

A GAME TO BE PLAYED: PLAY AND AUTHORITY IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Abstract

This paper argues for the centrality and necessity of play in religious education for both children and adults as a means to learn and teach the art of using the Christian language system to create existential meaning. Play involves games which, in some form or other require structure and rules. In religious education these rules and structures provide the scaffolding needed for mastering and using the art of the Christian language system. This paper proceeds by describing play and games generally, noting the necessity of guiding rules and structure. It then explores the two fundamental types of games which may be involved in the Church and in religious education. The suggestion of “playful orthodoxy” as a way forward in religious education is then posited. Such a notion recognizes both the playful and discovering nature of the participant as well as the need to teach for closure and orthodoxy. In this way both the opening and closing tendencies of the creative process are honoured and the tradition taught is grounded but creative. The paper concludes by suggesting some ways in which religious education can be centred around play.

A game to be played: play *and* authority in religious education

If [Tom Sawyer] had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would now have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is *obliged* to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do.

(Mark Twain, 2002, p. 21; original work published 1876, italics and capitalization in the original).

Play

Tom Sawyer’s efforts to make the laborious task of white-washing Aunt Polly’s fence seem so playful that Ben Rogers and several other boys of the village pay in kind for the privilege of engaging in this activity. Mark Twain’s subsequent philosophical reflection on play, as quoted above, provides a definition which seems very clear and straightforward. Yet those who have observed both children and adults in play would argue that it is difficult, if not impossible to formulate a succinct definition of play, and most modern scholars in the field have resisted the temptation to do so (see for example, Brown, 2009; Chudacoff, 2007; Garvey, 1977; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Some, such as Johnston (1983) maintain that those who have attempted to define the meaning of play have “consistently been guilty of reducing it to something other than play in its fullness” (p. 32). In an attempt to avoid such a reductionist approach, this section briefly explores some pertinent elements of play, and how these might be understood within this paper.

Perhaps one of the most important elements to note about play, and one which is consistent with Twain’s view above, is the lack of compulsion, or obligation, to engage in play. Play is voluntary and spontaneous; it is pleasurable and played for itself. It involves a deep engagement on the part of the players. These descriptions are emphasized by Garvey (1977) and affirmed by other contemporary theorists (for example, Brown, 2009; Chudacoff, 2007). However, such elements provide only one insight into play. Others are needed to present a more robust description of this phenomenon.

In his seminal work *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga (1955, original work published in 1938) maintained that the various descriptions of play offered by his contemporaries dealt only incidentally with the question of what play actually is “*in itself*” (p. 5, italics in the original) and what it means for the player. He argued that his contemporaries associated play directly with the quantitative methods of experimental science without first paying attention to the profoundly aesthetic quality of play.

Huizinga proceeded to argue that even in its simplest forms, play involves more than a physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It has a significant function in enabling all who engage in it to transcend the immediate needs of life and impart meaning to the action. Therefore, all play “means something” (p. 1). In essence, he described play in terms of a voluntary activity, absorbing to the player and yet also existing outside of the scope of everyday life. In extending such a notion, other scholars similarly note that the many play patterns in which human beings engage are an integral part of their culture because, they mean something (see for example Ackerman, 2006; Brewster, 1971).

However, a key insight from Huizinga (1955) for religious educators and scholars is the idea that, because play always means something to those who engage in it, there is the possibility of a close relationship between play and religious experience, specifically between play and sacred ritual as a means by which human beings create meaning in relation to the holy. For Huizinga, the concept of play merges quite naturally with the concept of holiness:

In play as we conceive it the distinction between belief and make-believe breaks down...archaic ritual is thus sacred play, indispensable for the well-being of the community, fecund of cosmic insight and social development but always play in the sense Plato gave it – an action accomplishing itself outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life (pp. 25-26).

In more recent times, also drawing upon the work of Huizinga, Ackerman (2006) introduces the notion of “deep play”. Deep play is the ecstatic form of play. Ackerman maintains that in deep play, all the play elements are visible, but they are taken to intense and transcendent heights¹. Deep play always involves the sacred and the holy in some form. For Ackerman, deep play is central to the life of all people. It “reveals our need to seek a special brand of transcendence” (p. 17). Ackerman maintains that a close examination of religious rites and festivals reveals the many and various play elements which are present. These include dance, worship, music, and symbol. However, in religious ritual, these various play elements attain great depth. As Ackerman says, “they swallow time. They are ecstatic, absorbing, rejuvenating” (p. 17).

