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Children's Voice and Theology

Godly Play in a Broader Perspective

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag geht der Frage nach, warum Godly Play in Deutschland und Europa bislang vergleichsweise wenig rezipiert worden ist, und nimmt dies zum Anlass für die Entwicklung kritisch-weiterführender Perspektiven. Neu nachgedacht werden müsste insbesondere darüber, wie auch aktuelle Themen aus der Lebenswelt von Kindern sowie religionspädagogische Herausforderungen etwa der religiös-weltanschaulichen Vielfalt aufgenommen werden können. Ein besonderer Schwerpunkt liegt bei dem Versuch, Godly Play mit der Kindertheologie zu verbinden, was zu bestimmten Modifikationen und Erweiterungen des ursprünglichen Modells von Godly Play führen würde. Vor allem müsste die aktiv-kreative Rolle von Kindern stärker zum Tragen kommen. Schließlich wird mit einer Theologie der Kindheit ein weiterer theoretischer Rahmen angesprochen, in dem beide Ansätze – die Kindertheologie und Godly Play – miteinander ins Gespräch gebracht werden können.

1 Introduction

Some introductory comments may help readers to place the present chapter.

First, Godly Play is an approach to Christian education which comes with a special aura. This is due to the special person who developed this approach – Jerome Berryman – as well as to the special atmosphere in which this type of play unfolds. Whoever has had the opportunity to encounter this person and this atmosphere will probably understand immediately what I mean. Godly Play is truly unique. Moreover, it is this uniqueness which has made it attractive in many places around the world. Yet at the same time, the process of becoming an approach which must work independently of the one person who invented it makes it necessary to think about the presuppositions under which it can be used in different contexts of religious education. The first intention of the present chapter is to think about possible ways of placing Godly Play in a broader perspective, thus making it more accessible to religious education in general.

My second introductory remark relates to how I first came across Godly Play. Having read Berryman's early article on children and parables (Berryman, 1979), I went to an international conference more than 25 years ago. As part of a very full conference schedule with many papers, Berryman offered not another paper but a presentation of Godly Play. He did not lecture on Godly Play, but he played with us and showed us children at play, at Godly Play.

While this was actually my first encounter with Godly Play, it was not the first time that I had met Berryman. Several years earlier, on his way back from Italy, having worked there with Sofia Cavaletti, he had come to Tübingen to meet Karl Ernst Nipkow. He was full of Italian impressions and Montessorian insights. Yet his one question was how we could change the format of religious education in such a way that it could accommodate Montessori's and Cavalletti's views of the child.

Ever since, I have been fascinated with Godly Play and no less with Berryman as the main player. I share the view that our British colleague John Hull once expressed in a

conversation: "I only know of one genius in religious education. It is Jerome Berryman."

However, being a religious educator and theologian, I have also been wondering about how Godly Play could be used with even more children than is the case today, and how it could become even more useful for others. At least in Germany, Godly Play has not received the attention of the majority of religious educators. In a sense, this chapter can be read as an attempt to understand why this has been the case.

In terms of my own work with children and with training future ministers and teachers of Religious Education, my interest in Godly Play arises from the fact that I share many intentions with this approach. In my understanding, Godly Play is a model for religious education that puts special emphasis on children. It opens up new ways for children to imaginatively encounter biblical narratives, and especially the parables. Moreover, its Montessorian background places it with the long-standing tradition of child-centered (religious) education.

From this point of view, the aim of the present chapter is to bring the Godly Play approach into dialogue with recent developments in child-oriented religious education in order to make it more suitable for new fields of practise beyond its original context. In the following, two perspectives will be taken up for this purpose. First, I want to consider a number of possibilities for broadening the approach within a German and European context; and second, I want to combine the understanding of children as theologians with Godly Play. In both respects, the Godly Play approach proves to be a very powerful beginning that, at the same time, should be broadened for future use.

In a final step, I will take up the perspective of a theology of childhood, i. e. the views of childhood maintained by adults. Such a theology should be seen as the necessary background for Godly Play or other approaches, and as a basis for giving children a voice of their own, in religious education no less than in society.

2 Broadening the Approach: European Perspectives on Godly Play

In this section, I want to consider some perspectives from the European and especially from the German discussion on Godly Play. They can be seen as critical questions but also as attempts to broaden the original approach in order to make it more accessible for new settings.

