Christianity and Gambling: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT: Religions hold complex relations with games and, in particular, with gambling. The article focuses on Christianity. On the one hand, the history of this religion shows a tendency to condemn games as source of distraction from spiritual rectitude and to stigmatize gambling, above all, as opening to metaphysical randomness and, as a consequence, as challenge to the idea of divine omniscience. On the other hand, Christianity has also sought to reinterpret games, and even gambling, as possible occasion for moral improvement and as useful distraction from the hardship of monastic life. A theological perspective that reaches its peak in Thomas Aquinas, but has its roots in Aristotle's evaluation of playfulness, tends to suggest the need for eutropelia, meant as the citizens’ virtue to appropriately have fun.

Keywords: Games; Gambling; Religions; Christianity; Moralization


1. Introduction: late medieval and early modern Christian attitudes towards games and gambling.¹

The prevailing attitude of Christianity towards games and, particularly, towards gambling is, in general, disparaging. The mendicant orders were generally against any kind of game. Saint Bernardino of Siena² would condemn them with a vehemence that reminds one of present-day fundamentalists (Depaulis 2013: 115-36). In spectacular bonfires, he would burn not only female “vanities” but also games, such as chessboards, checkerboards, and, above all, cards, the new ‘obsession’ of early 15th-century players, for cards were increasingly diffused thanks to innovation in printing techniques. During Lent of 1424, in particular, the Senese preacher pronounced a violent sermon entitled Del peccato del giuoco [“on the sin of gaming”], in which he declared that:

Play-cards are like multicolor copes […]. There are swords to cut you into pieces, clubs to beat you up, coins for avarice, cups for drinkers, and the inebriation, and the gluttony, and the luxury in which games result.³

A famous painting by an anonymous artist, executed between 1465 and 1475 and currently at the Historisches Museum [history museum] of Bamberg, Germany, shows a
companion of Bernardino, Saint John of Capistrano⁴ — who also delivered a sermon De ludo in 1452 — while he presides over the double bonfire of cosmetics and games (Fig. 1).

Another image, a woodcut print by Hans Leonhard Schäufelein,⁵ originally included in the frontispiece of the Vita Johannis Capistrani: Sermones eiusdem, published in Augsburg in 1519, depicts the bonfire of games in an even more accurate manner (Fig. 2).

Iacubus de Marchia (Giacomo della Marca),⁶ another member of the Observant order, in his sermon De ludo, preached in 1460, would rhetorically ask: “Quis inventit ludum?” [who invented game?]; and, quoting John Chrysostom and Thomas Aquinas, he would reply: the devil (1978-82, 1: 190-205). And then he would rant on about games in an extraordinary homiletic invention, in which he would imagine a cathedral of the devil as gaming house (baracterium), where dice would replace relics, play-cards religious icons, the dealer table the altar, and where monastic cells would host as many kinds of games:

In the sixth room are six cells: in the first, bini; in the second one, trenta per forza; in the third one, chi bada l’as; in the fourth one, imperiale; in the fifth one, a chi non piace la volta del compagno; in the sixth one, passa dece. And these are all diabolical names.⁷

The text sounds ambiguous today, not only for it betrays an even too meticulous knowledge of the various games, but also because, in its metaphorical verve, it reveals the deepest ground of religions’ hostility toward games: the danger that believers might seize the ludic aspect of the sacred itself, the involuntary but consubstantial playfulness of every liturgy.

To this regard, late medieval and Renaissance Lenten and confession books are revealing, both because they witness to such stigmatization and because of the classificatory meticulousness that they often display in articulating the semantic field of game. The Repertorium seu Interrogatorium sive Confessionale [‘repertory’ or interrogation or confession handbook] (1516) by Mattia da Milano⁸ or the Summa de confessione cognominata pacificata [compendium about confession also said ‘pacified’] (1518) by Pacifico da Novara⁹, another Observant friar, condemn games in relation to the Decalogue and to the capital sins (sanctifying festivities, stealing, desiring others’ properties, the sin of avarice, etc.).

2. Exceptions: attempts at ‘Christianizing’ games and gambling.

However, the more one focuses on early modernity, the more one finds exceptions in confession handbooks. Martín Azpilicueta,¹⁰ an author cherished by the casuists and forerunner of classical economics, as well as (perhaps not fortuitously) champion of the theological legitimacy of interest loans, wrote in his Manual de Confesores y Penitentes [handbook of confessors and penitents], published in Coimbra in 1553, then in Italian translation in 1574,¹¹

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Fig. 1: Anonymous. 1465-75. Saint John of Capistrano presides over the bonfire of vanities and games. Bamberg, Germania: Historisches Museum.

