

# Let us play: (un)shackling liaisons, (un)masking games and (un)hindered dialogue in the arena where theology takes place

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## ■ Modes of play: Political theology and rhetorical style

### ■ Introduction

In 1973 the theme of the May issue of the theological journal *Concilium* was ‘The crisis of religious language’. The linguist Harald Weinrich (1973:329) used the *compositum* (composition) ‘narrative theology’ for the first time. In the same issue the German political theologian Jean-Baptiste Metz (1973:334–342) argued that ‘narrative theology’,

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within the broader context of political theology, is a mode of discourse which is particularly sensitive to the 'experience' of people. At the time, and in that particular context, this argument was not met with enthusiasm. Eberhard Jüngel (1974; [1977] 1992) and Dietrich Ritschl (1976; 1984) did not appreciate any theology that had anything to do with life experience and social relevance, and Ritschl (1976:18) referred to narrative theology as 'that idiom'. Metz, on the other hand, argued that theology cannot in any circumstances be 'socially uninvolved' (Metz 1973; 1967). It was Metz who together with Jürgen Moltmann developed the notion 'Political Theology' during the 1960s as a socio-critical theology (Van Wyk 2015:1 of 8; cf. Schüssler Fiorenza 2013:38). Political theology is a theology 'with its face toward the world' (Metz 1968 [1969]:83; cf. Van Wyk 2015:1 of 8), committed to 'justice, peace, and the integrity of creation' (cf. WCC 1983). The three main tasks of political theology are: (1) socio-theoretical awareness of the complexity of different relationships; (2) an assessment of the state of affairs based on continuous social analysis; and (3) courage to engage multi-contextual and pluralistic environments (Schüssler Fiorenza, Tanner & Welker 2013:xiii–xiv; cf. Van Wyk 2015:6 of 8).

As contemporary of Metz, Moltmann has continuously made the same argument about narrative theology as a departure point or mode of, or entry into socio-critical theology – political theology – (Van Wyk 2015:2–3 of 8). Since he and Metz developed political theology in the German context, Moltmann (2000) has continuously emphasised this conviction in his published works:

I have described the ways my own biography has given me entries into theology – in general, in my own person and in the community of the church and the university ... I have described this process in the introductions ... because I have come to see that the biographical dimension is an essential dimension of theological insight ... My own experiences with theological thinking have taught me that two things belong together in Christian theology: the telling of God's history with us, and the argument for God's presence – biographical subjectivity and self-forgetting objectivity. (p. xviii–xix; cf. Moltmann [2006] 2008)

The narrative theology described here includes biography and autobiography (Goldberg 1981–1982; cf. Tracy 1975:207), in which the life story of the individual obtains meaning in the interaction with the stories of others (cf. Dreyer 2003:325–329; Ricoeur 1984:50–52).

This contribution constitutes a political-theological critical commentary and a hermeneutic-theological reflection on the dynamics of the space in which theology takes place, with specific reference to the research themes which are identified within that space. The space in question is institutional university academia – a Faculty of Theology being part of that space – and the research themes are 'reconciling diversity' and 'Ecodomy – life in its fullness', which are respectively institutional and faculty research themes.<sup>29</sup>

29. 'Reconciling diversity' is an institutional research theme (IRT) as well as a faculty research theme (FRT) (cf. University of Pretoria, Faculty of Theology 2014:58).

The contribution is not an exposition of the theological content of the themes, but rather a critical reflection on the influence that the space wherein the research themes are conceived might have on the authenticity of the proposed and hoped for contributions of those research themes.

The rhetorical style of this contribution is therefore narrative-like because it is true to the theological paradigm of the contribution – political theology.<sup>30</sup> But the other reason is that my context and situatedness (*Sitz im Leben*) gave rise to the questions and issues to be considered in this contribution. A reflection on the origin, authenticity and outcome of research themes like ‘reconciling diversity’ and ‘Ecodomy – life in its fullness’ while also being a theologian situated at a university and a Faculty of Theology makes the proposed rhetorical style especially suited, but maybe also quite necessary, ‘as a way leading to insight into the object of enquiry’ (Moltmann 2000:xix). Not only do I therefore ‘dare’ to say ‘I, I *must* say ‘I’.<sup>31</sup>

In doing this, I am also following in the footsteps of a renowned South-African feminist (and political) theologian, Denise Ackermann. In the introduction to ‘After the locusts, letters from a landscape of faith’, she acknowledges that ‘writing for the academy gets one into bad habits ... we know the rules and we know how to play the game’ (Ackermann 2003:xii). The motivation and explanation for her personal and narrative-like rhetorical style, is simply ‘about my efforts to discover what is worth living for in the midst of troubled times’ (Ackermann 2003:xii). Put differently, she is reflecting on ‘life in its fullness’ by marking her own situatedness, theologically and otherwise. Ackermann also acknowledges, ‘the rules and the game’ – the setting from which her reflection is