A first question refers to the relationship between the American Sunday School and Religious Education as a subject taught in public (state) schools. Is it possible to transfer Godly Play from its original context to another? Can Godly Play go to the public school? This question is of critical importance. Much of European religious education takes place within public school settings and this has far-reaching implications. Quite often, for example, Religious Education lessons do not take place in a special room, but the teacher will come to whatever classroom the pupils are using at a particular time. Liturgy does not have a set place in such settings, although some liturgical elements like an opening prayer may be used in some places. Should we try to develop models for Godly Play at school, or would the bleak atmosphere of a standard classroom take away the special atmosphere that is part and parcel of Godly Play? Can we do Godly

Play in a classroom that only a few minutes earlier was the site of major struggles with burdensome math problems and with getting bad grades for one's unsuccessful efforts?

The second question is more critical. It is not necessarily my own point of view, but sometimes German religious educators raise questions concerning the theology of Godly Play in terms of the relationship between the palpable and the transcendent. Godly Play claims to be imaginative but it does so in a way that, according to these critics, could actually restrain children's imagination. The criticism refers to the material objects used in Godly Play. The question is if the figures and pictures hinder the process of imagination that takes place when children just listen to biblical narratives without having anything set before their eyes. Will the material in fact curtail children's imagination? Of course, one could argue that children do need concrete objects to spur their imagination. But we must also be aware of the longstanding controversial discussion in general education about the role of the Montessori materials, which parallels these critical questions concerning Godly Play. How much freedom do predefined materials allow for? Should children not be given more leeway for their own choice of materials? Moreover, especially from a Protestant point of view, what is the relationship between the transcendent and the material objects? Is Godly Play more Roman Catholic in this respect, since it introduces children to the rich culture of Catholic churches and liturgies while it alienates them from the austerity of Protestant worship? Maybe most important is the question about the criteria for the materials to be used. What kind of aesthetics should we strive for? This is a point where German religious education has learned from the 'didactics of symbols' approach – an approach to religious education which aims to focus on symbols as the language of religion and of the human soul (cf. Halbfas, 1982; Biehl, 1989). Questions of aesthetics do matter – and they need to be considered critically. Many of the traditional Godly Play materials seem to adhere to a certain style which was characteristic of toys and picture books at a certain period during the 20th century. Is there any reason why other aesthetic styles should be excluded?

The third question relates to the content used in Godly Play. More exactly, it is the choice of topics that deserves more attention here. Comparing Godly Play with European religious education, it is easy to see that a whole number of possible themes have not received much attention in the Godly Play discussion: for example, ethical and political issues in their relationship to faith and religion, but also other topics relating to the life-worlds of children. Does the Godly Play approach imply that only biblical narratives or Christian festivals can be addressed? Yet what kind of faith or Christianity would this be? What would happen to love or compassion as the deep structure of Christian faith?

Fourth, what about religious pluralism? In most European countries, children grow up in the presence of different religions. Today, even Nordic countries like Finland that used to be exclusively Lutheran have become multi-religious societies. Religious education has to prepare children and adolescents for living together with people from different backgrounds and with different religious beliefs. Moreover, the children themselves are wondering about the meaning of other religions.

To illustrate this point I have chosen some examples from one of our studies on how young children at the age of 5 or 6 years think about God (cf. Edelbrock, Schweitzer

and Biesinger, 2010; Dubiski, Maull and Schweitzer, 2012). The first interview conversation is about God, possibly in a Christian sense, and Allah. The participating children, Ronja and Arzu, come from a Christian and from a Muslim background respectively – "I" is the interviewer:

A: God is Allah!
I: So it is the same? Aha.
A: Yes.
I: *Why does he have different names?*
A: Because those who are only German, only call him God and we call him …
R: Jesus as well.
A: … we call him …
R: Nowhere [?]
A: … we call him … hm, Allah and God. Both.
I: Okay. And then Allah is in heaven and Jesus also is in heaven.
Both: Yes.
I: Then there are two of them there. Do you think they know each other?
A: But …
I: Allah and Jesus?
R: Yes.
A: But Jesus is not up there in heaven.
I: But where else is he?
A: I don't know. My mom and dad say that you only believe that.
R: Yes, he is in heaven!
A: Not at all!
R: Yes.
A: No way.

