

# Exploring J.L. Moreno's Spirituality and Theology

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## ABSTRACT

J.L. Moreno's theological thoughts are not always taken seriously, even by those devoted to other aspects of his work. Yet clearly, they were foundational for him on any reasonable reading of his life. Creation and history are God's stage for God's psychodrama and Moreno got to be part of this in a very big and direct way, or so he believed. He role reversed with God and understood this as part of the unfolding of God's subjectivity in history. Traditional theology thought of God as 'object'. Now it was clear through Moreno's experience that God was to be thought of as 'subject'. God now no longer needed religion because he had entered the secular world fully, as spontaneity and creativity. This article explores some of the implications of this shift and highlights the centrality of our 'responsibility' as co-creators with Moreno's God, which is the spontaneity-creativity of the universe.

## KEY WORDS

co-creators, God, J.L. Moreno, psychodrama, responsibility, spirituality, spontaneity-creativity, subjectivity, theology, values

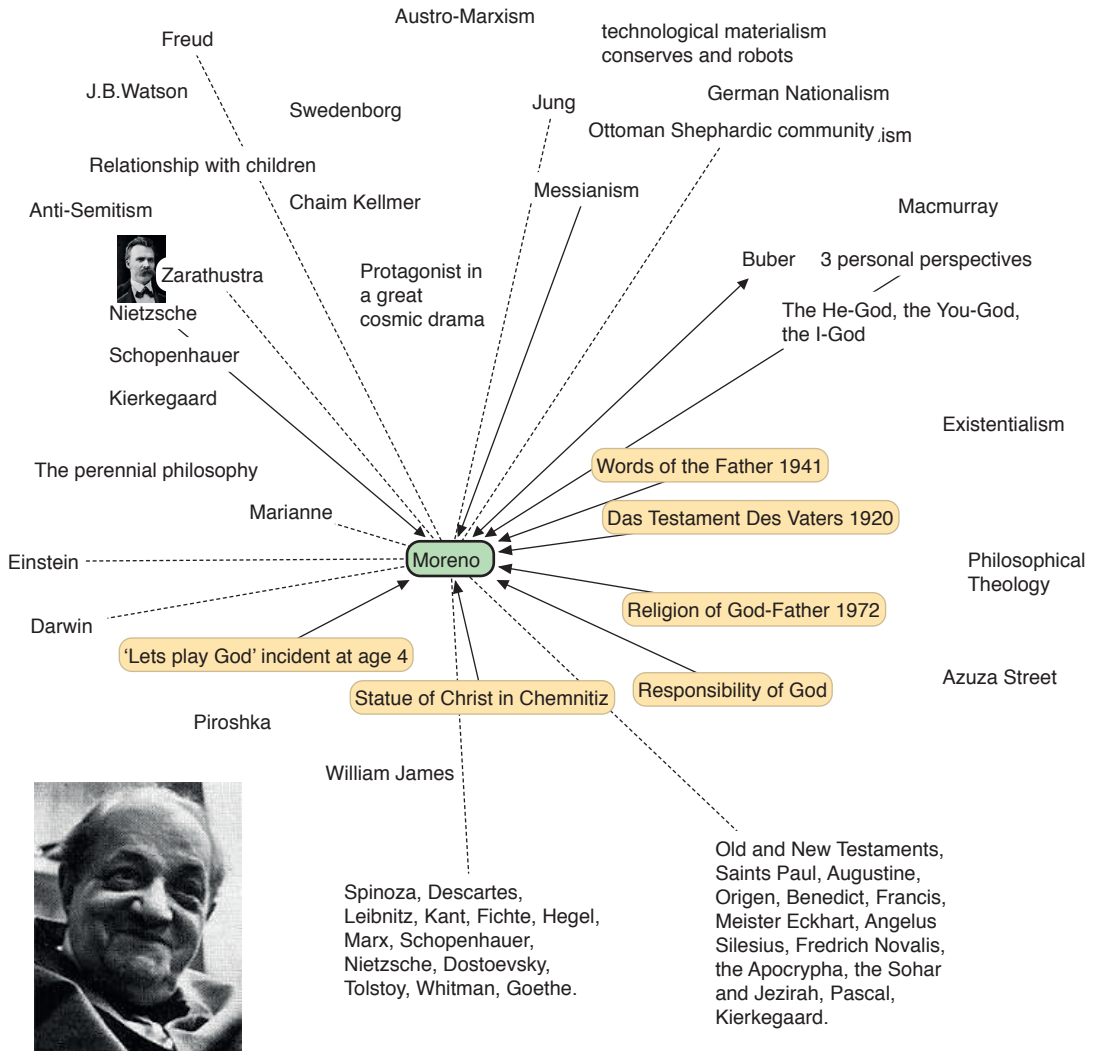
## Introduction

I presented a workshop at the 2019 annual Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand Psychodrama Association (AANZPA) Conference in Brisbane under the title, Exploring J.L. Moreno's Spirituality and Theology. I was invited to prepare a written form for the *AANZPA Journal*. Here it is! It is the beginning of an exploration of Moreno's spirituality and theology and I hope to write more under the title, J.L. Moreno's Theology of the Godhead.