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 30. In the introduction I have mentioned only the German context with regard to the correlation between political theology and a narrative-like rhetorical style. This is because my own introduction to political theology took place through the introduction to the theology of Jürgen Moltmann. The narrative style of political theology is not limited to the German context, of course. The narrative style however, does portray the differences of contexts of political theology that gave rise to this theology – that is the whole point: context, narrative and political theology go hand in hand. For two excellent comprehensive readers on the subject of political theology, see *Political Theologies* (De Vries & Sullivan 2006) and *The Eerdmans Reader to Contemporary Political Theology* (Cavanaugh, Bailey & Hovey 2012).

31. The background of the shift from ‘modern scholarly writing’ to ‘postmodern scholarly writing’, has been well documented. This shift entailed the use of ‘I’, and ‘we’, two personal pronouns which were absent in the process and product of writing. The reason for this was the Enlightenment concern about sources, methods and definitions and a ‘modern pursuit of formal scientific truth’ (Adams 1995:3). Postmodern scholarly writing is quite suited as method for a reflection on what ‘Ecodomy’ could mean (cf. Van Aarde 2015:1 of 8). For a detailed account of this shift, see Adams (1995) and Schutte (2005).

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taking place, or rather, the setting which had its ‘say’ when doing scholarly work. In this chapter I will start off by describing my own ‘setting’ or situatedness which will set the scene for my reflection on, in Ackermann’s words, ‘the rules and the game’. The ‘rules and the game’ pertain to two aspects, which I take to be interrelated: the choice and content of a faculty research theme and the very space wherein this theme is reflected upon.

The title of the contribution demands a last introductory note: (un)shackling liaisons, (un)masking games, (un)hindered dialogue. It is purposefully laden with double meanings and the preposition between brackets denotes the simultaneous ‘active’ aspects and conditions, and an attempt to deconstruct the aspects and conditions. ‘Play’ and ‘games’ are also simultaneously active and deconstructed. The ‘arena’, as a space of ‘play’ and ‘games,’ is depicted as a function of power. Theologically, ‘life in its fullness’ entails reconciling diversity: reconciliation without dissolving diversity (Van Aarde 2015; cf. Van Wyk 2014). This is by no means easy. Some would say it is unattainable. Research themes such as ‘life in its fullness’ and ‘reconciling diversity’ amidst major transitions and discussions aimed at the implementation of necessary transformation at Institutes of Higher Learning in South Africa is a challenging and complex endeavour. Therefore, the third concept in the title ‘(un)hindered dialogue’. In my opinion, transformation can only start once the ethical condition of an openness towards unhindered dialogue, is active. The aspects that ‘hinder’ that dialogue then, also need to be exposed.

## ■ The arena: The panopticon and the institutional ‘Hunger Games’ of university academia

### ■ The scene of the play

The Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria announced its Faculty Research Theme (FRT) entitled *Ecodomy – life in its fullness* in the second half of the year 2014. It was formally set out in the Faculty Plan and the part of the Faculty Plan pertaining to the FRT was published on the Faculty’s website under ‘Research’ and ‘Research Focus’ (University of Pretoria 2016). The aim of this was (is) to provide an umbrella under which aspects of the Faculty’s research would be clustered. The intention of the theme is to ‘address issues of ethical thinking and ethical decision-making on various societal issues and spheres of life, while taking religious worldviews, values and norms into consideration’ (cf. University of Pretoria, Faculty of Theology 2014:58). ‘Life in its fullness’ with regard to the well-being of the ‘household’ (the keyword of the research theme being *oikodome* [household]), the economy, ecology, theology and religion is emphasised. Adjacent to this, the origins of the FRT are also stated: It was the result of a benchmarking initiative to determine the Faculty’s unique selling proposition in terms of the branding of the Faculty (University of Pretoria 2016) and

that the 'FRT is aligned with the national and 2025 UP strategies and policies' (cf. University of Pretoria, Faculty of Theology 2014:58), as well as intended to 'support and interact with other FRTs and Institutional Research Themes (IRTs) at UP' (Faculty of Theology 2014:58).

I have been employed at the Faculty of Theology in the Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics since 2010 in various capacities. During this time, I have witnessed that the marketplace of theology became increasingly competitive and demanding. This also underlies the establishment of a FRT and IRT. The experience has been that of an ever-growing demand for increased citations, publications and other research outputs. On an institutional level, there is the demand these days that postgraduate studies be completed in record time. Postgraduate students are 'motivated' by means of ever-increasing registration fees. In such an environment, there is no time to really engage with the research one is doing, to collaborate and share knowledge to the benefit of one's peers in academia and the context in and for which one is conceptualising and practicing theology. Rather than focus on the desire to learn about and contribute to one's field of speciality, the focus is solely on outcomes. All of this is aimed at greater international recognition. In chasing these goals, local academic environments have become detached from the existential realities and challenges of historically disadvantaged communities, where people are desperately trying to obtain access to higher education. The past few months have seen a sudden and sometimes violent stimulus towards transformation (cf. Eye Witness News [EWN] 2016; SABC News 2016). In the midst of trying to be internationally recognised and locally relevant, research themes spring up and discussions take place.