This resonates with the thinking of Romano Guardini. In his work *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Guardini (1953, original work published in 1937) posits the case for the playfulness of the liturgy. Using the image of the play of the child and the creation of the artist, Guardini maintains that the essence of the liturgy involves not work, but play – “To be at play, or to fashion a work of art in God’s sight – not to create, but to exist – such is the essence of the liturgy” (p. 181). This is the deep play to which Ackerman (2006), and before her, Huizinga (1955) allude. Rahner (1965) also expressed this notion, positing that the Catholic liturgy “is itself very like a single solemn piece of playing or miming” (p. 79) and that “a sacral dance, carried out by both clergy and laity, has been woven around the austere core of the liturgy” (p. 80).

Guardini (1953) further suggests that the many aspects of the liturgy, such as the quality of language, gestures, colours, garments and instruments employed can only really be understood by those who are able to take art and play seriously. Its forms become the rules of the game, or as Guardini says, “the serious rules of the sacred game which the soul plays before God” (pp. 182-183).

The idea that play has rules, then, is crucial for playing. Although play is spontaneous, freely chosen, absorbing and pleasurable, those who play inevitably devise rules and structures to guide their play, even if those rules are changed or are made up as the play progresses. When rules and structures are introduced to the play, the play becomes a game.

Games

It may be problematic to separate play from games, since the two usually occur simultaneously. However, constructive analysis requires that this be done. What makes a game a game? As soon as one begins to play, one inevitably begins to devise some type of structure to guide the play, even if one is playing alone with one’s alter ego, or with God as in contemplation. Huizinga (1955) notes that, “All play has its rules. They determine what ‘holds’ in the temporary world circumscribed by play” (p. 11). Brewster supports this

view, maintaining through his observations of children that “although the games are spontaneous and unsupervised, there are certain rigid rules, learned from elders or formulated by the children themselves, to which they conscientiously adhere” (p. 16). Similarly, other contemporary writers such as Abt (1970), Garvey (1977), Schaefer (1993), Sutton-Smith (1997), and Ackerman (2006) contend that all types of play behaviour, at some point, are guided by rules and structures.

When play is guided by rules and structures, the play becomes a game. Nonetheless, the fact that the rules and structures of the game are freely accepted by the players is crucial. In his work *Man, Play and Games*, Caillois (1961, original work published in 1958) stresses this particular point. He notes that any game in which one is forced to play would effectually cease to be play. It would become

constraint, drudgery from which one would strive to be freed. As an obligation...it would lose one of its basic characteristics: the fact that the player devotes himself spontaneously to the game, of his free will and for his pleasure, each time completely free to choose retreat, silence, meditation, idle solitude, or creative activity (p. 6).

The rules and structures, then, ought not stifle the autonomy of the players. Caillois (1961) further contends that, although the game proceeds within certain agreed boundaries, the players’ action and response to the various twists and turns of the game “*is free within the limits set by the rules*” (p. 8, italics in the original). The rules of the game, then, do not specify action, but rather limit the alternatives about what action can take place.

In exploring the concept of games, Carse (1986) argues that there are two fundamental types of games which can be played. Firstly, there are finite games. These are the familiar contests of everyday life. They are played in order to be won, and when there is a winner, such games come to an end. Secondly, there are infinite games. These games are more mysterious. According to Carse, the object of such a game is not winning, but rather to ensure the continuation of the play. In infinite games the rules and boundaries may change. Even the participants may change – as long as the game is never allowed to come to an end. For instance, the rules may change when the players of an infinite game agree that the play is imperilled by a finite outcome – that is, by the victory of some players and the defeat of others. The rules of an infinite game “are changed to prevent anyone from winning the game and to bring as many persons as possible into the play” (p. 9).