This is just one of the fascinating examples we found in our study. It shows how children at an early age can take up questions of interreligious dialogue. Who is God? Where is God? How do Muslims view Jesus? Can other views of God also be true?

The second example from this study is taken from the interview with Iman, a Muslim boy.

I: Because Muslims are not allowed to show a cross because that is not good and is *haram*.
I: Mhm.
I: Because that is forbidden, with the Muslims.
[…]
I: And / mhm / my neighbor, she says that God has a son. But that is not true. That Joses / Joses is the son of God. God also does not do the things of the Christians.
I: Mhm.
I: Because he is good for the Muslims and there is no one else, who always gives Allah a bad name and says bad things, and God says to him: / mhm / I am the boss here of everyone. And he can also see everything. Without / He sees everything and never sleeps. One cannot see him, only when one is dead.

I do not want to claim that it is only the children speaking in such statements. Most likely, they are often simply repeating what they have heard from their parents. One thing, however, seems clear. Children have to come to terms with a world that has become multi-religious. Faith in God has come under debate, not only with atheism, but

also between different religions. Not even young children are exempt from the cognitive and emotional demands of growing up in the presence of different religions.

Can Godly Play also play a role in this context? I am clearly not the first one to ask this question. John Hull used the Godly Play model as a basis for a new approach called 'A Gift to the Child' (Hull, 1996). In this case, religious objects are presented to the children, for example a statue of the Hindu goddess Ganesha. The children are told what these objects mean to those who cherish them, and they are also told that the objects actually do not belong to everyone but only to those of a particular religious tradition. The aim is not to make everyone love Ganesha, although each child should become aware of what meaning a particular faith may have to offer, not only in general but to him or her – as a 'gift'.

I remember Hull telling me on some occasion that he does not think that his approach really is in line with Godly Play. Godly Play, at least according to its original design, is about the immersion into one particular religion, not about the encounter with different religions. Yet does it not make sense to also use an imaginative approach to learning about other religions? Could there be a way of extending Godly Play in a direction that makes space for children's questions about other religions?

My last point is about the role of the children themselves, their role in Godly Play. More specifically, it is about Godly Play and the recent discussion on children as theologians, which I will take up in the next section.

3 Godly Play and Children as Theologians

One of the most remarkable recent developments in the German and European field of religious education has been the new interest in children as theologians and in children's theology. To some degree, one could even speak of an international movement, with books in several languages and with international consultations in different countries (cf., for example, Iversen, 2007).

There is no clear definition of children's theology available so far, but there clearly is a common core of the different approaches. Their shared premise is that children are quite capable not only of asking questions that are of theological interest – the 'big questions' as they are often called – but that children are also able to find answers of their own. Seeing children – and also adolescents – as theologians means appreciating their theological creativity and the productive character of their ideas. It means trusting their theological potential. And it means allowing the children themselves to find and to create theological answers.

In my own work (cf. Schweitzer, 2011 and 2013), I have suggested a distinction between three different aspects or directions within children's theology: theology *of* children; theology *with* children; and theology *for* children.

3.1 Theology by Children

First we must become aware of the *theology produced by children,* which I call 'theology of children'. For some educators, this includes all of children's religious ideas. In my own understanding, it refers to the children's attempts at making sense of religious ideas, be it their own or from others.

- For example, they try to make sense of the idea that people go to heaven after they die. In their thinking about this idea, they come across the problem about what will happen when there is no more space in heaven.
- Or they come to think about what it means that some children are Catholic and others Protestant. In one of our studies (cf. Schweitzer and Biesinger, 2003), some of the children told us that it depends on the child – once the child gets a little bit older you will be able to tell if the child is Protestant or Catholic. Others, however, thought it depended on the year the child is born. If it is an even year, the child will be Catholic, if it is an uneven year, Protestant.

3.2 Theology with Children

Second, there is *theology with children*. Here I refer to the conversations and exchanges between children and adults on questions related to theology. Such conversations have a central place in religious education, but they are not limited to formalized educational settings. Children tend to ask 'big' questions, and they are interested in how adults respond to these questions.

The following example documents the conversation between a child at the age of five and his father (originally reported by C. Bizer, quoted from Biesinger, 1994, p. 16).