These remarks are comments about the environment in which academic scholarship is conducted, the choice of research themes and the manner in which institutional demands and pressures influence, hamper, endanger or directly contradict the envisaged outcomes of the research. I am asking a critical question (and a political-theological one) about the ability of such an environment – governed by institutional structures, the 'marketplace' with its demands for more outcomes, more 'visibility', 'more recognition' – to make an *authentic* contribution to the realities of its context. How can a theology 'with its face [turned] toward the world', aimed at 'life in its fullness' for all of creation, be authentic if the environment it originates from, is one of hierarchy and competition? Is a theology of 'life in its fullness' and 'reconciling diversity' internalised or is it a strategy of the academic game?

## The arena and the 'Hunger Games': A panopticon

To illustrate the mechanics of the space I have just described, I will use images and metaphors borrowed from the *Hunger Games* trilogy by Susan Collins (2008, 2009, 2010) because they depict the mechanics of a panopticon perfectly (Kushkaki 2013).

A panopticon is a structure of unseen surveillance which conveys omnipresent and omniscient power and enforces this power by convincing the objects of this structure to mutually enforce this surveillance because they experience the effects of it. This notion is based on a design by Jeremy Bentham in 1791 for an actual panopticon – a prison. In this prison, a centrally located guard in a central watchtower in a circular building observes the prisoners simultaneously. The prisoners know (or are almost certain) that they are being watched, but they cannot see who is watching them – the control from the ‘institutional heart’ of the space is invisible. This ‘inequity in gaze’ (Wezner 2012:149) creates the sentiment that the prisoners are being watched all the time, causing them to modify their behaviour accordingly and to internalise the surveillance and to start policing each other in the same way that they experience themselves to be surveilled (Bentham 1995:29–95; cf. Wezner 2012:149; Van Aarde 2012:4 of 11).

The story centres on the Capitol of the nation Panem which rules the 12 (13) other districts of the nation (cf. Collins 2008, 2009). In these districts living conditions are not liveable, the people pay heavy taxes and each district produces something different for the Capitol: coal, weapons, food, timber, technology, fabric et cetera. The panopticon structured prison is mirrored in the Collins’ trilogy. The Capitol is surrounded by mountains, shielding it from any other city. The position and the infrastructure in the Capitol elevates it over the districts that is controlled by it and mirrors the central, elevated position of the prison warden, from where the warden is able to survey, unseen, all the inhabitants – in all the districts. The districts are isolated from one another and are therefore unable to share information or compare their experiences or join in a rebellion. Isolated, they adhere to the invisible power. The people in the districts are reminded of the constant surveillance. The promise of punishment in case of disobedience is a constant reminder to the inhabitants of the districts and is represented by the ‘peacekeepers’ – police or army-like people who are allowed to use extreme force to subdue the population.

The main way in which the people in the districts are controlled, however, are the annual Hunger Games. For this purpose, one male and one female must be ‘reaped’ from each district, to enter the Hunger Games and fight to the death in an arena of the Capitol’s making. In the arena, they are faced with gruesome creatures, physiological attacks brought on by the Game Makers and each other. They must play this game until only one remains. The Hunger Games are portrayed by the president of the nation as a gift – a gift of the generosity of the Capitol for not killing every single man, woman and child in the Uprising that took place years earlier. There are frequent theatrical reminders of the powerlessness of the districts (Collins 2008:16–34; cf. Wezner 2012:150). Each year every district is shown a short historical film depicting the ‘chaos’ before the ‘order’ that was instituted by the Capitol. The Games are then sold as a sort of commemorative event. By forcing the districts to participate in the reaping, the president and the Capitol are also making sure that each district ‘wars’ with another, enforcing the

Capitol's oppressing paradigm on each other, because the competition in the arena is fierce and nobody is spared. 'Eternal glory' and a comfortable lifestyle await the victor. After the games, the winner settles down in his or her home district in one of the houses in the Victor's Village, a luxury housing section. Although these houses are in each district, there is an enormous difference between the lifestyle of the victors and the rest of the district. They become celebrities and mentors for future Games – participants in their district. They are showcased every year before the annual 'Hunger Games' and receive large amounts of money from the Capitol for the rest of their lives. In this way, the Capitol ensures that citizens are in a constant, fierce competition with one another, and the president and the Capitol ensure compliance, even satisfaction and gratitude towards the system and the status quo (Collins 2009; cf. Mortimore-Smith 2012:159–166; Pavlink 2012:30–38).

