

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**Playful Orthodoxy:  
Reconnecting Religion and Creativity by Education  
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People tend towards orthodoxy or openness in their theory and practice of religious education, but extreme versions of both tendencies are dangerous. Orthodoxy can tend towards rigidity and conflict while open teaching can result in a lack of commitment and depth. Religion, therefore, needs to be restored to its grounding in creativity, which includes both opening and closing tendencies, and results in the synthesis of playful orthodoxy rather than either dangerous extreme. The use of play, ritual, and narrative is the way to achieve such a synthesis, but many children do not know how to be active and constructive participants in play, ritual or story. The Montessori method is adapted, therefore, to encourage children to be more self-directed and active in their participation in ritual and story as well as more wondering and creative in their play with regards to religion. A way to accomplish this is Godly Play™, an approach developed from within the Christian tradition, but there is no reason in principle why the same strategy could not be adapted by any of the world's religions to help cope with trouble rather than causing trouble by religious practice.

The problem addressed here arises when one notices that the two fundamental tendencies of religious education, teaching for the closure of orthodoxy and the openness of the seeker, move in opposite directions. Since both tendencies are dangerous, when they stand alone, religious education is confronted with what seems like a cruel dilemma.

If one teaches for orthodoxy by memorization, with an emphasis on authority, by the formation of habits, the promotion of single-minded duty, and by forming an us-against-them mentality, then the result is a deeply held, clear concept and firm practice. The danger is that this can result in the formation of an orthodoxy that is rigid, close-minded, defensive, and sometimes violent.

The opposite extreme is also dangerous. Teaching religion in a way that encourages self-direction, wonder, discovery, perspective taking, pluralism, and inclusiveness tends towards an “any thing goes” approach. No identity or community is formed to guide and support one. Such rootless religion can sometimes even result in the loss of personal identity.

This closing – opening dilemma is false, however, because what appear to be opposing tendencies are actually parts of a larger whole, the creative process. Grounding religious education in creativity, however, is counter-intuitive. To speak of “playful orthodoxy” has the ring of an oxymoron to it.

The opening and closing tendencies of the creative process become separated when religion shifts its experience base from the creative process to power. Power based religion is so pervasive that our language has conformed to this separation as being normal.

The problem with power based religion is that it resists the opening aspect of the creative process and favors only the closing tendency. The secondary use of creativity when applied to power based religion limits the process to protecting the system and promoting its expansion. When this happens religion decays as a way for creative coping with ageless existential issues and new situations in life and death. Instead of being a way to cope with trouble it becomes trouble itself.

To address this problem we must re-root the teaching of religion in the creative process. To support this conclusion a long view of religion will be taken to affirm its creative function. Secondly, the “where” and “what” of creativity will be discussed. Thirdly, the style and stage aspects of the creative process will be examined. The fourth step will be to discuss how religious language can be re-rooted in the creative process. The fifth step examines what kind of teacher is needed to accomplish this. Finally, the question of what method should be used to teach playful orthodoxy will be addressed.

### **Religion and Creativity**

The established world religions have long perplexed and frustrated people with their conflicting and exclusive truth claims. Today this conflict threatens the survival of the species and, perhaps, the continuation of life in any form. To gain perspective on what religion is for we shall, therefore, go back to prehistory long before any of the present world religions existed. This is not done to discover a “golden age” but to propose that religion’s fundamental function is to cope creatively with trouble.

Trouble is what prompts stories (Bruner 1996). It forces us to play with a situation to see if we can find a better way for the story to turn out. When any of our fundamental needs --- physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, or self-actualization (Maslow 1971) --- are frustrated we experience trouble. Rituals conserve ways for enacting fundamental stories and to provide a safe place in which the creative process can flourish to create more optimum personal narratives. Religious practices arose during prehistory. Apparently they were a way to cope by tradition and creativity with timeless, existential limits and timely new situations. This probably began with ritualized actions, which then developed into rituals with words.

The speech picture became somewhat clear after about 35,000 BCE. The Cro-Magnon people could speak (Crystal 1997, 292), so speech became available to help creatively cope with trouble. Writing, however, did not develop until about 3,500 BCE, in southwest Asia (Crystal 1997, 198). This means that little can be known about the play, rituals, and stories, which people used until then.