Infinite games then have quite a different status from finite games. Carse (1986) describes the rules of infinite games to be like “the grammar of a living language, where those of a finite game are like the rules of a debate. In the former case we observe rules as a way of continuing discourse with each other; in the latter we observe rules as a way of bringing the speech of another person to an end” (p. 9). He further maintains that the rules, or grammar, of a living language “are always evolving to guarantee the meaningfulness of discourse, while the rules of debate must remain constant” (pp. 9-10). However, while the rules of an infinite game may be changed by agreement at any point in the course of play, it does not follow that any rule will suffice. Carse argues that the rules are designed, and if necessary changed, in order to deal with specific threats to the continuation of play. “Infinite players use the rules to regulate the ways they will take the boundaries or limits being forced against their play into the game itself” (p. 10), even when death is one of the limits. Put another way, “Finite players play within boundaries; infinite players play with boundaries” (p. 10).

The concept of an infinite game resonates with play and sacred ritual as referred to by Huizinga (1955) and Ackerman (2006), and the playfulness of the liturgy referred to by Guardini (1953) and Rahner (1965). It also resonates with religious education, particularly the Godly Play approach to religious education. While this will be discussed later in this paper, it is important to note briefly here that in Godly Play, the players use religious language to play at the boundaries, at the edges, of being and knowing (Berryman, 1991, p. 149).

Since infinite games are involved with ultimate concerns and playing at the edges of experience, and since they may incorporate the deep play of sacred ritual and liturgy, they could be conceived of as the type of game which the Church (in its broadest and ideal conception) plays.

Games played in religious education

Games played in the Church, and subsequently in religious education, are intended as infinite games. In drawing upon the work of Romano Guardini, Lang (1997) classifies six sacred games which are played out in Christian worship: praise, prayer, sermon, sacrifice, sacrament, and spiritual ecstasy. These games are essentially infinite games since they are played at the edges of knowing and being. They incorporate the boundaries or limits into the game itself, enabling the players to play with boundaries. This reflects Hugo Rahner's (1965) understanding of religion as *theologia ludens*, an interpretation of traditional religion as play. Rahner further posits that religion as play recovers the forgotten virtue of *eutrapelia*, a Greek word which attempts to express a mean between "gravity and playfulness, crying and laughing" (p. 92) in religion. Put another way, it may also be translated as "play for the sake of seriousness" (Rahner, 1965, p. 95).

In reviewing Rahner's contribution to play-theory, Miller (1973) notes that *theologia ludens* views God as a player, human beings as players, the Church as the community of play, and salvation as play. In other words, *theologia ludens* is "a theology of play, by play, and for play; it must wittingly incarnate its content" (p. 159, italics in the original).

However, during the two thousand years of Christian history, the infinite game often collapses. The boundaries – death, the threat of freedom, aloneness, and the need for meaning (Berryman, 1991, p. 57) – have not been taken into the game. Instead, they have become the limits *within which* people come to play, rather than boundaries *with which* the participants play and incorporate into the game. The game thus becomes a finite game. This has led to the rules and structure of the game becoming fixed and constant so that a sense of absolute orthodoxy prevails. Rather than the "grammar of a living language" (Carse, 1986, p. 9), the rules of this finite game serve to preserve language in a series of propositional or doctrinal statements, thereby bringing the discourse to an end. Game over!

But a sense of orthodoxy is needed and it is right that orthodoxy be insisted upon. As FitzSimons Allison (1994) notes, orthodoxy provides the acceptable limits within which the "profound mysteries of the Trinity" (p. 20) should be approached. That is, orthodoxy provides the creeds and guiding structures for the game. However when the finite game of absolute orthodoxy demands an "assent to the creeds rather than 'yes' to the God to whom the creeds point" (p. 20), heresy ensues.

When the Church engages in this finite game, it influences religious education to do the same. When the finite game of orthodoxy prevails the players are no longer free to play at the edges of their knowing and being, but are restricted by a set of rules and structures which require them to learn "the right words," as agreed to by the leadership of church organizations. The religious education curricula, no matter what its rationale may state, and no matter what pedagogical approach is espoused, becomes limited in such a social system to furnishing participants with the desired language as an end in itself, which teaches idolatry, not communion with God and one's neighbour.