After being extracted from the arena of the 75th Hunger Games (which is named the Quarter Quell, a Hunger Games that takes place every 25 years), Katniss Everdeen, the main character, visits the ruins of her home district: District 12 (Collins 2010:1–15). The devastation she encounters is the result of her escape and her rebellion against the Capitol. She finds a white rose, one of the president's creations, in her old house, in the Victor's Village – untouched and in perfect condition. The implied message for Katniss is that of an omnipresent, albeit invisible, surveillance and control: 'perhaps I am watching you now' (Collins 2010:15). This rose and its message 'illustrates [sic] the disciplinary network as well as Katniss' interpretation of the network's control through surveillance and spectacle' (Wezner 2012:148). Her internal struggle throughout the series is her question about what to do about the situation – and how to play the game.

When the Capitol's power is eventually broken, a vote is cast by a council made up of leaders and other prominent figures and survivors of the 12 districts. The object of the vote is to decide whether to send the children of the Capitol's citizens into the arena for the commemorative final Hunger Games. District 13, the seat of the new regime, has a panopticon structure too – a survival mechanism that was initiated after it made a pact with the Capitol. The mechanics of the pact involved District 13 threatening the Capitol with nuclear weapons. The Capitol then agreed to relinquish control over said district and remove any trace of its existence so that the rest of Panem would be unaware of it. District 13 would then be left in peace to govern itself. However, another panopticon ensued and this one is more deadly and effective than the Capitol's panopticon, due to the move underground and the strict military-style codes of conduct (Wezner 2012:151). The votes are cast and the council decides to organise a 'final Hunger Games'. The panopticon keeps on functioning. The surveillance stays in tact – those who are surveilled keep on surveilling each other.

I am of the opinion that the content and contribution of research themes like 'reconciling diversity' and 'Ecodomy – life in its fullness' can be possible – but only if the

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‘arena’, the ‘game’ and ‘playing it’ are deconstructed to represent something other than fierce competition and isolation. This deconstruction has three aspects:

- Firstly, it entails the recognition and acknowledgement of the panopticon. This starts by describing it, as I have done in the previous section.
- Secondly, it entails an epistemology of vigilance and the hermeneutics of suspicion. This will be explored from the paradigm of political theology with specific references to insights from feminist theologians.
- Thirdly, it entails an ethic of dialogue. This will be explored by investigating, (1) the ambiguity of games and (2) the deconstruction of ‘play’ from a hermeneutic-theological perspective with special reference to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s dialogical-play with the Other.

## ■ An epistemology of vigilance

I have found the insights of feminist theologians with regard to the practice of a political theology as a critical theology, particularly helpful due to their own theological reflections and criticism towards a theology of life that does not take all the participants in that life’s experiences and perspectives into account (Schüssler Fiorenza 2007; 2013; cf. Van Wyk 2015:3 of 8):

The feminist critique of theology and tradition ... has pointed out that all interpretations ... depend on the presuppositions, intellectual concepts, politics, or prejudices of the interpreter and historian. Feminist scholars ... point out that for all too long the Christian tradition was recorded and studied by theologians who consciously or unconsciously understood them from a patriarchal perspective of male dominance. Since this androcentric cultural perspective has determined all writing of theology and of history, their endeavour is correctly called his-story. If women, therefore, want to get in touch with their own roots and tradition, they have to rewrite the Christian tradition and theology in such a way that it becomes not only his-story but as well her-story recorded and analysed from a feminist point of view. (Schüssler Fiorenza 1986:611)

The choice to utilise the insights of feminist theologians in this section in particular, is based on the correlation I have drawn between political theology, narrative and context, which includes the context in which I contextualise and practice theology. In 2017, the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria will be celebrating its centenary. One hundred years of theology. One hundred years of scholars and academics making contributions, doing research, contextualising, theologising. In 100 years, the Faculty has had only four female academic scholars, in permanent and temporary positions, who were appointed starting in the year 2000.<sup>32</sup> The African

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32. The Faculty of Theology’s church partners are part of the appointment process of academic scholars at the Faculty.



feminist theologian Musa Dube (2000:35), together with Ackermann (2011:4–5) remind us of the gross under-representation that still remains when it comes to women’s participation in discussions that effect policy and paradigm shifts in the church (and church polity) and theology in Africa and South Africa, and the rest of the world (cf. Van Wyk 2015:7 of 8).