I have been a psychodrama 'camp follower' and trainee for nearly twenty years. The original motive for this involvement was a woman, would you believe, like so many callous youths attending church youth groups! My motive now is JL himself, certainly his psychodramatic techniques but even more so his writings, particularly where he references God and the philosophy underlying psychodrama. But also, personally, JL has taught me not to be frightened of my own megalomania, my love of the big picture and the fervent hope in my breast that I can be part of that big picture somehow. This has been so helpful. JL took his spiritual and religious megalomania

# J.L. Moreno's Spiritual and Theological Atom

*"Role reverse with me and put yourself entirely into my position."* (1969a, p. 5)



**Ideas that Developed Early**

1. The all inclusiveness of being
2. All existing things are by nature good and blessed.
3. Concept of the moment as a category itself.
4. Notion of the situation
5. Spontaneity and creativity as the guides of ethical conduct, rather than social rules of cultural conserves.
6. Encounter

Nietzsche denied religion, God and Christ and the whole western metaphysical tradition

**Moreno secularized them.** Otherwise their projects have important similarities especially around the revaluing of values.

A theory of God must be attained first and is indispensable in order to make the life of any particle of the universe significant, whether it is a man or a protozoon. JLM.

*Moreno's theory of God is that God is Spontaneity-Creativity and that S-C is distributed throughout the universe. All individuals are capable of accessing spontaneity and hence potentially creative in all they do. Nolte*

into the secular world of psychiatry and the development of action methods. I took my megalomania into the world of spirituality and theology and the church. I ended my active career in the church calling myself a 'secular religionist', hardly on a par with JL's achievements, mind you. My suggested spiritual and theological atom for JL was displayed in the conference workshop and accompanies this article.

## JL and God

JL references God throughout his work. Gems can pop up quite unexpectedly. But the two primary works are *The Words of the Father* (2011) and *The Religion of God-Father* (1972). *The Words of the Father* is a foundational text, which JL referred to all his life. Having recently graduated from medical school, he was working as the local doctor in Bad Voslau, a spa town near Vienna, and had formed a relationship, initially emotional and spiritual and later intimate, with a young woman named Marianne. It was in this setting, in 1920, that JL wrote 'the words of the father' in red pencil on the walls of his house, following an ecstatic experience. His son Jonathan's description of the event is the most helpful I have read: "Altogether, the physical and emotional setting stimulated J.L.'s messianic tendencies to new heights. Recalling his epiphany in Chemnitz, he and Marianne began to hear a "Voice." Night after night they waited for it. At first it was subdued. Finally, it came more clearly than ever and seemed to transport J.L. to a new level of consciousness. *I walked down the hill, up the hill, stimulated by the scent of flowers and the silent air wanderings of the nightbirds. I was marching through space and space was marching through me, on and on and on, no stop. Millions of other people were marching through space at the same time, on and on and on, no stop. It was as if the universe was in movement in an unlimited number of dimensions. Wherever I turned a new dimension would open up. I saw sky, stars, planets, oceans, forests, mountains, cities, animals, fishes, birds, flies, protozoa, stones, and hundreds of other things. Then I saw each opening its mouth, each man, each tree, each stone, each particle of the universe shouting in unison: I am God, The Father, The creator of the universe, These are my words, The words of the Father*" (Moreno, 2014:70).

JL joined the chorus and shouted, "I am God, the father, the creator of the universe". He had role reversed with God, entered God's psychodrama. I think the wonder of it was that he did not lose his own identity in that moment. JL took on God's identity, and he played with this for the rest of his life. There had been previous important religious and spiritual experiences, but this was the big one. It marked the end of his religious phase, which had pre-occupied him for many years as a young man, and began the secular phase of his life, "becoming a philosopher, a scientist, trying to continue through group psychotherapy, psychodrama, sociometry, and encounter groups – that to which I had dedicated my

previous, religious life" (Moreno, 1972:213). In 1941, he published *The Words of the Father* in English, with a good deal of commentary that may be more important to the enquirer than the actual 'Words'. He subtitled it *The Psychodrama of God*, which was omitted in the latest edition available through Lulu.