In his book *Games People Play*, Berne (1967) outlines a number of "life games" which appear to parallel what might happen in religious education when the participants are restricted by rules which require them to learn and adhere to propositional statements. An example of such a game is "Debtor" (pp. 81-84) – a plan for a whole lifetime – in which the players are in-debt to one another for a good deed performed. The players then spend the rest of their lives seeking to pay off the debt. For example, Jesus Christ died for the sins of humankind, therefore humankind performs works of sacrifice, almsgiving and prayer as a means by which to pay off the debt and ensure salvation. The individual then becomes trapped in a finite pattern of behaviour that is destructive rather than life-giving.

The art of being able to use religious language to find life-giving salvation is a crucial goal of religious education. So, the way such language is used must be carefully considered. Is the purpose to enable participants to learn such a language as an end in itself? If so, this becomes a finite game which ends in a series of finite statements, and becomes words about words. Writers such as Miller (1973) warn that this is potentially idolatrous. Or, is the purpose of being able to use such language to enable participants to play at the edges of knowing and being so as to discern meaning from sacred stories, parables, liturgical actions and contemplative silence? If so, then this reflects *theologia ludens* in which the ultimate concern is “not so much the articulation and understanding of the faith of the church...as it is to articulate and understand the articulation and the understanding” (Miller, 1973, p. 159). This reflects a more infinite game which seeks meaning and purpose.

Those who rightly insist upon orthodoxy may then perhaps ask, “How can we be sure that such a game won’t teach the wrong thing?” Abt (1970) would argue that one can’t be sure, any more than one could be sure that a book or a lecture doesn’t teach the wrong thing by implication or accident, as well as by intent. But, taken to its logical extreme, Abt argues, undue concern about teaching the wrong thing “leads to a preference for the very *least* effective teaching methods, since these offer the least threat of corrupting the young” (p. 115, italics in the original). It is therefore dangerous to dismiss an infinite game solely for fear that it might “teach the wrong thing” because it results in teaching poorly or even destructively. Is this really what teachers want for religious education?

Perhaps the way forward may be to consider religious education as an infinite game in which both playing at the edges of knowing and being (that is, playing with the boundaries), as well as the closure of orthodoxy, are possible and honoured. Although these two elements seem to move in opposite directions, both are actually parts of a larger whole, the creative process (Berryman, 2005).

A way forward: playful orthodoxy – the opening and closing tendencies of the creative process

Religious practices and rituals throughout the evolution of the human species have served as ways to cope through tradition and creativity with existential issues and situations of danger as well as celebration (Berryman, 2005). Through the rules and structures of the religious game, rituals conserve ways for enacting fundamental stories. They also provide a safe place in which the creative process can flourish in order to craft personal narratives. This section of the paper discusses creativity and the creative process with a view to grounding religious education, as an infinite game, in the creative process so that both parts of this larger whole – orthodoxy and playing at the edges of knowing and being – are acknowledged and honoured.

Creativity flow

American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has researched and written in the area of creativity for more than thirty years. He posited that the experience of *flow* which is related to the concept of deep play, as discussed earlier, makes creativity pleasurable, and thus self-reinforcing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). But further, he argues that human beings are born

...with two contradictory sets of instructions: a conservative tendency, made up of instincts for self preservation, self-aggrandizement, and saving energy, and an expansive tendency made up of instincts for exploring, for enjoying novelty and risk – the curiosity that leads to creativity belongs to this set (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 11).

Both of these tendencies are necessary for human beings, and both parallel the notions of orthodoxy, the conservative tendency, and playing at the edges of knowing and being, the expansive tendency.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) further develops the notion of creativity by arguing that it occurs “in the interaction between a person’s thought and a sociocultural context” (p. 23) and is made up of three components: the

domain (such as mathematics, or indeed religion); a field (consisting of people who act as gatekeepers to the domain, such as teachers, critics, or administrators, all of whom act so as to decide whether a new idea should be included in the domain); and the individual person who uses the symbols of a given domain to develop a new idea.

