
Christianity: A Religion of Joy

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Once before I have written a theology of joy. This was in 1971 on the climax of the Vietnam War and the worldwide protest-movement against it. This was in the midst of student rebellions and the liberation movements in the third world. The German title was *Die ersten Freigelassenen der Schöpfung. Versuche über die Freude an der Freiheit und das Wohlgefallen am Spiel* (“The first liberated men in creation: experiments on the joy of freedom and the pleasure of play”)—the English title was *Theology and Joy*.¹

My question at that time was this: How can we laugh and rejoice, when there are so many tears to be wiped away and when new tears are being added every day? “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a

1. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy* (London: SCM, 1973); see also *Theology of Play* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

foreign land?” complains Psalm 137, as so many old spirituals echo.² How can one rejoice when innocent people are killed in Vietnam? How can one laugh and play when children are starving in Africa? How can we dance when in the prisons of Latin American military dictatorships human beings are tortured and “disappear”? Don’t we live in *one* world? Do we have a right to joy if we do not cry out for those who suffer?

At that time the play *Anatevka*, or *Fiddler on the Roof*, made the circuit of our stages.³ It tells of Tevye, the dairyman, and his Jewish congregation in the Ukrainian village of Anatevka. The czar is oppressing them with excessive taxation. Their sons have to serve in a strange army and fight in unwanted wars. The Cossacks initiate pogroms against them whenever it strikes their fancy to go after the Jews. Still, this small congregation of the persecuted and pursued sings the Lord’s song in an alien land. Are they doing this merely to forget their ugly predicament? Are they only trying to comfort themselves by covering their sadness with happy sounds? Or is there really such a thing as freedom in the midst of slavery, joy in the midst of suffering, and praise of God in the groaning of his creatures?

In this essay on God’s joy and human flourishing I am not asking, “How can I sing the Lord’s song in an alien land?” but, “How can I sing the Lord’s song in his presence—figuratively speaking, in the warmth of God’s shining face?” I am presupposing the contrasts of 1971, because from a global perspective, they are not diminishing, but now I want to explore the positive dimensions of the *great joy* in the *broad place* of God, who is nearer to us than we believe and is enlarging our life more than we think. Joy is the power to live, to love, to have creative initiative. Joy awakens all our senses, energizing mind and body. How do we experience this power in the presence

2. James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury, 1972).

3. Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, 26–28.

of the “living God” (Pss. 42:2, 84:2)? How is our life resonating the immense joy of God?

The Joy of God

In the Old Testament it is God’s turning towards his people and his shining countenance that provokes joy:

You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures for evermore. (Ps. 16:11)

Blessings are proceeding from the shining countenance of God, and a blessed life is life in fullness and festivity. Human beings are not the only creatures who flourish in the presence of God, though, for it is also—and perhaps in the first place—the nature of the earth:

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the Lord; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth. (Ps. 96:11–13)

When God comes to judge the earth, the whole of creation will rejoice. We should have this in mind when we speak of the final judgment. The final judgment is a day of rejoicing, not of terror.⁴

When God comes to human beings there are two turning movements. First in God: God turning from a “hidden face” (*hester panim*) to a “shining face.” This conversion in God from God’s

4. Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise! God's Future for Humanity and the Earth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 127–48.

aversion to human sin to God's affection of grace evokes in human beings a corresponding turning movement:

You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy. (Ps. 30:11)

Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. . . .
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit. (Ps. 51:8, 12)

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (Isa. 35:10)

God himself "will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing" (Zeph. 3:17).

With this composition from the Psalms and the prophets of Israel we see a great and wonderful harmony: the joyous and singing God, the joy of the earth, and the joy of the redeemed people.

The Birth of Religion out of the Feast of Life

According to modern theories of religion, religion is alive in the misfortune of the people: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature" and an "opium" of suffering and desperate people, said Karl Marx.⁵ Religion must be "necessary," because everything in the modern world must be necessary; otherwise it is superfluous and useless. As a common proverb says, "Need leads to prayer." But this view is wrong. In truth, religion is the feast of life, useless but joyful, and prayer is praise for the fortune of being.⁶

5. Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 54.

