows for creative response to God. Paus similarly contends that the analogy allows to stress the “free” nature of liturgy, but also its ambivalence and its “timeless” character, inasmuch as it does not have a clear end (1983, p. 302).⁷² For Walton, it is primarily about improvisation and spontaneity, which she thinks ultimately lead to “insight, agency, commitment” (2001, p. 298). But are these aspects crucial elements of liturgy that require recourse to such a “dangerous” metaphor or analogy?

In order to respond to this question in closing, it is worth taking at least a very brief look at what liturgical theologians themselves say about the nature or essence of liturgy.⁷³ For the Orthodox liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemmann “the meaning and essence” of liturgy is “the gathering together of heaven and earth and all creation in Christ” (Schmemmann 1987, p. 12, 19). The liturgy is most fundamentally about entry into the kingdom, the “journey” of the church into the presence of God (Schmemmann 1973, pp. 26–27). The Catholic liturgical theologians Aidan Kavanagh and David Fagerberg consider liturgy a way of “doing the world” because liturgy brings us face to face with the divine and thus shows us reality as it truly is, calling us to change the world to conform to this reality. Right worship, for Kavanagh “enacts a world rendered normal” within a context of “radical abnormality” (Kavanagh 1984, p. 159). He concludes: “The liturgy is nothing more nor less than the Body corporate of Christ Jesus, suffused with his Spirit and assembled in time and place, doing its best by doing the world as the world issues

⁷² Although he primarily treats it as an analogy, he ultimately makes the more fundamental ontological claim that liturgy *is* play (1983, p. 302).

⁷³ This can obviously be only the most cursory overview, not a full discussion. In each case I have selected what the respective theologian suggests or explicitly argues is the most fundamental or essential nature of the liturgical phenomenon.

constantly from God's creating and redeeming hand" (1984, p. 176). Fagerberg argues that "the only adequate definition of liturgy" is "living in the eternal circulation of love within the Trinity," which is structured and enabled by liturgical practice (Fagerberg 2004, p. 31). Thus, "liturgy is the faith of the Church in motion"; it "is participation in the life of God" and "living God's life: deification" (2004, pp. 219, 226). The sacramental theologian Kevin Irwin finds that "all liturgy can be understood as the privileged, though provisional, encounter with saving events of the past experienced anew through the liturgy" (Irwin 1994, p. 99).⁷⁴ In a more recent account he contends: "What we celebrate in the liturgy is the fullest experience we can have of the triune God through Christ's paschal mystery here and now before the coming of God's kingdom" (Irwin 2016, p. 355).⁷⁵ Surely no play or game or drama has such lofty aims or would be well suited for accomplishing them.

All liturgical theologians agree that liturgy has salvific functions even if they articulate these somewhat differently. For Laurence Hemming the goal and essence of worship is to make us present and prepared to hear God speak to us and "to make us fit for heaven" (Hemming 2008, p. 2). Liturgy sanctifies the world and is most essentially soteriological: "it is the divine means by which we are gathered into God" (2008, p. 158). Liturgy "performs its meaning" by making us present to Christ (2008, p. 163). Robert Taft concurs: "liturgy is not just ritual, not just a cult, not just the worship we offer God. It is first of all God's coming to us in Christ." (1997, p. 255). Christian liturgy and worship practices are a privileged means for divine encounter (1997, p. 242). The "root metaphor" of Christian liturgy is "the death and resurrection of Jesus"; it provides a "living icon" of Christ's presence: "if it [worship] means anything, it means Jesus acting on us, saving us, relation to and communicating with us as savior" through the activity of the Spirit (1997, pp. 243, 244, 247–48). For Bruce Morrill "to celebrate the liturgy is to share in the very life of God revealed in the saving deeds of Jesus, whose death and resurrection during the annual paschal (passover) feast disclosed the meaning of all the acts of his mission that culminated in that ultimate mystery" (Morrill 2012, p. 3).⁷⁶ For the Lutheran liturgical scholar Gordon Lathrop liturgy has meaning "if it says an authentic thing about God and our world" and "brings us face to face with God" (Lathrop 1993, p. 5). He suggests that this is accomplished in diverse ways and through the juxtaposition of clashing symbols. Does the symbolism of "playing a game" or participating in a "drama" best accomplish or encapsulate such salvific encounter with the divine?