A theology of ‘justice, peace and the integrity of creation’ (WCC 1983) should be the driving force behind research themes like ‘reconciling diversity’ and ‘life in its fullness’. No research topic is chosen in isolation or is interest-free. The task of political theology as a critical theology is to practice an ‘epistemological vigilance’ (Isasi-Díaz [1996] 2012:432). Political theology entails a continuous critique of ideology – even in the face of ‘new’ theological paradigms aimed at progress in terms of emancipatory action (Schüssler Fiorenza et al. 2013; cf. Van Wyk 2015:6 of 8).

I encountered ‘epistemological vigilance’ as a concept in the work of the South-American liberation theologian, Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz ([1996] 2012), who reflects on the task of theology in her specific context as a Latina woman, as she explains her theological endeavour in her contribution titled, ‘Mujerista Theology: A challenge to traditional theology’ (Isasi-Díaz [1996] 2012:418–437). This epistemological vigilance firstly refers to a critical consciousness of our own subjectivity, as well as being critically aware of the limits of our capacity to know reality and our tendency to distort this capacity (cf. Isasi-Díaz [1996] 2012; Maduro 1982:27–29). Theologians and other academic scholars should work hard at being aware of and revealing ideological biases. Epistemological vigilance secondly refers to the constant necessity of evaluating how the results of our theology, our research and the ‘way in which we conduct our research’ (Isasi-Díaz 1996[2012]:432) contributes to the theological enterprise we envisaged.

This means we should constantly evaluate the authenticity of the contribution we hope to make, given the factors or interests that form or determine the choice of research themes. Being part of an institutional panopticon means a constant vigilance as to whether our genuine hopes for the contributions of our research are not obscured by our situatedness and the powers that keep that setting in play. ‘We need to apply the hermeneutics of suspicion to our constructive proposals, to our narratives, to our whole theological enterprise’ (Isasi-Díaz [1996] 2012:432).

Thirdly, epistemological vigilance refers to the way in which we maintain community and our ability and willingness to grapple with contradictions and differences. Hard work is necessary to avoid losing the community, ‘at not giving into the destructive competition, or worse ... ignoring each other’ (Isasi-Díaz [1996] 2012:433).

A ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ as ‘a willingness to suspect and a willingness to listen’ (Ricoeur 1970:26) is a cardinal aspect of epistemological vigilance. Paul Ricoeur’s

notion of a hermeneutics of suspicion (cf. Itao 2012:10–17) points to a critical reading of texts including ‘human beings as texts’ and symbols and includes political or theological suspicion (Van Aarde & Dreyer 2010:2 of 10; cf. Thiselton [2001] 2006:607). In this regard, there is a close connection with the hermeneutics of suspicion and critical theory<sup>33</sup> – indeed the hermeneutics provide access to critical theory (Kaplan 2003:7).<sup>34</sup> Critical theory is a necessary foundational aspect for doing ‘theology of others’ (Ackermann 2003) and one could say also for a research theme on ‘Ecodomy life in its fullness’:

Critical theory ... is any theory that renders explicit how cognitive reflection can throw light on systemic distortions, whether individual or social, and through that illumination allow some emancipatory action. (Tracy 1987:80)

In her reflection on the theology of Dirkie (D.J.) Smit, Denise Ackermann states how critical theory was a useful tool for feminist (political) theology as a critical theology (Ackermann 2003:4). It is a useful tool because it examines issues of economy, history, power and exploitation and interrogates them (Ackermann 2003:15). Schüssler Fiorenza (1986) also alluded to this in her earlier work:

Critical theory ... provides a key for a hermeneutic understanding which is not just directed toward an actualizing continuation and a perceptive understanding of history but toward a criticism of history and tradition to the extent that it participates in the repression and domination which are experienced as alienation. Analogously (in order to liberate Christian theologies, symbols, and institutions), critical theology uncovers and criticizes Christian traditions and theologies which stimulated and perpetuated violence, alienation, and oppression. Critical theology thus has as its methodological presupposition the Christian community’s constant need for renewal. (p. 612)

A critical ‘reading’ divulges the agendas of those who take part in the communicative events (cf. Gadamer [1960] 1994:370). An authentic ‘theology for others’, or an authentic theology about ‘Ecodomy – life in its fullness’ and ‘reconciling diversity’, from the foundation of critical theory and critical theology, is only possible if there is equal participation – this pertains especially to the ‘rules’ and the ‘games’ of academia in general and theological academics in particular. The challenge of ‘(un)shackling liaisons, (un)masking games and (un)hindered dialogue’ with regard to the authenticity

33. ‘Critical theory’ originated from the Frankfurt School, specifically the Institute for social research which was affiliated to Frankfurt University (1920). The theory’s intention was an alternative method to traditional hermeneutic approaches. It started with the work of Max Horkheimer and Theo Adorno and it sought to critique one-sided doctrines. It critiqued the driving forces of modernism like power, economy and history (cf. Tracy 1987).