6. Theo Sundermeier, *Religion—was ist das? Religionswissenschaft im theologischen Kontext* (Frankfurt: O. Lembeck, 2007).

Primitive religions are *family religions*. They accompany life from birth to maturity, from weddings to anniversaries, and, at last, into the beyond. There are also festive celebrations of the natural circles of the earth, solstices, times of the moon, spring and autumn, seedtime and harvesting. These are the so-called *religions of nature*. Family religions and nature religions are the normal and everyday fundamentals of all religions.

What happens in these feasts of life? It is the self-representation of living things and the “demonstrative value of their being.” The biologists Adolf Portmann and Frederik Buytendijk have shown this in the world of animals: “To put it simply, the birds are singing much more than Darwin permits.” In view of the extravagant luxury of specific types, of colorful splendor and hypertelic forms in the world of living things, Buytendijk contends with Portmann that nature’s purpose-free abundance leads to this concept of self-representation.⁷ This demonstrative value of being ascends through the stages of living things and reaches its completion in the human being’s feast of life. Is not the free self-representation of human beings a human echo of God’s pleasure in his creation? The glorification of God lies in any case in the festive demonstration of the human joy of existence. Human beings in their fondness for this finite life and by their affirmation of mortal beauty share in the infinite pleasure of the Creator of this world.

In the feast, life is not produced but demonstrated. In these demonstrations, life experiences are articulated. There can be no experience of life without its adequate expression. Only when we can express our sorrow and joy have we made these *experiences*. It is not necessary but very meaningful and liberating to express the joy of

7. Frederik Jacobus Johannes Buytendijk, *Het Spel van Mensch en Dier als openbaring van levensdriften* (Amsterdam, 1932); Adolf Portmann, *Biologie und Geist* (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), 22–29.

existence in praise, thanksgiving, singing, and dancing and to find the right bodily and sensuous forms. The feast of life gives wings to the soul and new energies to the body. It is renewing life out of the transcendent origin of life.

Christianity: The Religion of Joy

If we really think about it, we arrive at a surprising conclusion: Christianity is a unique religion of joy. Faith is living in the Christian feasts. And yet the universal symbol of Christianity is the cross, a symbol of pain, suffering, and cruel death. How do these things go together? Are joy and pain contradictions, or do they belong together?

Christianity begins with *Christmas*. When Mary becomes pregnant with Jesus, she sings,

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. (Luke 1:46–47)

When her child is born in the stable in Bethlehem, angels visit the poor and freezing shepherds in the field:

Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. (Luke 2:10–11)

According to the Eastern church, this birth of the divine child happened not in a man-made stable but in a cave of the earth: he is also the Savior of the earth! This birth is embraced by God's joy and received by the joy of human beings and the earth. This is why today we still sing cheerful Christmas hymns and carols and give each other gifts as ways to express our joy.

Joy to the world! The Lord is come:
Let earth receive her king.

Whereas Christmas is the central festival of Western Christianity, *Easter* is the central festival of *Eastern Christianity*. The resurrection of Christ from the dead and the appearance of eternal life in him are the inexhaustible grounds for Easter jubilation:

Christ is risen—he is risen indeed!

In a canon of John Damascene for the feast of Easter we read,

Rejoice ye heavens in worthy wise!
Earth too shout for joy!
Exult greatly, O cosmos,
the visible and the invisible both.
Christ was awoken. He the Joy of the aeons.⁸

In the West, too, we sing with Charles Wesley,

Christ the Lord is risen today!
Sons of men and angels say:
Raise your joy and triumph high;
Sing, ye heavens, and earth reply.