Many liturgical theologians also stress the ways in which liturgy seeks to form or transform us. For Don Saliers "worship forms and conveys the awareness of God and the order of creation and history" (in Anderson and Morrill 1998, p. 17). Thus, "Christian liturgy is formative and expressive of the ethics of Christian character" (in Anderson and Morrill 1998, p. 27). Most fundamentally, "liturgy is doing God's will and work in the world while providing human beings with a time and a place for recalling who God is and who we are before God, and identifying the world to itself" (Saliers 1994b, p. 27). The evangelical theologian Chan similarly says: "The liturgy is simply a way of structuring worship that is faithful to what the Spirit is doing in the church: forming it into the body of Christ" (Chan 2006, p. 126). The Methodist liturgical theologian Byron Anderson also argues that worship is a way of shaping Christian identity: "Christian worship is a cluster of practices in which person and communities are formed intentionally and unintentionally in particular understandings of self and church" (Anderson 2003, p. 29). He goes on

⁷⁴ Joyce Ann Zimmerman similarly thinks of liturgy as a privileged "way to live our conscious being's commitment to God, not only as a cultic occasion but as the primary dimension of Christian faith" (Zimmerman 1988, p. 197).

⁷⁵ In his *Models of the Eucharist*, he says: "Succinctly put, liturgy is both a means and an end. It is a means of integrating the various aspects of our lives, with all our strengths, weaknesses, successes, failures, possibilities, and limitations. We bring our real lives to the enactment of the mystery of faith so that our faith in God can guide the way we deal with all that makes life a challenge." (Irwin 2005, p. 296).

⁷⁶ Similarly, in a different context he says: "Put simply, worship of God is the entire Christian life, and thus the entire mission of the church in the world. Liturgy is the symbolic, ritual activity of the assembled church. It gives believers an explicit sense, a tangible presence, of the God hidden in their daily lives, as well as something of the specific content, through proclaiming and responding to Sacred Scripture, of what this ongoing human encounter with the divine is like. In the church's liturgy believers glorify God by participating more deeply in God's vision for the world and their place in it through word and sacrament" (Morrill 2009, p. 6).

to describe liturgy as a kind of grammar that enables such formation of the self and shows how various aspects of liturgy become “a way of writing God’s way on our bodies and in our hearts and minds” (2003, p. 212). Guardini is equally convinced that liturgy “is primarily occupied in forming the fundamental Christian temper” (1930, p. 86) The Reformed philosopher James K. A. Smith (Smith 2009, 2013) explicates liturgy even more fully in terms of formation, especially as a formation of our desires and loves, such that they can exemplify the kingdom.⁷⁷ For these thinkers, liturgy is conceived more in terms of what it does to the human participant than how God is revealed in it. (Of course the two emphases are not incompatible.⁷⁸) Yet, playing a game or watching a performance—even if one is fully absorbed in it—surely does not so routinely bring the players before the face of God or shape their character in such fundamental ways, partly because they are not usually repeated in the same insistent fashion. While there may be some parallels here in terms of structure, more explicitly pedagogical or ethical imagery would be a much better “fit” for these aims than the imagery of playing.

It seems clear from the phenomenological analysis and from the theological treatments themselves that the nature or essence of the liturgical phenomenon cannot be completely identified with the activity of playing, with a game, or a performance. At best it could serve as an analogy or metaphor for some aspects of its appearance. Yet even in that respect one should remain cautious. Metaphors are loaded and there is no such thing as “mere” metaphor or analogy. For Mitchell, metaphor functions as “the renewable linguistic resource by which a liturgical community renegotiates, from one generation to the next, its layered relationships to Mystery and manners, God and culture, the world of nature and the work of human hands” (Mitchell 2006, p. 200). Does the metaphor of play help the community to negotiate this relationship successfully? In his magisterial study of metaphor, Ricoeur argues that metaphors augment our experience of reality and introduce new dimensions into it (Ricoeur 1975). Metaphors are “living” inasmuch as they allow us to envision our reality differently. Is the metaphor of play a good augmentation or extension of liturgical practice and a productive way of envisioning its reality differently?

It appears far from evident that this is the case. The dangers of semblance, illusion, and triviality that always haunt the play category weigh too heavily in comparison to any gain in freedom and spontaneity it might provide. Furthermore, the insistence on the distinctiveness of liturgical “play,” its “separateness” in terms of place and time, always runs the danger of denying the crucial connection between liturgy and life. Finally, the emphasis on the “gratuity” of the involvement in liturgy as a closed world minimizes its important imperatives and opportunities for formation and transformation.

