



Play and the Human Condition

Henricks, Thomas S.
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Book Review

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Reviewed by: Jonathan Roach, *Stratham Community Church, United Church of Christ*

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Thomas Henricks' *Play and the Human Condition* provides a valuable guide to the academic study of human play. Henricks has been teaching at Elon University since 1977 as a sociologist. He has been studying human play since his PhD dissertation, which explored the relationship between sports and social stratification, and he has over thirty years of academic publications in play studies. In this volume, Henricks attempts to advance his thesis that "play is fundamentally a sense-making activity and that the broader goal of this process is to construct the subjectively inhabited sphere of operations and understandings called the self" (209).

Henricks organizes this book into an introduction and nine chapters. He begins the introduction with three questions that guide his work: "How do we discover who we are? How do we determine the character of the world in which we live? And how do we decide what we can do in a world so configured?" (1). The introduction provides a rationale for studying play as well as an overview of the book.

The first three chapters explore general models of play. In Chapter I, Henricks explores the difficulties around establishing a definition for play as he reviews several modern definitions. He presents six ways of understanding play: as action, as disposition, as experience, as context, as interaction, and as activity while he connects each model to their major theorists. The next chapter presents how play is different from other patterns of human behaviors including ritual, work, and *communitas*. The final chapter in this section develops a theory of play that centers upon self-realization. Henricks notes that "play best teaches people how to conceive self-directed lines of action and to mobilize varieties of resources to realize these

ambitions” (89).

In the middle of the book, Henricks devotes five chapters to various aspects of play including psychology, the human body, physical environment, social life, and culture. After focusing on the mind in his chapter on the psychology of play, Henricks turns to the human body and play in Chapter Five. While examining animal play, he concludes “play integrates symbolic and physically based meaning systems. . . play is a form of consultation between matters manifest and latent, known and unknown. In consequences, players extend and secure their understanding of themselves” (137). Next, he engages the physical environment and social aspects of play, because as he explains, “play is complicated by the presence of more than one player” (161). Chapter Eight builds upon the foundation of the earlier chapters to explore culture and play. This is an important chapter that engages the work of Geertz, Deirida, and Gadamer to list a few.

Henricks’ final chapter weaves the various themes of the earlier chapters together to support his thesis. He examines the relationship between play and freedom. He concludes that “if play has a legacy, it is its continuing challenge to people of every age to express themselves openly and considerately in the widest human contexts” (227).

Play and the Human Condition is a well-developed and scholarly text. Henricks engages a wide range of disciplines and carefully builds his arguments. The book offers a detailed road map to professional play literature that will be very useful to any scholar researching in this field. Except for a few terms, like *communitas*, this volume is accessible for the non-specialist. Theologians and graduate students should have no problem understanding and engaging this text in fruitful dialogue.

This volume would be a good addition to major theological libraries. It is especially important for scholars and programs that explore ritual studies and hermeneutics. Chapter Four, on play as therapy, gives a foundation for this important approach to clergy who want to explore this avenue of pastoral care and counseling.

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