The Religion of God-Father is the last piece that JL ever published. It was included as a chapter in *Healer of the Mind* (Johnson, 1972), two years before his death. There is a poignant, bitter-sweet quality to this essay, which I warmly commend to everyone interested in Moreno. In it, he affirms key aspects of *The Words of the Father*, but behind this lies a deeper sense of coming to himself: *I am profoundly aware of having hardly touched on the Father-God concretely. I have remained amorphous as a living God. I do not want to diminish and to belittle the efforts which I made during the plastic years of my adolescence.... But I have failed so utterly in turning the moment in the world's needs... I must admit humbly that my megalomania is shattered. Nothing is left but the crown and the throne. The body is dead* (Moreno, 1972:213).

How could you not but love the man? Mind you, JL did not hold back in claiming a grand meaning for his experience that enabled *The Words of the Father*. He saw it as the third great unfolding of the Godhead. The first was the 'He-God' of the ancient Hebrews, the second was the 'You-God' of Jesus, and the third was his experience of the 'I-God'. This was now 'God-the-Father' speaking directly to his creation, through his creation: *The Godhead above the clouds, the God reaching into outer space and who is invisible has lost his meaning. The God who is the God of love has been betrayed so many times by men that something had to be added, a God which does not come from the Thou, but who comes from within our own person, through the I, through me* (Moreno, 1972:199).

The analysis of JL's experience, and the unfolding of the Godhead in terms of the three personal pronoun perspectives, may be an original contribution. It is now certain that Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (1996) owes much to JL's earlier reflections on encounter (Moreno, 2014:65). It is also certain that, at about the same time JL had his life changing experience, the young Scottish philosopher John Macmurray was beginning to analyse religion, history and life in terms of the three personal perspectives. He went on to write a major philosophy of action (Macmurray, 1958), which put into philosophical terms what JL was building on the psychodramatic stage. In our own time, the American thinker Ken Wilber built Integral Theory around the three personal perspectives. Reading Wilber (1996) is a bit like reading the sequel to JL's *Words*, inviting us all, both great and small, into the psychodrama of God but without any actual reference to psychodrama.

## JL and the Zeitgeist

I think that within JL's historical context, his experience and the reflections that arose from it have an interesting and significant place in the history of ideas. It seems to me that he was well and truly positioned within the zeitgeist of his time and contributing to it. For instance, for JL subjectivity was central but without devaluing objective science. It was concern for the human subject that saw him turn sociology into sociometry. And it was God's subjectivity that also interested him intensely: *In this book, God is not represented as an object, an essence, a substance moulded (sic) after the image and within the experiential limits of man. Here God comes forth alone and in full earnestness, creating and experiencing, with all the subjectivity of a real being. This is, however, not the subjectivity of an ordinary, fallible, imperfect being, but that of the Absolute Creator of the world. ... Subjectivity is an indispensable premise to the most important function of God, that of being the creator of our universe and of many more universes than ours* (Moreno, 2011:10).

JL wrote *The Words of the Father* in 1920. Remember that only five years earlier, in 1915, J.B. Watson had begun publishing his ideas on behaviourism which, at least symbolically, marked the pinnacle of scientific positivism. Subjectivity need not be considered, even in the scientific exploration of the psyche. Now JL was making subjectivity indispensable, at least in the social sciences: *My God-universe pattern became the blueprint, the ontological guide after which I modelled sociometry, the idea of a society in which our deepest selves are realized. It is from my theological analysis and experiments that I drew the inspiration and the certainty to forge ahead in to realms which are entirely secular, materialistic and down to earth* (Moreno, 1949:236, quoted in Nolte, 2014:233).

For theology, God as Subject was a new idea as well. Traditional theology tried to see God as Object, even when dealing with Spirit. After all, wasn't theology the mother of the sciences? God as Object entrenched the theological fallacy, that is, the objectification of metaphysical ideas as true in and of themselves, apart from experience, and serving to justify hierarchical institutional structures. There is no role reversal in the theological fallacy, but instead the use of the idea of God for the purposes of power. Interestingly, JL never used the concept of Spirit. In fact, there are only one or two uses of the word in his main works, both quite incidental. But spontaneity and creativity are central: *We can say with greater certainty than ever that the supreme power ruling the world is Spontaneity-Creativity. It has created a rational cosmos which coexists interdependently with man's perception of it but amenable to his intervention as long as he knows and abides by its rules* (Moreno, 1955:373). Moreno's theory of God is that God is Spontaneity-Creativity and that spontaneity-creativity is distributed throughout the universe. All individuals are capable of accessing spontaneity and hence potentially of being creative in all they do (Nolte, 2014:236).