34. David Kaplan (2003) emphasises the link between Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics and critical theory in his work.

of research themes, is to reconcile diversity in terms of different perspectives and experiences.

## ■ The ambiguity of games: Life, fun and violence

In a recent article, unification-philosopher Keisuka Noda, writes about the paradoxes, the meaning, the challenges and the responses of life. From his specific philosophical paradigm, he argues that the world and life is to be understood as a process of challenges and responses – as a game (Noda 2013). A game has three characteristics:

- It consists of rules or determinants and an undetermined element of chance and because of this undetermined element, the game is fun.
- It provides the opportunity for the development of skills necessary to play the game.
- It is self-sufficient: the goal is not external to the activity (the object exists in the activity itself) – which to him, *can be* fun. (p. 118)

He associates play with creativity. Creativity is the ‘capacity to play with reality’ and deals with challenges (Noda 2013:120). It is the capability to ‘change one’s perspective to interpret a challenge and change one’s stance and attitude towards challenge’ (Noda 2013:120). It is the ability to re-contextualise a challenge. It is the ability to cope with a challenge. If one ‘has room to play with reality’, new ways to approach challenges are discovered.

In the Christian tradition, there has been a double tradition of denunciation and appreciation of games (Neville 2004:120). In the first age of the church, games in the Roman Empire were ‘degrading spectacles’ (Neville 2004:120). The fictional world created by Suzanne Collins and the Hunger Games are modelled on that type of ‘play and game’ (cf. Collins 2010). The name of the power-yielding nation that instated the Games, ‘Panem’ refers to the slogan *Panem et circensus*, that is ‘Bread and Circuses’ (Collins 2010:223). This slogan was coined by the Roman satirist Juvenal in reference to the way in which the ruling class pacified the commoners by diverting them from contemplating their subjugation. In ancient Rome, the ‘bread’ was the distribution of grain and the ‘circuses’ were the public games.

Because Christians were martyred during these degrading spectacles of violence and bestial passion, these circuses and those games were not held in high regard and contrasted sharply with the ‘noble’ Olympic ideal of civic pride and rivalry. In fact, the Greco-Roman philosopher Epictetus (cf. Long 2001) described the Olympic Games as one of the main analogies of life (the other being a banquet). In reality nations and people are (in the context of the madness of society) in constant war with each other. To idealise a world without conflict, that is to strive for an ideal utopia, is unrealistic. The Games, however, replicate the reality of agonistic competition, without killing each other. Instead, through

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the Games recognition was given to both the winners and the losers, because both were allowed to participate.

Due to the violent spectacles of the games in which primarily Christians were murdered and with the inception of Christianity as the religion of the state, Constantine prohibited gladiatorial contests. That just meant that a lot of the violence went underground and also, that other types of games, like chariot races, could flourish. The crowds' behaviour in Constantinople at the start of the 5th century at these races could be compared to the football hooliganism at soccer (football) matches in modern times. Chrysostom denounced these 'games' (or 'races').

Violence as an attribute of 'games' within the Christian tradition however, did not come to an end. They were part of Christian education to make a boy a man, by playing games of shooting, slinging and throwing javelins – as is illustrated in a 15th century educational book for boys on how to train for battle and the use of games in the training (Neville 2004:121). The connection between games, violence and power did not end in the 15th century. The future archbishop of York, Cyril Garbett, was editing a practical theological textbook as a guide for work in a Christian community (congregation or parish) in 1915. He was of the opinion that 'the best test of a man's character is the way he plays his games' – this was linked to the worth of a man's religion and for boys it meant 'playing a clean game' (Garbett 1915:7). From this textbook and his notes, it also seems as if playing hard games were only the activity for men, because girls should play without any 'coarseness' (Garbett 1915:8).

Through the centuries however, some acceptance emerged that the human play instinct would always find (or seek) expression (Neville 2004:121).

## ■ The deconstruction of play

### ■ Hermeneutics and ethics of dialogue with the Other

The universal theme in the hermeneutics of Gadamer is 'play' (*Spiel*) – specifically 'understanding as play'<sup>35</sup> (Gadamer [1960] 1994). He regarded *understanding* as the 'basic

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35. Vilhauer argues that Gadamer's understanding of play is a 'hermeneutical key' to understanding his 'fusion of horizons', a concept that has been criticised by (for example) Betti (1980), Caputo (1987), Habermas (1990) and Hirsch (1967). With his aesthetics, Gadamer made an effort to grasp destructive and productive modes of engagement for the purposes of improving practice. Gadamer's hermeneutics of play can be applied beyond aesthetics (art) to 'general understanding' (Vilhauer 2010:xii).

posture of life' (Mootz & Taylor 2011:1) and the primary way in which we participate in the world and belong to the world. Understanding is *interpretive* and informed by our perspective. Our situated perspective is shaped by the way we belong to the world. *Belonging* to the world has two consequences: Firstly, as individuals we are participants in a larger community which is the basis of our identity, but secondly, these larger influences of the community (language, history, culture) have a sort of agency of their own – greater than the action of the individual. Gadamer expressed *belonging* as the function of *play*.