Child: All people die, right, father?
Father: All people die.
Child: But you will not die. (Pause) Then I will be so alone.
Father: Of course we will also die. But now we are still alive.
Child: And who decides when you die? (Pause) Does God make this decision?
Father: God decides. You know, when one is old, maybe one does not want to live any longer.
Child: But you are already old. And where shall I go?
Father: God will send you a new father.
Child: You will not die before I grow up, and even one day later. And after you die, I will go to my grandmother.

This conversation shows how a child brings up the question of death and dying. It is important for this child to think about what will happen if his parents die. Death appears to be a social threat in the first place: that is, losing the people the child depends on. The father is taken by surprise, but tries to find answers that the child can accept. In the end, however, the father's suggestion of God sending the child a new father, which is meant to comfort the child, fails to meet the child's actual needs. A new father cannot be a comfort for the child, since this new father would imply exactly what the child seems to fear most – being left with people who are not familiar. It is the child himself who, in the end, finds a creative solution: "And after you die, I will go to my grandmother". The idea of the grandmother is comforting, because she is familiar and trustworthy.

This example suggests that children have a need to include the question of death and dying with their conversations with adults. For them, such questions are not only a private matter to be pondered secretly. They are looking for support, affirmation, and guidance.

3.3 Theology for Children

My third aspect is *theology for children*. This aspect is sometimes considered contradictory within a 'children's theology' approach. It seems to imply a return to traditional catechetical procedures based on dispensing ready-made answers to be learnt by heart. Or it could remind us of the Enlightenment attempts to teach children some kind of natural theology, like John Todd in his once-famous book published in 1839, *Truth Made Simple*, which was planned as the 'First Volume of a System of Theology for Children' (Todd, 2009). Yet this is not what I mean. Theology for children relates to the challenge of finding the right response, for example, to the question about the whereabouts of the dead once heaven is full. How should we respond to this question? Should we tell children that this question cannot be asked? Or that heaven is so big that it will never be overcrowded? Or that God will create a new heaven once there is no more space in the first? None of these questions is innocent. All of them carry with them theological implications and certain images of God. This is why it is important to become aware of the theology that adults are offering to the children, even within a 'children as theologians' approach.

Is there a place for children's theology within Godly Play? Berryman has been quite outspoken about the theological potential of children. After all, his mentor, Sofia Cavalletti, authored a famous book, *Il potenziale religioso del bambino* – 'The Religious Potential of the Child' (Cavalletti, 1983). Yet where exactly is the place for children as theologians in Godly Play?

There are two possible answers. The first answer could identify play itself as a place for creative theology. In the process of playing, children actively create and act out or express their ideas and understandings, their thoughts and their wishes. Play is indeed a very important part of children's lives, as well as of human life in general. And most certainly the importance of play has been greatly underestimated, not only in theology. It is less clear to me, however, if playing should be the only way of allowing children to be active as theologians. There must also be a place for children to express their theological ideas and thoughts in dialogue, among themselves as well as with adults. Playing can be a way of doing theology, but there must also be a place for reflexivity, not only in terms of deepening the experience of play, but also in the sense of understanding.

Of course, these are ancient theological insights, of *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) or of understanding what one believes and what Christians believe, as Martin Luther states the main objective of his catechisms. Children want to understand as well, and we should give them the support they need for it.

This is where my second answer to the question about the place for children's theology in Godly Play comes in. In my view, the 'wondering phase' in Godly Play could be used as a bridge to children's theology. The English word *wondering* is actually a weak translation of the Italian *stupore*. *Stupore* does mean wondering, but certainly it also means much more; among other things, it relates to the Greek *thaumazein* (to admire, to marvel) as the root of all philosophical questions.

A children's theology approach could imply that there should be more emphasis on the wondering phase and more appreciation of children's active and creative the-

ological contributions. Moreover, it could mean that this phase should also be done differently, so that children are supported in their own independent thinking. This includes being prepared for critical questions, for example, about the relationship between creation and evolution or about God being able to hear prayers even if "so many people are praying at the same time" as one child put it, commenting on a picture she had drawn. Such pictures can also remind us of the fact that children's theology is not only a matter of the intellect. The ways in which children see and imagine the world are highly important, emotionally as well as relationally. Many examples from the field of children's theology show how probing questions articulated by children and playful attempts at answering them go hand in hand. What adults often consider separate worlds – playing on the one hand and serious thinking about 'big questions' on the other – actually goes together for children.