Spirit has also fared badly within the Western theological traditions. The famous church historian, Adolf Harnack, referred to the Spirit as the orphan of the Trinity. But JL was not going anywhere near the Trinity. The emergence of the I-God is a return to the Father, not the distant Father of the Hebrews, but the immediately present Father of Creation, “a new God of light and life” (Moreno, 2011:7). Hegel’s concept of Spirit was a watershed in philosophical and theological thinking in the West, something institutional theologians have never fully absorbed or come to terms with. JL’s vision of spontaneity-creativity is as big, but although JL read Hegel, he does not seem to have linked the two. My thesis is that the term Spirit had too many religious associations for him and, following his transcendent experience in 1920, he was determined to end his fascination with religion and embrace secularity. He now had God without religion and spontaneity-creativity to better describe his vision: *In all history, two kinds of religion have appeared: religions with a god and religions without a god. Here in the Words, a new situation is presented. Here is God, Himself, without a religion* (Moreno, 2011:171). It is worth noting that Ken Wilber (1996) has fully re-instated the concept of Spirit in his theory. In my view, his concept could alternatively be described as spontaneity-creativity.

## JL and Nietzsche

It is also interesting to think of JL in relation to Friedrich Nietzsche. No thinker influenced European culture more in the first few decades of the twentieth century. JL was aware of Nietzsche’s reach and the way in which his ideas differed significantly from other philosophers. Whereas science, and especially Darwinian evolution, had questioned the factual basis of Western thought, Nietzsche questioned and attacked its value base. It was of course institutional religion that ‘bore the brunt’ of both attacks. With Nietzsche, nothing was left of religion, God, Christ or even metaphysics as the basis of Western values. From this completely nihilistic position, he built what he called a revaluation of values based upon his ideas of the Overman (Superman) and eternal recurrence. No more vulnerability and compassion, but rather strength and celebration in the spirit of Dionysus. Life is the will to power: *The old precept: “Love thy neighbour” became its opposite, “Be hard – love yourself!” and he claimed it to be a higher value* (Moreno, 2011:175).

But whereas Nietzsche proclaimed God dead, JL secularised him, took him out of the hands of institutional religion and re-conceived him for a new world. Life was not the will to power but the will to create, and we are all called to be co-creators with God. The difference between these two great thinkers, in JL’s mind, could be seen on a continuum with spontaneity-creativity at one end, and conserves, the products of spontaneity-creativity, at the other: *The highest value of spontaneity and creativity, the top-value on any*

*axiological scale, is the Godhead. It establishes a frame of reference for every possible type of living being – animal, man or superman – for every type of action, work or performance, for every possible type of cultural conserve – memorized matter, the book, or the motion picture. The scale has two opposite poles: the maximum of spontaneity at one pole and zero spontaneity at the other, with many degrees of spontaneity between the two, every degree representing a different quotient of spontaneity. This is an axiological scale: the ideal exponent of one pole is a totally spontaneous creator, and the ideal exponent of the other, the total cultural conserve (Moreno, 2011:174).*

Both JL and Nietzsche were concerned with the revaluation of values. Value for JL was to be found in spontaneity-creativity while for Nietzsche, it was located in the conserves, a Beethoven symphony or a Wagnerian opera for instance. One valued creative action, the other what had been created, the act versus the conserve, the will to create versus the will to power: *Man has created a world of things, cultural conserves, in order to produce for himself a semblance of God. When man found himself failing in his struggle for maximum creativity, he divided from his will-to-create his will-to-power, using the latter as a devious means by which alone to achieve the aims of a god (Moreno, 2011:182).*

However, both men saw a very challenging future for the human race. JL's fear was that the conserves, and especially robots, would stifle and disarm our capacity for spontaneity-creativity. For him, it was vital that spontaneity-creativity kept ahead of technology. Nietzsche held a similar fear, that the Last Man, that is, humanity surrendered to the mediocrity of the mob, would prevail over the Overman, the hero for life, who had emerged from the abyss of his earlier nihilism.