In 'play', the 'play' (music or games or language) has primacy over the players. Play entails being drawn in, participating, playing along. In Gadamer's terms, one must 'play along' (Grondin 2001:44). Players enter into the 'spirit of the game' and play by its rules. The play has an agency of its own. In this 'hermeneutic belonging' with its emphasis on participation in community, individuals relate to one another on the basis of 'the game' – the conversation – in which they participate. It is through dialogue and conversation the individual constructs the world we live in and the individual 'I' moves to 'we' through participation in the community. This 'play' is a dynamic process in which 'difference' (or diversity) is the essential component – not the enemy (cf. Vilhauer 2010).

The dialogue occurs by the mode of 'play'. Play only fulfils its purpose if the player loses himself in play (Gadamer 2004:103). In recognition of the potential value the conversation (the game) has for us to accomplish something greater than we would have on our own, we give ourselves over to playing the game ('belonging to conversation and/or dialogue'). In this game, 'charity' and 'collaboration' are joined: charity in terms of 'taking' (listening to) what the other person is saying and collaboration in terms of expressing views (subject matter) in a way that could be 'taken' by the listener. The players are engaged in the collaborative attempt to arrive at an understanding of the subject matter. The dialogue is guided by the subject matter of the dialogue and what it takes to make the subject matter clear to the players. For Gadamer (2004; cf. Kögler 1996; Vilhauer 2010:xvii–xi) dialogue is essentially not about doing something *to* or *for* someone, but *with* someone – only on condition of the other person's mutual contribution – the agency of play.

The hermeneutic concept of play has an ethical dimension which can be used as a guide to practice in terms of opening up dialogue where dialogue has ceased and the subjects have become closed to one another (Vilhauer 2010:xi). This is because 'play' involves the subjects, much as the viewer of a painting, the listener of an opera or the reader of a novel find themselves drawn into it (Gadamer [1960]1994:101–110). But 'play' is not purely playful. In every 'play' there is a 'sacred seriousness' (Gadamer [1960] 1994:107). This is not only when applied to art, but also to any other type of

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play – athletic games, social games. ‘When we are playfully concerned with something, we are also seriously there ... only someone who does not play along is not serious about the play’ (Grondin 2001:44). Because the true experience of play is *being drawn into*, the opposite of play is not ‘seriousness’, but rather *not taking part*: ‘the mode of being of play does not permit the player to relate to the play as an object’ (Gadamer [1960]1994:108). Understanding does not take place by observing an object and therefore objectifying it. Understanding and being with others are events of participation. But we only participate to the extent that we allow ourselves to be drawn in, to be ‘moved by the magic’ of the event (Grondin 2001:45).

Gadamer (1996:132) uses the concept ‘festival’ to express ‘playing along’. Participation is a specific element of the essence of festival: whoever joins in is included – or even more: immersed. Those who participate in the festival is open to communication (Gadamer 1996:133). But communicating is more than (or not necessarily) words being exchanged, it is ‘rather a being with one another, involvement in others. Being and coming together is more important than agreeing about this or that’ (Gadamer 1996:133).

The biggest obstacle to genuine *understanding* is a mutual openness of the dialogue partners toward each other. This is the ethical conditions for understanding and dialogue. The biggest challenge is to cultivate a mutual willingness in those who have become closed:

When faced with a refusal to engage in genuine dialogue, individuals tend to be tempted to either disengage, retreat, and withdraw from any type of encounter with the Other, or to try to overpower the Other with force. Gadamer encouraged a recognition that our continued to-and-fro engaged play with the Other is crucial for our way of living and flourishing as human beings. Disengagement, the complete restriction of the Other’s possibility for participating in play, the elimination of the Other – or any ‘game-stopping’ moves are the worst kind of violence against our human form of life. (Vilhauer 2010:xvii)

Dialogue with the Other is not:

[A]bout understanding the Other’s articulation; about submitting to the authority of the Other; taking on the Other’s point of view in a way that means giving up your own power of reflection; giving yourself up to the Other; the projection of your own meaning or interpretation onto the Other. (Vilhauer 2010:xvi)

Gadamer ([1960] 1994:497–499) emphasised the ethical responsibility to engage in an on-going play ... with the Other. The foundation of the Other’s identity and personhood is the recognition of the true uniqueness of the Other. It is when we find those who are unwilling to engage in dialogue that we must find new ways of interacting, engaging and playing with them. ‘The game must go on’ (Vilhauer 2010:xviii). We have an ethical responsibility to keep on ‘playing’ ... but by a different set of rules.