Fig. 2: Hans Leonhard Schäufelein. 1519. John of Capistrano presides over the bonfire of games. Frontispiece of Vita Johannis Capistrani. Sermones eiusdem, edited by Bernardino Confessor of the Monastery of Mariemay. Augsburg: Joannes Miller, 1519.
that “without committing a sin the clergyman and the friar can sometimes play even with dice and cards for reasonable purposes, such as reawakening or cheering up an ill companion, who would need such recreation”. In any case, attempts at moralizing games are not uncommon in the history of Christianity.

The historical archives of the city of Colonia contain a manuscript in Rhenish Franconian dialect entitled Eyn suuerlich boich van bedudynge des kaetschens (Fig. 3), literally, “A ponderous book on the meaning of tennis”. That is a translation, completed in 1450 by a member of the Order to the Holy Cross, of the famous Flemish text Dat Kaetspel Ghemoralizeert (1431) [moralized tennis], wherein the bailiff of Furnes, Jan van den Berghe, would turn tennis into an allegory of fair justice.

The problem at stake, indeed, was not the game itself, but gambling. The archive of Heiner Gillmeister, a specialist in the cultural history of tennis, contains a woodcut print of French provenience, entitled “Le Cymetiere des malheureux” [the cemetery of the miserable ones], where a tennis player lies with his racket in the right hand, while the left hand holds a little purse full of coins, similar to that which one finds in the typical iconography of Judas (Fig. 4).

In the terms of game theorist Roger Caillois, it is above all alea, that is, chance, to stir the hostility of Christianity. Already in the 3rd century, a homily by pseudo-Cyprian, entitled De aleatoribus, is explicit about the matter: those who gamble forestall the advent of grace (Pseudo-Cipriano 2006). Nevertheless, also gambling games, and not only agonistic games, have given rise to attempt at Christian moralization. Already in the 10th century, Wibold, the bishop of Cambrai, invented a Ludus regularis seu clericalis [licit or clerical game], in which the dice’ 56 possible numeric combinations were associated to a list of 56 virtues (Fig. 5).

The complete list can be found in the first book, chapter 88, of the Chronicon Camaracense et Atrebatense by Baldricus Noviomensis16 (1615). The erudite André Joseph Ghislain Leglay,17 who proposes a comment of it in a note of Migné’s Patrologia (134: 1007-14), reconstructs the very complex diagram that was to be used in the pious game (Fig. 6).

Moralization of hazard does not necessarily entail the invention of a new game, but often consists in the Christian interpretation of already existent games. That would concern also complete information games such as chess, whose playing would however sometimes involve gambling and the use of dice. In the De laude nonovae militiae [praise for the new militia] (IV, 7), Bernard of Clairvaux18 had been peremptory: “Detestantur aleas et scaccos”19 [chance games and chess are to be despised]. Nevertheless, around 1300, Jacopo da Cessole, a native of Asti, Italy, and among the founders of the Dominican monastery of Savona, wrote the Ludus scachorum [the game of chess] or Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium ac popularium super ludo scachorum [book on the customs of men and about the noble and more popular practices concerning chess] (1957). A collection of sermons, this work is comprised of four treatises. The first links the invention of game with a mythical pedagogy: the Persian philosopher Xerses would have invented chess so as to encourage the irascible king Evil-Merodach, son of Nebuchadnezzar II, to patience; the second and the third treatises describe the virtues of the various chess pieces, divided into noble and popular ones;
the fourth treatise turns the chessboard into a metaphor of the city and recommends relations and actions of the various pieces, providing a hundred exempla. The *Ludus scacchorum* gained enormous and international success and was often diffused together with lavish illustrations (Fig. 7).

In 1432, following the example of Jacopo da Cessole, the Dominican Ingold von Basel, chaplain and reader of theology in Strasbourg, wrote the *Püchlein vun Guldin Spil* (1882), literally, the "booklet of the golden game". In it, he would deal with the origin, the modalities, the dangers, and the possible virtuous usages of seven games: 1) chess; 2) board games with little discs (*Pretspil*); 3) dies games; 4) card games; 5) archery or other similar games; 6) dances; 7) musical games, that is, the *Saitenspiel*, i.e., playing string instruments. Ingold would indeed propose an articulation based on the semantics of medieval German, in which *Spiel* would designate, indeed, board games as well as dances as well as playing a musical instrument. The most interesting aspect of this treatise, however, lies in the fact that Ingold proposes a (pseudo-) reconstruction of the noble origin of each kind of game. Therefore, chess would have been invented by ancient and pagan sages such as Xerses or Philometus of Chaldea; board games would have been invented by Greeks in front of Troy; string instrument playing by King David, etc. These imaginary reconstructions were instrumental to propose the seven games as remedies to capital sins.