About 40,000 years ago, then, a new way of thinking was born. This is especially noticeable in the artifacts that show no immediate survival use. Cave paintings, ornaments for the body, and burial practices are examples. The cave paintings seem to have been for social use and were made far from the animals painted and the bulges of the walls were used to make them more realistic. They had been imagined and were to aid the imaginations of others. Perhaps, they were a link between the spirit and the everyday world and conveyed energy to the people who saw or touched them.

Since modern mammals play there is no reason to think that ancient humans did not, even as language was only first developing. Play is fun, so it is self-reinforcing. It is not the product of play that motivates one to play but the playing itself. Play absorbs the player and is entirely voluntary. When combat is re-framed as play the combatants do not bite all they way down to kill and eat their prey, so play provides a way to practice, to enjoy one's skill, to discover new moves, to try out new weapons, and live to tell about it. Play is also associated with learning languages, creativity, learning social roles, and problem solving (Garvey 1977).

What-if or wondering play gives rise to creating new ways of doing things. As-if or role play helped form continuity by ritual and story telling to induct children into adult roles. These two kinds of play suggest that they are grounded in the exploring (wondering play) and conserving (role play) aspects of the creative process. Religion's early function, then, was to cope creatively with trouble by play, ritual, art, and story telling. This was, perhaps, the beginning of the particular kind of discourse we now call "religious." That is our assertion here.

Creative coping by means of religious language helped save human beings as a species. We, therefore, need to better understand the connection between religion and the creative process so religion can perform this constructive function for our species today rather than destroying it by religious conflict.

### **The Public Place and Private Process of Creativity**

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has spent more than three decades studying creativity. He discovered that the experience of "flow," which is related to "deep play (Csikszentmihalyi 1975 pp. 74-75)," is what makes creativity pleasurable and, therefore, self-reinforcing. The tendency to create new ideas and ways of solving problems, however, is not the only clue to our survival.

We are programmed with "two contradictory sets of instructions" (Csikszentmihalyi 1996 p.11). Human survival is the result of the tendency to conserve as well as to create. Our instinct for self-preservation, self-aggrandizement, and to conserve energy exists alongside our tendency to explore, enjoy novelty, and take risks.

Csikszentmihalyi asked "where" creativity is located to better understand it. He proposed a systems model to define creativity within a network of relationships involving a domain and a field, as well as the creative person. Creativity takes place when any act, idea, or product changes an existing domain or creates a new one (Csikszentmihalyi 1996 p. 28).

A domain consists of a set of language rules, vocabulary, and procedures. Mathematics is one example. Religion is another. The second component of creativity is the field. This is the group of people who act as gatekeepers to the domain. The third component of the creative system is the individual.

In Godly Play (Berryman 1991) individual creativity was described as a movement with an opening (exploring) and a closing (conserving) phase. The opening begins when an established meaning is broken by a crisis, irritated by dissonance, or dissolved by wonder. This initial step in the creative process is followed by the second step, which expends energy to scan for a more adequate kind of coherence to overcome the chaos resulting from the disruption. This might last for hours, days, or years and be conscious or unconscious. The third step is insight. A new, more adequate pattern is formed and forces its way into consciousness by means of an image, a fragment of a song, a piece of poetry, a dream, or by some other means.

After the insight closure begins. Up to now the process has been largely nonverbal and outside the confines of thought. The fourth step in the process takes the insight and develops it. The insight is clarified, filled out, and evaluated by the rules of the particular domain in which it was discovered until there is closure. This is the fifth step and is necessary to end the possibility of some people to never be satisfied with the development of their ideas.

The whole loop of the creative process is available to all of us, but individuals prefer different parts of it. Sometimes people enter the process at different points, depending on the subject matter, but by and large such preferences are consistent enough to be a general indicator of personality type.

Some people love the free flowing spirit of scanning so much they don't want to interrupt it by an insight, which takes an effort of focused energy quite different from that used in scanning. Sometimes this energy shift is noticed before the insight is evident so that one can be aware of "having" an idea before knowing what it is.