Both East and West know that the resurrection of Christ is not just a human event but a cosmic event as well. The Easter rejoicing embraces the whole groaning creation. Easter jubilation is also the joy of the earth as indicated in the Psalms of the Old Testament. Therefore we celebrate Easter in springtime, the European springtime, as a sign for the final spring of the new, eternal creation of all things.

Finally, at Whitsun or Pentecost, joyful hymns extol the experience of God's Spirit in the life of men and women. Pentecost is the central festival of the new *Pentecostal churches*. Whenever there is talk in the New Testament about experiences of the divine Spirit

8. Ernst Benz, *Heiteres Licht der Herrlichkeit: die Glaubenswelt der Ostkirche* (Hamburg: Furche, 1962), 2.

we hear words of joy. For it is the Spirit of life that fills human beings with a new and enduring feeling about life, an experience that opens soul and senses for the nearness of God.

My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. (Ps. 84:2)

These are not only “spiritual joys” but also the joys of senses. We don’t have to differentiate between spiritual and sensual happiness. They belong together. But we must differentiate between the joys of life and destructive addictions, that which the New Testament calls “carnal sins,” that is, sickness unto death.

And what about Good Friday, the central feast day of *Lutheran Christians*? Certainly here thoughts of compassion turn first of all to Christ’s passion, his suffering with us and for us on the cross.

O sacred head, now wounded,
with grief and shame bowed down.

And yet, in another hymn:

We sing the praise of him, who died,
of him, who died upon the cross.

In the same hymn we call the cross of Christ “the balm of life, the cure of woe.” *Ave crux—spes unica*. Behind the cross of Christ the sun of resurrection arises.

It is a remarkable fact that the great Christian festivals are not distributed throughout the year but take place in the first half and are concentrated on the spring. The spring of the new year begins with the winter solstice, comes alive at Easter in the flowers and trees, and reaches its full flowering at Whitsun or Pentecost. This is, in my understanding, a way of showing that with the coming of Christ into this world, his death and resurrection, and the outpouring of the divine Spirit, the spring of eternal life begins for human beings, all

living beings, and the earth. Mortal and earthly life is taken up into the divine, eternal, and heavenly life.

The Joy of the Seeking and Finding God

In the fifteenth chapter of his Gospel, Luke interprets the astonishing—and, by the Pharisees, denounced—attitude of Jesus, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2), with three well-known parables: about the widow’s lost and found coin, about the lost and found sheep, which the shepherd carries on his shoulders home, and about the lost son, whom his father folds in his arms.⁹ Luke’s theological interpretation of the found coin and the found sheep is the following:

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. (Luke 15:7)

This theology is not quite correct, because first, Jesus accepted “sinners and tax collectors” without conditions and did not have table communion with only repenting sinners, and second, the lost sheep could do nothing to contribute to its being found, and the lost coin could not repent. The joy is only on the side of the finder. These are parables of God’s love for the lost and of God’s joy in finding them. Jesus had demonstrated this in accepting sinners without conditions and eating with them. Only the lost son is “repenting,” turning around from the way toward perishing and coming home. Before he can confess his sins, however, his father, seeing from afar, runs toward him and enfolds him in his arms (Luke 15:20). Prevenient grace is the joy of the father:

9. Julius Schniewind, *Die Freude der Buße* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956).

“For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost, and is found!” And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:24)

The activity lies solely in the hands of the seeking and finding and rejoicing God. Repentance means to join in the rejoicing of God. Repentance is not self-afflicted pain or self-punishment; repentance is the joy of God. God seems to take pleasure in finding the lost. It is the lost and forgotten people in whom this joy of God springs up, not the self-satisfied and complacent.

A good witness for this is the famous seventeenth-century French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal. When he died in Paris, a writing was found sewn into his coat, his so-called *Memorial*:

“God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,” not of philosophers and scholars.

Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ. . . .

Thy God shall be my God. . . .

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.

I have cut myself off from him. . . .

My God wilt thou forsake me?

Let me not be cut off from him for ever! . . .

Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ.