## ■ It is a game – play on!

### ■ Conclusion: A space of reconciling diversity constitutes life in its fullness

In this chapter, I have attempted to argue that a ‘Hunger Games’-style panopticon that determines research prerogatives can endanger, obscure and hamper the authentic contribution of an institutional or faculty research theme aimed at making an impact in society and contributing to the wellness of that society – due to the power and other (economic) motives involved in making the choice of a specific research theme in the first place. The nature of the institutional game is the single greatest reason that research themes such as reconciling diversity and the practice of ‘Ecodomy – life in its fullness’, may not be internalised in the very society in which the research aims to make a difference. The game – in the panopticon manner as a ‘hunger game’ in which the competition is fierce and one player surveils the other because that secures survival – renders the authenticity of the notions of reconciling diversity and ‘life in its fullness’ null and void because it contradicts the notions of inclusivity, equality, openness, justice and participation.

The panoptical power might throw you into the game, but removing yourself from it is not the antidote to the power that governs it. On the contrary, if you are suspicious about the powers that have made you a participant, you can deconstruct the game, make your own building blocks, arrange the building blocks and develop new rules for your participation in it. ‘Play’ becomes something else. It is not a forced and oppressing activity, played in isolation. ‘Play’ becomes the very vehicle of openness towards a dialogue partner and a willingness to listen and learn from dialogue partners (other players) in conversation. Gadamer ([1960] 1994:101–110) explored ‘dialogue-play’ as a hermeneutical lens to interpretation, understanding, learning and practicing (ethics) (cf. Vilhauer 2010:xi; 49–72; 139–149). ‘Play’ features as a key concept in the dynamic and dialogical interpretative process, in which the participants come to grasp a common subject matter together (Vilhauer 2010). Gadamer explored types of interaction that reopen dialogue between those that have become closed to one another to reconceive the process of understanding. ‘Understanding as dialogue’ (cf. Vilhauer 2010:1) should be the foundation of the correlation between research themes within an institution. Understanding as dialogue should be the driving force behind the choice of research themes. ‘The ethics of play’ as an openness towards dialogue can contribute to the authenticity of the nature, content and output of research themes aimed at reconciling diversity and ‘life in its fullness’.

Dialogue (play), or conversation (game), or indeed reconciling diversity of binary oppositions is only possible when power is not part of the ‘play’. Moltmann ([2006] 2008) articulates this when he describes his understanding of truth:

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Humanly speaking, truth is to be found in unhindered dialogue – a dialogue which, if it is not already domination free, is at least truth-seeking. In this dialogue, community and freedom are joined: community in mutual respect and reciprocal participation, and freedom in the right to have one's own opinion and to give one's own assent. (p. 287)

We are situated at 'spaces of theology' with a specific dynamic: A lot of what we keep ourselves busy with is dictated by the interests of the marketplace in a purely financial sense; the alignment of faculty research themes with institutional research themes, with international relevant themes, to be an internationally acclaimed university, to attract more students and move higher on the world ranking list. In that regard it is more closely related to the gladiatorial games of old. But just as much as what we do is dictated by the concern of the church to bear witness of the good news of the gospel, so we also have a duty to practice public theology. In this regard, it might more closely resemble the nature of the Olympic Games of old. Based on both these aspects, the rules of the game are always changing and if we know that, then we know we are playing a game. The questions are, however, the type of game and the manner of play.

Conversations about the nature and content of 'public' theology from the perspective of our respective institutional situatedness (*Sitz im Leben*) are only possible with the deconstruction of the institutional power as a game, together with the awareness of both the ambivalent and dialectical nature of 'play' – with its possibilities and dangers. 'Play' and 'games' can be associated with leisure and fun. They can also be associated with strategy, acting, and 'pressures of conformity within a consumerist society' (Neville 2004:120).

For us it could mean an insistence on playfulness *and* a refusal to play along. From this perspective, a research theme about 'life in its fullness' might just be possible.

## ■ Summary: Chapter 9

This contribution is a political-theological and hermeneutical reflection on the origin, nature, intention and contribution of a research theme identified within the dynamics of an institutional space, by taking a critical look at the 'rules' and the 'game' of university academia. Specific reference is made to institutional and faculty research themes, namely 'reconciling diversity' and 'Ecodomy – life in its fullness'. The institutional academic space is compared to a Hunger Games-style panopticon, with its 'rules' and 'play'. It is argued that these research themes can only make an authentic contribution if the 'play' and 'game' of the space in which these themes originate, are deconstructed. If this deconstruction can take place, there might be an authentic chance for unhindered dialogue towards the transformation of the academic space and the greater community it serves.



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## Chapter 10

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