Other people are so delighted by having insights that they can endure long periods of what they might otherwise experience as pain and loneliness during the chaos of scanning. Once the insight is experienced, however, they often lose interest and do not develop it.

Conserving people step in after the insight. They can't stand the loss of meaning during a crisis or threat of dissonance and they certainly don't want to participate in the potential chaos of

wonder. They hate scanning and do not find the insight worth it. They don't even like to be around "creative" people, who enjoy such things.

During step four stability is sometimes maintained by trimming new ideas to fit what is already accepted by the field. At step five, the greatest control and least risk is maintained by limiting ones involvement to the purely executive step of accepting or denying the developed idea. Steps four and five, then, are most attractive to people using religion based on power and control.

It is important to note, as we conclude this section, that the creative loop can be used to accomplish destructive as well as constructive results. Sometimes an outcome is unknowable, so one goes forward with the process, betting that the outcome will be constructive. Destructive outcomes are, therefore, sometimes accidents. It is also true that one must tear down to build up a new idea or structure, so destruction is sometimes a byproduct of creativity. At other times, however, creativity is explicitly placed in the service of destruction. If religion's domain was developed to help human beings creatively cope with trouble then such destruction with intent in the name of "religion" is not religion. It is destructive activity pure and simple.

Creativity, then, includes both exploring and conserving tendencies. People, however, tend to prefer only parts of the process. This has caused religion to become uprooted from its ground in the whole process of creativity and has been based on the opening or the closing tendencies, leaving the impression that religious education must be based on one or the other rather than both.

There is more to creativity, however, than its opening and closing tendencies. Two more important features of creativity will now be examined.

### **Creativity's Styles and Stages**

The styles and stages of creativity give further definition to its process. This discussion will be guided primarily by Howard Gardner's theory of "multiple intelligences"(Gardner 1983) and James W. Fowler's theory of "faith development (Fowler 1981)."

Gardner's Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences was published in 1983. Ten years later he applied his theory to creativity in Creating Minds (Gardner 1993), which described what we will call "styles" of creativity. Although Creating Minds was published three

years before Csikszentmihalyi's Creativity (Csikszentmihalyi 1996) Gardner adapted Csikszentmihalyi's idea of using a systems model, which they had discussed for years, to help define creativity. What Gardner contributed to this discussion was the variety of ways people create and his interest in the connection between the creativity of the child and that of the master, which we will set aside for another time.

Einstein was Gardner's exemplar for logical-mathematical intelligence. Picasso illustrated spatial knowing. Stravinsky represented the musical frame. T. S. Eliot showed how a particular sensitivity to words can shape one's creative interests. Martha Graham exemplified kinesthetic creating. Gandhi showed interpersonal creativity at work and Freud was his model for a person tuned especially to the intra-personal.

In Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Gardner 1999) Gardner reported that he had discovered an additional frame of knowing to the first seven. It is found in the kind of person who is especially attracted to patterns in nature. He also discussed why existential, spiritual, or moral sensitivities are important aspects of character, but do not qualify as one of his frames of knowing. One might, therefore, display an existential, spiritual, or moral interest related to the interests of any of the frames of knowing.

Gardner also cautioned that his theory of multiple intelligences was not a recipe for education. To run children through all the ways of knowing for a particular lesson is a waste of the teacher's and children's time and energy. An awareness of the multiple ways of knowing is better used to help understand and remedy learning and communication difficulties when they arise (Gardner 1999 pp. 89-92), so they can be constructively managed.

In religious education one needs to keep stages as well as styles of creativity in mind to insure good communication. We turn now to a discussion about the constraints and opportunities highlighted by stage development theory.

My involvement with this point of view began as the editor of Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith (Fowler and Keen 1978), which helped pave the way for Fowler's Stages of Faith (Fowler 1981). In Europe Fritz Oser, a Swiss scholar, championed what he called "religious

development” (Oser & Gmunder 1984). Fowler’s faith development and Oser’s religious development have been compared, critiqued, and alternative perspectives have been suggested (Fowler, Nipkow, & Schweitzer 1991), but the focus here is on two very practical considerations for religious education informed by such theory.