3. Conclusions: towards “eutrapelia”.

We could continue for a long time. The attitude of Christianity towards games is ambiguous because the role of the body, of the senses, of movement, of representation and of grace in Christianity is ambiguous, as it is perhaps the case also in other religions. But the semantic field of games is
ambiguous too, as an ever more abundant literature emphasizes and investigates it. Competitive games can lead to violence and blasphemy, but also train the spirit and the body, as well as be a metaphor for the struggle between good and evil, God and devil: from the *ioca monachorum* to the rhetoric challenges, from jousting to tennis itself. Camouflage games can result in idolatry, yet sacred representations, processions, and effigies simulate the salient moments of Jesus's story even within the cathedrals. Vertiginous games distract the spirit, and Chrysostom already would state that, where the dance is, there is the devil, yet a literature and a paraliturgical costume flourish around the mystique of equilibrium as a metaphor of the state of grace. Finally, random games remind one of the dice of the Passion, open a void in the fabric of the divine will, and jeopardize the dialectic of arbitrariness and grace, yet they too are sometimes condoned, if they generate delight, if they awaken from the torpor of meditation, or if they teach mathematics, as an extensive literature indicates, from *De viribus quantitatis* by Luca Pacioli to the *Liber de ludo aleae* by Girolamo Cardano.

Games for Thomas Aquinas are indeed not only lawful but also necessary, provided that “one takes care of three things”: that the pleasure of the soul is never sought in ugly or harmful deeds or words; that the soul never completely abandons its gravity; and that “entertainment is appropriate for the people, time, place and all the other due circumstances” (*ibidem*). Whoever in games respects these three admonitions pursues the virtue that, Thomas Aquinas underlines, already Aristotle in the *Nicomachean ethics* called “eutrapelia”, that is, the virtue of “knowing how to turn acts and words into a joke” (*Eth. Nic. II 7, 1108a 23 -24*).

In what it consists, exactly, this “eutrapelia” is, then, specified by Dante, who in turn refers to Thomas and Aristotle book IV of the *Convivium* (*IV XVII 6*):

> The tenth [virtue] is called Eutrapelia, which moderates us when we joke appropriately. This virtue, therefore, that the Latins would call *iocunditas, comitas*, or better still *urbanitas*, consists in the ability to live in company, and to know how to enjoy the pleasure of being with others, in return offering to others a cordial and affectionate attitude.

Eutrapelia and urbanitas are therefore two aspects of the same virtue. Being citizens and knowing how to play with dignity are two playful faces of the same coin. That is perhaps the best advice to be drawn from the past for anyone today reflecting on gambling and religion.

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Fig. 8: Little monk throwing a ball. *Summa theologica*, Ms 1026, fol. 16r, Library of Angers, France. Quoted in Sonntag 2013: 269.
Notes

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2 Massa Marittima, Italy, 8 September 1380 - Aquila, Italy, 20 May 1444.

3 “E piviali sono e naibi di molti colori […]. Spade per farti tagliare a pezzi, bastoni per farti bastonare, denari per l’avarizia, coppe be’ beitori, e ebrietà, e gola, e lussuria che il gioco si tira dietro”; Bernardino of Siena (Saint) 1934: 435; trans. mine. Bernardino is obviously referring to the four suits of Italian cards.

4 Capestrano, Abruzzi, Kingdom of Naples, 24 June 1386 - Ilok, Syrmia, Kingdom of Croatia, 23 October 1456.

5 Nuremberg, 1480-1485 – Nördlingen, 1538 o 1540.

6 Monteprandone, near Ascoli Piceno, Italy, 1393 – Naples, 28 November 1476.

7 “In sexta [stantia] sunt sex cellule: in prima al bini; in seconda a lo trenta per forza; in tertia o chi bada l’as; in quarta a lo imperiale; in quinta a chi non piace la volta del compagno; in sexta passa dece. Et omnia ista sunt nomina diabolica”; quoted in Depaulis 2013: 124; trans. mine.

8 15th-16th c.; see Rizzi 2013: 104.

9 Cerano, near Novara, Italy, 1424 – before 14 June 1482.

10 Martín Azpilicueta Jaureguízar; Barásoain, Navarra, Spain, 13 December 1492 – Rome, 1st June 1586.

11 Italian translation by Friar Cola di Guglinisi of the Order of Saint Francis of Padua. Venice: Gabriele Giolito de’ Ferrari, 1574.

12 “senza commetter peccato veniale il chierico può et anche il frate alcuna volta giuocare etiandio a dadi et a carte per cagioni ragionevoli, come è per risvegliarsi o per rallegrare il compagno infermo, che ha di questa ricreatione bisogno”; ibidem: 437, quoted in Rizzi 2013: 106.

13 1360, Handzame, current Belgium - 7 October 1439, Handzame, current Belgium.

14 Van den Berghe 1915; see Gillmeister 2013.

15 Died after 966.
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