### **JL, a Modern Day Paul?**

It is worth noting, I think, that there was a similar shift in values, or revaluation, between Judaism and the ideas of Jesus and Paul in the New Testament. Moreno understood that the Law in Judaism was the cultural conserve that gave and still gives Jews their identity, and against which all things are to be measured. Jesus in his preaching of the Kingdom of God, and Paul in his emphasis on the Holy Spirit, proposed the other end of JL's continuum, that of spontaneity-creativity, as the basis of our values and directions in life. Perhaps it is not too ridiculous to suggest that JL rediscovered the teachings of Christ and Paul for our own time, our secular modern world. The church has long since fallen back into Law, while at the same time placing the Spirit in the orphanage, as I have mentioned. Perhaps JL has the key to unlock Spirit from the orphanage and bring it back into the centre of our lives as spontaneity-creativity.

## JL and Responsibility

For JL, responsibility is the key to co-creativity with the spontaneity-creativity of the universe: *The universe is continually becoming and so is God; being the result of millions and millions of forces which fill the cosmos, he is in becoming. You and I are the parts, contributory forces, rivulets, to establish one day that moment when the words of the Genesis will become true... Co-creativity ... and this infinite creativity which is true on all levels of existence, whether it is now physical or social or biological ... ties us together. We are all bound together by responsibility for all things, there is no limited, partial responsibility. And responsibility makes us automatically also creators of the world ... Responsibility is the tie which we share and which brings us into the cosmos ... And so I saw the cosmos as an enormous enterprise, billions of partners, invisible hands, arms stretched out, one to touch the other, all being able, through responsibility, to be Gods (Moreno, 1972:200).*

Again, I think JL speaks to the hour. World War II marked the climax of the crisis of institutional religion in the West and the divine law it 'upheld'. In the vacuum, human rights, which had been bubbling away in Western culture since John Locke and the US Declaration of Independence, were proposed as an alternate basis for universal law, and in 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was promulgated by the United Nations. The implications of this huge social and cultural inversion are still being experienced. One thing seems clear. An emphasis on human rights is not necessarily conducive to social cohesion and unity, however important they might be. As a response, in 1998 a group of retired elder statesmen, including Australia's Malcolm Fraser, drew up a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities that was accepted by the United Nations. But response so far has been minimal. The dialectic between rights and responsibilities might well be the world's most crucial debate. There is much at stake, from climate change to race and gender and everything in between.

JL was not content to leave spontaneity-creativity as a general concept. In the commentary to *The Words of the Father*, he began to unpack it as The Theology of the Godhead. He dares to think the unthinkable, the subjectivity of God the Creator. But why not, we may ask, once God as Subject steps onto the psychodrama stage. I am leaving that unpacking, I hope, for another workshop and subsequent paper.

## JL at the End

As I have noted, 1972 was the year of JL's last published writing. It was also the year of his last visit to a psychiatric hospital, when a former patient asked JL to call on her. Jonathan Moreno (2014:251) presents a firsthand record of the occasion, written by Jo Powers who was a therapist working at the hospital: *He greeted his former patient warmly and sat with her on a large*



comfortable couch in the center of the room. I stood back, standing directly opposite them across the room. J.L. was completely comfortable and was warmly inquiring how his former patient was and how her treatment was progressing. That particular tableau in itself was enjoyable to watch but what followed was very mind-blowing. As he talked with her, slowly other patients drew near to him and began to sit on the couch, sit on the floor at his feet, or to draw chairs near to him. He introduced himself to this growing group, shaking their hands, listening to each, patting their hands, smiling, and reassuring. His charisma and therapeutic engagement were remarkable—I, a witness from ten paces away. As a young man and a student who was learning about group work, I was amazed at how he related so comfortably with all the patients, how he addressed them, how he engaged them, and how attuned he was to the whole group. He was completely comfortable and living in the “moment.” He was completely comfortable with a group of acutely ill patients. He showed no discomfort with psychopathology; on the contrary, he exemplified compassion, empathy, and encouragement to all who joined him in this group “encounter”.

I struggle to read this passage without tearing up. Remember, it was that same year, 1972, that JL had declared, “I have failed so utterly in turning the moment in the world’s needs ... I must admit humbly that my megalomania is shattered. Nothing is left but the crown and the throne. The body is dead”. But for all his struggles, it was as if his theology and spirituality had at last become fully embodied as he sat amongst these patients in the hospital. In his brokenness, and his complete ease with it, God, the Universe, the Whatever, had found another human home. He died two years later.

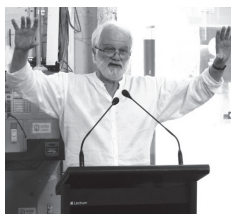
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