First, the value of verbal and nonverbal communication shifts in importance during the development from childhood to adulthood. Children rely primarily on the nonverbal communication system while adults rely on their verbal skills. In late adulthood some adults then shift back again to rely primarily on the nonverbal system. Religious interests follow this pattern.

Second we not only need to teach for the discovery of new ideas but also for creating new stages of development. This has implications for both how religion is understood and how it is practiced.

By nonverbal communication I mean the facial expressions, vocalizations, gestures, calls, grunts, social grooming, pointing, and other such communication, which we share with other mammals. This communication does not develop in stages. As confidence grows in one’s linguistic behavior the nonverbal system becomes obscured, although it continue to provide clues to the meaning of words. The lack of awareness of the nonverbal system develops in part, because there is a complete discontinuity between linguistic and nonlinguistic behavior.

The two systems evolved in separate but parallel ways and are produced by different regions of the brain (Deacon 1997 p. 54 and Chapters 8-10). We can, therefore, describe nonverbal communication with words, as I am doing now, but it makes no sense at all to ask what word expresses a hearty laugh or anguished sob. There is no point-to-point translation. Still, the two systems are bound together, because much of what we say relies on nonverbal communication to nuance our verbal meaning. For example someone might say, “Good morning,” in such a way that it ruins your day.

We are ushered into the realm of verbal communication about the age of two years. The importance given to non-spoken communication declines until what Fowler calls the “Conjunctive Stage” develops in middle or late adulthood. It is then that unspoken communication begins to be

more positively valued once again. When adults begin to rely again on relationships rather than words to make meaning, then, the experience of God as presence becomes important again. This signals a second naivete, a way to be child-like in one's religious practice and the making of meaning.

The second practical implication for religious education from stage theory comes from the fact that the creative process may contribute to the development of new stages. This happens when one is drawn to the next "higher" stage because problems can be solved "one stage up" in a more comprehensive and satisfying way. Hearing stages "above" one's own creates a dissonance with normal patterns of thinking that sets the creative process in motion to create the next "higher" stage.

The opposite occurs, however, when the communication gap between people is more than one stage. Instead of being drawn to the "higher" stage one is repulsed and frustrated, because the "higher" form of discourse is completely unintelligible to the person at the "lower" stage. Care needs to be taken to watch for the two-stage gap, which damages present communication and can stifle the development of more complex and flexible religious thinking because it halts the creation of new stages.

Ascending the ladder of stages, however, is complex and not all beneficial. The ability to think at "higher" stages gives one the ability to think in broader, more abstract, and flexible ways, but something is also lost as each step "higher" is taken. The communication of presence and emotional uniqueness is lost, step by step, as pre-narrative and then narrative forms of speaking are devalued and avoided by conceptual thinking and concepts about such thinking.

For example a Fowler stage is identified by seven kinds of structures. One of these is the perspective-taking aspect of our thinking. As the creative process moves a person "upward" from stage to stage the ability to interpret a situation with greater perspective taking increases. One moves from understanding a situation from only his or her point of view to taking into consideration another person's standpoint. Continued development allows one to assume a hypothetical third-person way of looking at the interaction between the self and another person.

Then the ability to take the perspective of a different group, as it observes you, develops. For some people the ability to take the perspectives of conflicting subgroups within a group, that is interpreting your actions and thoughts, can also be developed.

The above illustration shows the potential, which stage development implies, for greater understanding of religion at “higher” stages, but it also shows how the possibility for greater misunderstanding between stages can develop. To restrict religious thinking to the “lower” stages of development robs humanity of one of its most important tools for creative coping with trouble, so the encouragement of stage growth is as important as teaching content. It should be accompanied, however, with the awareness, patience, and skill it takes to be aware of and to sort out cross-stage static in religious discourse as well as to promote a creative involvement with religious content within each stage.

This concludes our discussion of creativity --- the public place, personal process, style and stage considerations. We turn now to the fourth step in our presentation. How can we re-ground religious communication in the creative process?

### **Re-grounding Religious Communication in the Creative Process**

This section will follow the outline of the four characteristics of the creative process mentioned above. A suggestion about re-grounding religious communication will be offered for each characteristic.