To end with one brief philosophical suggestion: A broadened notion of mimesis—that goes beyond its association with theatre or drama—might be more useful than the category of play. Although he himself does not employ it for liturgy, Ricoeur’s account of three-fold mimesis (Ricoeur 1984) and his depiction of the “world” of a text (Ricoeur 1995) provide a way of articulating the convictions surrounding the “configuration” of the liturgical event that drives many of the attractions of the play analogy, while at the same time insisting on its groundedness in life and its transfiguring potential far more fully than the narrow version of theatrical or merely imitative mimesis usually employed.

⁷⁷ To cite one more philosopher in the Reformed tradition: Nicholas Wolterstorff claims that “Christians do not enact the liturgy in order to placate God, they do not enact the liturgy in order to keep themselves in God’s good graces... they do not enact the liturgy in order to center themselves” but instead “assemble to worship God” which means that liturgy is a “Godward” movement that consists in “awed, reverential, and grateful adoration of God” (Wolterstorff 2015, pp. 26, 38).

⁷⁸ Graham Hughes argues that worship rituals enable “the facilitation of access to the group’s God, and the disclosure of that deity’s character in such a way that an appropriate response is elicited. Any attempt to give an account of the ‘meaning’ or ‘meanings’ generated within such an assembly must be capable of comprehending this dimension” (Hughes 2003, p. 41). He draws on hermeneutic and semiotic theories to explore such meaning in worship, stressing especially the ways in which worship must intersect with the horizon of the contemporary person for otherwise it would remain meaningless. He concludes that “liturgical meaning is effected at the extremity of what we can manage to comprehend as human beings. Worship is a journey ‘to the edge of chaos’. It is something liminal, standing on the borderline of finitude and the infinite. It is both the terror and the ecstasy of coming to the edge of ourselves” (2003, p. 257). Following the work of Victor Turner, language of liminality is frequently employed by liturgical theologians.

Drawing on Ricoeur, one might say that liturgy is mimetically prefigured by life (both that of the prior events of salvation and that of the liturgical participants), has its own place of mimetic “configuration,” but then mimetically refigures and transfigures life.⁷⁹ While this cannot be worked out in detail here, this mimetic relationship between the liturgical “world” and the “world” of liturgical participants allows for the role of the imagination (including freedom and spontaneity), while not denying the stabilizing, structuring, and ordering dimensions of ritual. It also expresses the insistence on the need for appropriation, while not capitulating to the dangers of semblance or triviality. More significantly, it can help make sense of why the configuration of liturgy must be rich and complex (cf. the question that precipitates the use of play imagery for liturgy in Guardini)—because it shapes a world and does not merely disseminate information or knowledge—and how such a richly configured world can work transformation in the world of its participants with regular participation and appropriation. It can thereby express more fully the essential connection between liturgy and life on which all liturgical theologians ultimately insist and that is at least implicitly denied by the idea that liturgy is purely gratuitous and exists in its own separate and closed world.

The anamnesis and mimesis of liturgy, then, is neither merely about imitating or remembering some event long ago, nor is it about staging a colorful drama that involves us in its performance for a time, but it is instead about opening a world in which these events are configured anew for the current participants, such that they are enabled to enter them, to imagine themselves within them, and to appropriate them for their lives. At the same time liturgy also configures what is prefigured by the lives of its participants (birth and death, suffering and joy, etc.), providing “concordance” (consolation, healing, redemption) to the “discordance” of their lives, such that they are able to appropriate the liturgical world and be transformed by it. All three dimensions (prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration) are needed, and if liturgy were only “playing” in its own little enclosed world, it would lose its signification and become mere entertainment. There are probably many other images, metaphors, and analogies that can aid in understanding more fully what is going on in liturgy—what liturgical experience is all about—but this mimetic account provides at least some of what liturgical theologians desire to express about its nature without degenerating into a very confusing metaphor that ultimately trivializes liturgy and despite all safeguards suggests that it is a non-essential practice that may well be meaningless for our lives.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Note: Please note that due to Covid-19, I was not able to procure existing English translations in all cases. For the historical works, both German and English references are given and it is then noted what edition is actually used in the text.

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⁷⁹ This has been worked out far more fully in my *Reading Religious Ritual with Ricoeur* (Gschwandtner 2021).

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