In fascinating ways, the work of the Swedish educator S. Hartmann (Hartmann and Torstenson-Ed, 2007) shows how children integrate religious doubt in their theological thinking. Hartmann devoted much of his professional life to the question what children think. He posed questions to children about their understanding of reality, of people and of the world, as well as their religious understandings. In his results he especially refers to the seeking and doubting character of children's faith. Doubt will be typically found more with older children, but it certainly is not absent at earlier times, for example, concerning the existence of God. 'Big questions' are part and parcel of children's ways of approaching the world. There is no need for adults to draw dividing lines between children's play and their more intellectual attempts at coming to terms with the transcendent.

4 Theology of Childhood

Theology of childhood is not the same as *children's theology*; it refers to adults and to their views of childhood. Such views are quite important for religious education and for the relationship to children in general. In many ways they determine how adults encounter children, what they expect of them, and what they do not consider them capable of.

A number of important studies on theologies of childhood in the history of Christianity have become available, including my own *Religion of the Child* (Schweitzer, 1992) and Berryman's *Children and the Theologians* (Berryman, 2009). These studies show that there has been a whole spectrum of different views of children within Christianity, positive images as well as negative or ambivalent ones. From today's perspective, many of the traditional views have to be challenged as distortions. This is not only true, for example, for the notoriously negative understandings in 18th century pietism, which led to the demand for constant surveillance lest the evil consequences of hereditary sin should break out with a child. It is also true for later views that, for example, describe children as savages. Yet distortions have also occurred in the opposite direction, when children were seen as angels or as redeemer-like figures, as sources of unspoiled wisdom or as the embodiment of innocence. As different as these views actually were, however, they had one thing in common. It was adults who created and maintained them. They were their projections onto children.

Yet it would certainly be wrong merely to criticize all Christian views of children and to end up with some kind of historical relativism. In spite of all the differences, there is a remarkable tradition that goes back to the New Testament and to how Jesus himself related to children, calling children true models of faith (cf. Bunge, 2001). In many ways, this tradition has led to the understanding of childhood as a stage of life that is of equal worth and dignity, and also to an understanding of children's faith as no less important or serious than the faith of adults.

In recent years, this kind of theology of childhood has been taken one step further – a step that I consider decisive. Children have to be treated as subjects. Adults have to become willing to change their perspective, away from the adult point of view and in favor of the children's perspective. This change of perspective is a necessary consequence from the Christian tradition concerning childhood.

Again, there is an interesting parallel with the Montessori tradition. In many of her works on children, Montessori includes references to God the creator. Even more often, however, she identifies children with Christ suffering on the cross (cf. Oelkers, 1989). Berryman takes up this Montessorian tradition, but he also modifies it in important respects. Both of his foundational books – *Godly Play* (Berryman, 1991) and *Children and the Theologians* (Berryman, 2009) – include a special chapter on the "Theology of Childhood" and on the "Doctrine of Children". His proposal for a theology of childhood suggests that we should view "children as sacraments". For him, children are a "means of grace".

I am as intrigued as I am puzzled by this suggestion. As a Lutheran, I can easily follow Berryman's attempt to see God's grace in children. For me, the very existence of children is a sign of God's continuing grace, and many adults find children to be one of the most obvious ways in which they encounter God's grace in the world. Yet not everything that is a 'means of grace' can be called a sacrament; otherwise the special character of sacraments gets lost, because everything good in the world would become a sacrament. Sacraments must remain special, or they will cease to be sacraments.

What might be more important in the present context, however, is the question if viewing children as sacraments really does justice to their status as subjects and as active centers of creativity. After all, I do not expect a sacrament to talk back to me.

In other words, what are the consequences of calling children 'sacraments'? Does it help us in seeing them as active subjects rather than mere objects?

In my understanding, both Godly Play and children's theology need to be based on a theology of childhood. This theology has to be in line with the Christian tradition that goes back to Jesus himself, by accepting children's capacity for faith and for their own understanding of faith – and ultimately as models for the faith of adults. Theologies of childhood have to do justice to this, theologically as well as in terms of the practise of religious education.

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