First, let us discuss the gatekeepers. They need to respect and be more open to the theological inquiry of children. Always telling children how to think and feel stifles their creativity. They need to think for themselves within their tradition so they can develop their own authentic and creative ways to cope with existential trouble. Always telling children how to think and feel, on the other hand, sets up a power struggle between the child’s experience and the adult’s. Which is valid? This not only associates religion with a power struggle, but it also sets up a double bind for the child. The child must either give up his or her felt experience and comply with the adult’s interpretation or risk challenging the adult and affirming his or her experience as valid. The child

needs both the adult's sense that they are real and their own felt experience of being real. This double bind forces them to give up one or the other when they need both.

Recognizing children as theologians also takes advantage of their nonverbal closeness to God and lack of interest in power-based religion. If it is true that our spirituality is located in our non-verbal communication system and ought to be grounded in the creative process, then, children, who are not yet completely co-opted by adult religious language or religion as power, have especially important contributions to make as creative theologians.

Second, the whole creative process, steps 1-5, needs to be emphasized when playing the religious language game with children. As noted above, people are usually drawn to particular parts of the total process. To help re-root the use of religious language in the creative process children need to be encouraged to use the whole process when thinking theologically.

For example a scanning child, who appears to be merely wandering around the open classroom, needs to be supported to discover an insight. An insight child needs to be encouraged to develop his or her idea. A development child needs to be discouraged from copying other children's work and encouraged to discover his or her own unique insights. The executive child, who only wants to say which developed insight is accepted or not, needs to be challenged to set out on the whole risky voyage of discovery.

The pleasure of using the whole process is greater than engaging in only truncated parts of it. Children, however, do not know how self-reinforcing this is unless they are guided and supported to make such a discovery. Since play is voluntary this cannot be forced. Children need to be invited and intrigued to take part.

Third, when we turn to creativity styles we enter one of the most enjoyable and overlooked areas for reconnecting the use of religious language to the creative process. Children in general often go unsupported in their natural tuning to a unique frame of knowing. This is especially true in the area of religion, because the link between a preferred frame of knowing and religion is not always immediately apparent.

Adults also need to be aware of their own frame of knowing so they do not project it onto children as if it were the only possible means for religious expression. As was noted above, there are as many ways of creatively coping with trouble as there are of knowing, so adult guides need to be alert to this richness of possibility.

Children, like adults, need to play to their strengths. Not only is that where the most natural talent lies but also the most security. The creative process does not work at its optimal level unless it can do so in safety, so style support is important for both creative potential and the security in which it can bloom.

Words are usually the dominant mode of communication in religious education. They are to be memorized or interpreted in a prescribed way. Both strategies, memorization and prescribed interpretations, bypass the child's creative process. Matters are even worse if a child prefers the language frame of creation, as T.S.Eliot did. The child's unique gift of verbal creativity is often suppressed as an error or at least troublesome behavior.

Children naturally tuned to the other seven ways of knowing are also suppressed when language is the main means of teaching. The antidote to this is for the teacher to be sensitive to children's awakening styles so they can be encouraged. This affirms each child's preferred way of knowing and includes it in what counts as "real" for creative coping with trouble by religion.

Fourthly, we turn to re-rooting religion in the stages of development. There are two dimensions to this problem. The first is to acknowledge how creativity takes place within one's primary stage of knowing. This results in better learning of content and gives a solid base for the sorting out of cross-stage static when working with others. The second is how to encourage the growth of stages themselves.

One of the difficulties and delights of working with a circle of children is that they might be at three or even four stages, assuming childhood is from 2-12 years of age. Each child is moving through the stages at his or her unique rate, despite statistical guidelines. Sometimes children even mask their natural stages by memorizing a higher vocabulary and syntax to please

adults. When such children encounter something new, however, they “drop” in stage and re-engage their language with the creative process at their natural level.

The use of play, ritual, and story for teaching and using religion to creatively cope with trouble works as well today as it did in Cro-Magnon times. Play is located in our non-verbal communication system, so it does not divide into linguistic stages. Ritual is a combination of the non-verbal and the verbal, so children can find in it what they need. Story is the natural spoken medium for children, as well as many adults. The combination of all three, therefore, is the most appropriate way for teaching religion so that it is rooted in the creative process.