Arguing that religion is a domain of creativity, Berryman (1991) describes the creative process as a movement with an opening (expansive tendency) and closing (conserving) phase. In taking his initial impetus from the work of Loder (1979; 1981), Berryman envisages the whole movement consists of five steps², the first consisting of a disruption of one's circle of meaning, wherein an established idea or meaning is broken in some way, for instance, by being challenged. The second step in the creative process involves the scanning for a new frame of meaning to cope with the disruption, and to restore cohesion. This step could last for hours, days, or even years, and may occur either consciously or unconsciously (Berryman, 2005). The third step is insight. A new and more adequate pattern is formed and becomes a new frame of meaning, using the symbols of the given domain to develop the idea. Until this point the process has been largely nonverbal. The fourth step – the point at which closure begins – involves the new insight being articulated, verbalized and evaluated by the rules and structure of the particular domain in which it was discovered until there is closure. The gatekeepers are involved at this point, deciding whether or not the new idea should be included in the domain. Closure is the fifth step.

Berryman (2005) notes that different people tend to enter the creative process at different points. Those with more playful and expansive tendencies will engage thoroughly with the first three stages of the process. Conservative people tend to enter the process after the insight, around step four. According to Berryman, steps four and five are most attractive to the hierarchical structures of religious traditions, whose tendency is to insist upon orthodoxy. It is critical to note, however, that all parts of the creative process are necessary and need to be emphasized when playing the religious language game. The rules and structures, which particularly come into play in steps four and five, provide the scaffolding for the opening and more playful tendencies represented in steps one to three. Herein lies the notion of playful orthodoxy, in which both the opening and closing tendencies are honoured.

Creativity styles

The styles of creativity also provide further clarity to the creative process. Although his work has been the subject of academic critique for its reliance upon cognitive developmental theory, the work of Howard Gardner is drawn upon here for its significant contribution to the concept of creativity and its styles.

Gardner (1983) was among the first to propose the plurality of the intellect, arguing initially the case for the existence of seven “*relatively autonomous* human intellectual competencies...[or] ‘frames of mind’”(p. 8, italics in the original) which can be fashioned and combined in different ways by individuals to address and solve problems. Some ten years later, Gardner (1993) applied the theory of multiple intelligences to creativity, which gave rise to his notion of styles of creativity. In this work, he identified the different ways in which people create, aligned to his original notion of multiple intelligences. For instance, Igor Stravinsky is Gardner's exemplar for musical-rhythmic intelligence. T.S Eliot typified the way in which an individual's creativity might be expressed through a verbal-linguistic frame.

In his later work *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century*, Gardner (1999) proposed an additional frame of knowing. It was represented by a person who was especially attracted to patterns in nature. Gardner also discussed the existential, spiritual and moral sensitivities a person might display in relation to any one of the specific frames of knowing.

The relevance of Gardner's work to this discussion lies in his assertion of the needs for educators to be aware of the multiple ways of knowing, and of the particular ways in which their students demonstrate a preference for learning and expressing their creativity. However, he cautions against simply running students through all the ways of knowing for a particular lesson:

MI theory is in no way an educational prescription...In particular, I am leery of implementations such as...Attempting to teach all concepts of a subject using all of the intelligences. To be sure, most topics can be taught in a variety of ways, but applying a scattershot approach to each topic is a waste of time and effort (Gardner, 1999, pp. 89-90).

An awareness of the different ways of knowing is better used to help understand and resolve communication and learning difficulties as they arise so that children can constructively begin to manage them by becoming aware of their own particular talents.

Grounding religious education in the creative process centering around play

As has been established, all games, both finite and infinite, have rules and structures to guide the play. The game of religious education is no different. The rules and structures in this game should provide a safe place in which playing at the edges of knowing and being, and the closure of orthodoxy – both of which are parts of the creative process – are made possible. The question of how best to ground the game of religious education in the creative process remains. How can religious education honour and enable play at the edges of one's own knowing and being to occur, yet at the same time, teach for the closure of orthodoxy?

While there may be other ways which achieve these aims, one particular approach which has been shown to honour both the opening and closing tendencies in the creative process, and which has been developed and refined over a period spanning more than thirty-five years, is Godly Play³. In this particular process, the participants learn the art of religious language as a means by which to discern meaning in relation to existential issues – by playing at the edges of knowing and being. The Christian language system itself, and the prepared environment of the Godly Play classroom, which is infused with this language system, provide the rules and structures which guide the play, which is one of the best ways to learn a language.