I have cut myself off from him, shunned him. . . .

Let me never be cut off from him! . . .

Everlasting joy in return for one day’s effort on earth.¹⁰

Human Joy and Happiness

With this we change from a theology to an anthropology of joy, but we still keep God’s joy in human beings and human joy in the living God before our eyes as the yardstick. If we do that, then joy cannot

10. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées sur la religion et sur quelques autres sujets*, ed. Louis Lafuma (Paris: Editions de Luxembourg, 1951), § 913. *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), 309–10.

be understood as a fleeting emotional state but only as a feature of a flourishing life, a life that is lived well and that goes well, as Miroslav Volf has put it.

Here the distinction between *joy* and *fun* is helpful. Today in the wealthier societies and the rising middle classes, we are living in a “fun society” (*Spaßgesellschaft*). I want to have a good time, say those young people who can afford it, and go to parties, preferring discos that are so noisy one can’t hear oneself speak—but then, it isn’t intended for one to speak and listen there. The sole idea is to be “beside oneself” in the dancing throng. Once one has had one’s fun, one is not satisfied but is still hungry for more of it, pining for more, as if, in Shakespeare’s words, the appetite had grown from what it fed upon. Life is expected to be a party without end. The older rich people have their cocktail parties, where they exchange courtesies and niceties or watch each other suspiciously. They no longer know how to celebrate a feast. They don’t even try. They instead engage entertainers, event managers, and animateurs. They let themselves be entertained because they can’t entertain themselves.

The difference between joy and fun is as great as the distinction between joy and a gamble of chance, or between a meaningful life and a lottery win. Joy is enduring and puts its mark on one’s attitude to living. Fun is short-term and serves amusement. True joy is only possible with one’s whole heart, whole soul, and all one’s energies. The feeling about life that underlies the party-making fun society is, I suspect, more boredom with life than true joy. True joy opens the soul, is a flow of spirits, giving our existence a certain easiness. We may *have* fun, but we *are* in joy. In true joy, the ecstatic nature of human existence comes to expression.¹¹ We are created for joy. We are born for joy.

11. Helmuth Plessner, *Lachen und Weinen* (Bern: Francke, 1961), 93–100: the gestures of joy.

Joy and Human Pain

On the other hand, joy in life and happiness is denigrated when people incline to pain and sorrow rather than to joy and laughter. Do we have a right to happiness when so many people despair because their life is full of pain and sorrow? They think that grief is deeper than joy, that pain weighs more heavily than happiness, and that suffering seems more a matter of course than laughter. Their lives are more of tragedies than celebrations. After two world wars and unspeakable war crimes, Germans especially were more inclined to a tragic feeling for life, believing more in catastrophes than in successes and progress. In that terrible twentieth century, pessimism about the course of the world and a nihilistic view of human nature seemed more realistic than the idealism of the nineteenth century. I can illustrate this from Schiller's "Ode to Joy," which a few years ago was turned into the "Europe Hymn" in its setting in Beethoven's ninth symphony. After the world war terrors and so many state crimes, does Europe deserve this song of joy? Let's take a closer look:

Joy, thou beauteous godly lightning,
Daughter of Elysium,
Fire drunken we are ent'ring
Heavenly, thy holy home!
Thy enchantments bind together,
What did custom stern divide,
Every man becomes a brother,
Where thy gentle wings abide.

In the following verse we read,

Suffer on courageous millions!
Suffer for a better world!
O'er the tent of stars unfurl'd
God rewards you from the Heavens.¹²

The universal harmony is established with the help of the “next world,” such that here on earth the “millions” of poor and oppressed people endure their suffering patiently and do not protest or revolt. Are these the costs of the ideal joy of humankind?