Well-designed teaching involving play, ritual, and narrative can be open to all the stages of language meaning. This can be achieved when the core of the metaphor out of which each sacred story, parable, or ritual action results is fashioned into a teaching object. Children, using such materials, do not need to keep the language in mind as they reflect on it, since they can move the story, parable, or rite about with their hands as it lies before them on the floor.

This strategy also means that the storyteller does not have to worry about matching the lesson’s language with each child’s stage. The children reveal their stage orientation when they respond, so the teacher does not have to guess. All stages can be valued equally and yet treated appropriately in such a situation. When stage differences become apparent to the children, as they wonder together about the lesson, the mentor can also show them how to work out the differences with patience and respect. Coping with cross stage static is valued and modeled in this way.

The open, Montessori-like setting is important in such teaching for many reasons, but it is especially ideal for stimulating stage development. Children will naturally hear “upper” stages in a multi-graded classroom and be drawn to them in the safety of the teacher’s support for all stages.

These four kinds of interventions --- in the public arena, the personal process, with respect to style, and for the two aspects of stage analysis --- are needed for teaching religion in a way that can help reconnect the use of religious language with the creative process. There are many more such interventions that can be made but these four illustrate that such grounding is possible.

The teacher was often mentioned in the above discussion. This raises the question of what kind of person is best qualified to teach religion to children if the goal is to re-root religion in the creative process. We turn to that discussion now.

### **Who Should Teach Religious Communication?**

Two general qualifications for the teacher of religious language can be dealt with quickly. First, he or she needs to be fluent in the language of the tradition being taught. Second, the teacher guide and mentor needs to be comfortable with the discovery method and teaching in an open classroom, where children can make choices from among constructive alternatives. This is rather straightforward. What is more complicated has to do with the teacher's stage development and role. It is this third qualification, which will concern us now.

Erik Erikson called those who take a genuine interest in the coming generation "generative." When generativity does not develop in adults there is instead "an obsessive need for pseudo-intimacy or of a compulsive kind of preoccupation with self-imagery --- both with a pervading sense of stagnation (Erikson 1998 p. 67)." The teacher of religion needs to be truly generative if he or she is going to help ground religious communication in the creativity of the child.

An ability to be comfortable in the rituals of such teaching is also necessary. In Toys and Reasons: Stages in the Ritualization of Experience Erikson defined ritual as "an agreed upon interplay between at least two persons who repeat it at meaningful intervals and in recurring contexts (Erikson 1966 p. 37)." The grounding of religious language in the creative process needs such "an agreed upon interplay." Ritual is what holds the child and adult together in the same language-learning game. It is this interplay that can bridge the stage and experience gaps between childhood and adulthood when teaching religion to children.

For such interplay to be successful the adult needs to be comfortable with being "a numinous model in the next generation's eyes" as well as a "judge of evil and the transmitter of ideal values," Erikson tells us. When the adult is not comfortable and playful in this role then the ritual becomes ritualism and the mentoring authority of the adult degenerates into what Erikson

called “Authoritism,” the nonverbal communication of the teacher as self-important and judgmental. Children need instead the safety of ritual interplay with a generative, adult guide and a safe, constructive community of children in which to be creative.

Erikson was appreciative of the power of play to help negotiate all the key psycho-social crises across the life span, but it was especially important during the “Initiative versus Guilt” crisis, which Erikson called the “Play Age.” Play becomes especially important again, it seems to me, when an adult turns toward the coming generation, because this “turning toward” is largely nonverbal.

One cannot distract children from the non-verbal, since they are not yet as co-opted by language as adults. They naturally pick up any conflict between the spoken and the unspoken message. This means that the teacher must be authentic about and enjoy his or her “turning toward” children to be truly generative.

We have been following Erikson to this point. We will now shift to Fowler’s stage analysis. As one makes his or her way through the stages of faith development there are exciting and useful changes, such as the shift from primarily valuing and using narrative to the use of ideas to create meaning. What happens later during the Conjunctive Stage, following my interpretation, is that thinking about one’s thinking in increasingly complex and abstract ways finally becomes a dead end. Fowler talks about the “postcritical rejoining of irreducible symbol as power and ideational meaning (Fowler 1981, 245),” which takes place during this stage, but I would like to add to that an emphasis on the re-assertion of the non-verbal communication system.