Four ways in which Godly Play can be seen to be grounded in the creative process can be identified. Firstly, and in drawing upon Csikszentmihalyi's language, the gatekeepers recognise children as theologians who are seeking meaning and direction in relation to their existential limits. The recent research of Hart (2003) and Hyde (2008) affirm this dimension of children's lives. When the gatekeepers respect and are open to the theological enquiry of children, the children reveal their theological interests. In presenting the lesson, and in allowing children to respond through wondering and art, children learn to think for themselves *within their tradition* so that they can develop their own authentic and creative ways to confront their existential issues.

Secondly, each of the five steps of the creative process is emphasized in playing the religious language game, and children are encouraged to use the whole process when thinking theologically. For instance, a scanning child (step 2) wandering around the open classroom is supported by the gatekeeper to discover an insight. An insight child (step 3) is encouraged to develop a thought or idea. The rules and structures for behaviour, as well as the organization of the room, assist here in helping to ensure orthodoxy, while simultaneously enabling the child to play with an idea. However, since play is voluntary, the child needs to be "invited, guided, and intrigued to take part" (Berryman, 2005, p. 447).

Thirdly, the creativity styles of children are valued and supported as a way of reconnecting the use of religious language to the creative process. The mentors and gatekeepers also need to be aware of their own frames of knowing so as not to project these onto the children as the only means of religious expression. Traditionally, words have been the dominant mode of communication in religious education, often with the aim of being memorized in some way⁴. However, memorization and prescribed interpretation by-pass the child's creative process as well as the other frames of knowing. Sensitivity to the children's developing styles and frames of knowing is encouraged.

Fourthly, the use of play, ritual and storytelling help to ground religious education in the creative process. Play, ritual and storytelling are activities in which all humans engage. Play can involve the scanning for new

frames of meaning to cope with the disruption to one's circle of meaning. Ritual provides shape and structure (the rules) for the play. Storytelling, as an age-old medium for both children and adults, engages children's religious experience. The combination of all three provides an effective way of honouring the opening and closing tendencies of the creative process.

Conclusion and an important post script

As an infinite game, religious education involves not only human players. In playing the religious language game, God as the Holy Trinity – as Creator, Redeemer and Holy Spirit – is also invited to play. Rahner (1965) captured this idea in proposing God as "*Deus vere ludens*" (p. 25, italic in the original) – God who plays. While one cannot guarantee that God is present in this infinite game, acknowledging the possibility that God *may* be present assumes that children may already know and have experienced God in their lives and in their play.

The implication here is that what happens when children participate in the infinite game of religious education takes places between each child and God. The real "teaching" happens by the work of the Holy Spirit, who acts through the teacher. As Saint Augustine writes "if the Holy Spirit is speaking in those who are handed over to the persecutors on Christ's account, why not also in those who are handing Christ over to the learners?" (Rotelle, 1996, p. 219).

The role of the children's mentors is not to impart religious truths, but rather to present the lesson and to provide a safe environment, equipped with the necessary rules and structures (orthodoxy), so that the play between each child and God in community is scaffolded, enabling Creator and creature to play at the edges of knowing and being, to co-create together.

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¹ It is interesting to note that although Ackerman uses the phrase "transcendent heights", she is actually referring to the deep experience of play, that is, going deeper and inwards rather than higher and outwards. She is, in effect, using a mixed metaphor to describe the notion of deep play.

² Loder (1979; 1981) describes the five steps of the movement as an inherent pattern or logic of the knowing event which intertwines novelty and continuity. The pattern consists of (1) conflict; (2) interlude and scanning; (3) insight felt with intuitive force; (4) release and redirection of the psychic energy bound up with the original conflict; and (5) interpretation.

³ For a comprehensive guide to the Godly Play process, see Berryman (2009). In this work, both the theoretical underpinnings and practicalities of Godly Play are detailed.

⁴ Memorization, as it is used here, does not necessarily refer to rote learning, but to any form of learning which requires subject matter to be committed to memory, or learned by heart.