Schiller’s “theodicy of joy” (George Steiner) soon evoked angry reactions on the part of protest atheists: the senseless sufferings of the “millions” cannot be compensated by a heavenly reward in the next world. Unjust suffering was the rock of atheism in the nineteenth century in Germany, and it was Dostoyevsky who took up arms against Schiller’s joy idealism and countered his consolatory views with Ivan Karamazov’s outraged story: While he was playing in the courtyard a little boy happened to injure the lord of the manor’s favorite dog. As a punishment, the owner of the dog has the boy on the next morning torn to pieces by his hunting dogs, in front of his mother’s eyes. Ivan’s comment is as follows:

And what becomes of *harmony*, if there is *hell*? . . . And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price. . . . And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It’s not God that I don’t accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket [to his world].¹³

Accordingly, I prefer to hold on to unrequited suffering and to protest against such injustice. This world, in which there are crimes and sufferings like this, is not a divine world of joy; it is hell. Nor is

12. Friedrich Schiller, “An die Freude/Ode to Joy,” trans. by William F. Wertz, Schiller Institute, http://www.schillerinstitute.org/transl/schiller_poem/ode_to_joy.pdf. Schiller was influenced by the philosophy of Freemasonry just as was Mozart in his *Zauberflöte*.

13. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: The Modern Library, 1929), 301; emphasis mine. On the relationship of Dostoyevsky to Schiller at this point, see George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 329, 331, 334.

there any imaginable compensation for this pain in a world beyond. The face of this world is not peace and joy. It is pain and protest.

But are joy and protest, happiness and pain, laughter and tears true alternatives? I don't believe they are. The secret of life is *love*. In love we go out of ourselves and lay ourselves open to all the experiences of life. In the love of life we become happy and vulnerable at the same time. In love we can be happy and sad. In love we can laugh and weep. In love we can rejoice and must protest at the same time. The more deeply love draws us into life, the more alive and, simultaneously, the more capable of sorrow we become. That is the dialectic of the affirmed and loved life. We can't have the first without the second. We can easily make the counterproof: when we are wounded and resigned and withdraw love from life, we lose interest in living and become apathetic. Then we no longer feel the disappointments, the injustice, and the pains, but we don't really live anymore either. We are spiritually petrified, and our hearts turn to stone. Nothing touches us either, neither good nor evil, and that is the first step on the road to death. It is the death of the soul, which goes ahead of the death of a person.

This means that Schiller's "Ode to Joy" and Dostoyevsky's indignation about the innocent suffering of a child are not in fact antitheses, and we don't have to choose between them. Joy in life's happiness motivates us to revolt against the life that is destroyed and against those who destroy life. And grief over life that is destroyed is nothing other than an ardent longing for life's liberation to happiness and joy. Otherwise we would accept innocent suffering and destroyed life as our fate and destiny. Compassion is the other side of the living joy. We don't accuse God because there is suffering in the world. Rather, we protest in the name of God against suffering and those who cause it.

Finally, we ask which is greater: the joy or the grief, the happiness or the pain, life or death? And my answer is this: existence is greater than nonexistence, life is more than death, hope is above despair, and so joy is greater than pain. Why? The answer is simple: because whereas in pain we want our suffering to disappear, in joy we want the things that make us so happy to endure. That is why “Zarathustra spoke,” according to Friedrich Nietzsche:

Joy—deeper still than misery:
 Pain says: Refrain!
 Yet all joy wants eternity—
 —Wants deep, wants deep eternity.¹⁴

Why then is Christianity such a unique religion of joy, even though at its center stands the suffering of God and the cross of Christ? Because we remember the death of Christ in the light of his resurrection, and we remember his resurrection in the splendor of the divine, eternal life that is embracing our human and mortal life already here and now. This is the logic of “how much more” (Paul Ricoeur): where sin is powerful, God’s grace is much more powerful (Rom. 5:20), for Christ has died, but how much more is Christ risen and has he overcome death (Rom. 8:38–39)! So pain too will be caught up and gathered into joy, despair into hope, and temporal death into the joy of divine life. Pains are passing, and I hear praise everlasting.

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, trans. Adrian Del Caro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 264.