After experiencing several stages of cognitive development one cannot go back to the naivete-without-options of childhood when the non-verbal was primarily relied on. The adult, therefore, must choose in particular situations to allow nonverbal communication to re-assert itself if one is to continue to grow toward epistemological maturity.

An example of non-verbal communication re-asserting itself is when one chooses to not analyze Holy Communion while participating in it, even though the ability to do so is available and respected when used in other contexts. Instead one allows the nonverbal communication system to

dominate the experience and appreciates the quality of relationships that make the experience truly communion with God, others, the deep self, and with nature.

In addition, having passed through several stages, one begins to realize that each step toward more abstract and flexible thinking also subtracts an emphasis on the intimacy the “lower” stages share. Moving through several stages and experiencing the gain/loss each time helps one become more stage neutral, neither too attached to “higher” stages nor too repulsed by the “lower” ones. This frees one to truly see where children are in order to support where they might go as they develop their use of religious language.

In theory the way to bridge the gap between children and adults is for the adult to match the stage of the child or to speak one stage beyond his or her customary way of speaking. Unfortunately, this can feel to the child like being “talked down to” and is rightfully resented. An extreme example is the patronizing, singsong voice some adults use when addressing children.

When adults are truly generative and conjunctive, however, they do not “talk down” to children. The child, therefore, knows he or she has a true play partner and the game is one of mutual growth with God, the adult, and the community of children. With a teacher like this religious language can be grounded in creativity.

Unfortunately, most adults do not easily become generative and conjunctive. This is usually a property of one’s later years. The compromise is to teach teachers how to teach in a way that incorporates into their teaching role as many of these characteristics as possible.

In addition to an awareness of stage constraints and possibilities the teacher also needs to have a special appreciation for the uniqueness of religious language. This uniqueness was identified by Ian T. Ramsey (1915-1972), who was appointed the Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of Christian Religion at Oxford in 1951, and Bishop of Durham in 1966. He argued that there is an “empirical placement of theological phrases” so religious language cannot be reduced to some sort of emotional venting. It involves an “odd discernment” (Ramsey 1957), which requires a commitment to the linguistic domain to be made before it can be used well and

understood. A teacher, therefore, needs to develop in Ramsey's terms "a nose for odd language."

The "oddness" is more than religious language's difference from scientific language. It also includes, it seems to me, that religious language supports and then re-directs one back into the nonverbal communication system where our spirituality is located (Berryman 2001). An awareness of this also needs to be incorporated into the teaching role.

We have defined the role of the teacher needed for rooting religion in the creative process. We will now turn to what teachers need to teach if that is to take place.

### **Teaching Playful Orthodoxy**

We human beings do not learn "language in general." We learn particular languages, such as Arabic or Chinese and even within a particular language, such as English, we learn specialty languages --- such as medicine, law, or religion --- and each specialty language in turn has its own sub-functions.

To understand mathematics, for example, we begin with a particular base system, such as base ten, before being able to learn other base systems or speak about mathematics in general. Its sub-functions are "putting together," addition and multiplication, and "taking apart," subtraction and division.

Europeans, to take another example, learn western music and its many formal sub-functions, such as a symphony, to distinguish music from noise. They are then able to recognize and appreciate other kinds of music if they are rooted in Western music and are at the same time open to learn from new forms that they might discover.

Religious communication works in the same way. We need to learn a particular religious language system well, such as Christianity, if we are going to be able to understand another religion such as Islam or make meaningful comments about religion in general. What follows is a description of a way to teach "how to speak Christian" that is rooted in the whole of the creative process so it includes both the rooting of orthodoxy and the openness needed to meet new challenges.

Children are invited into a circle with a mentoring storyteller. The surrounding room is carefully laid out with sacred stories, parables, and liturgical action materials. An additional function of the Christian language system, silence, is also taught but the means for this kind of communication is in the children themselves. While other teaching materials are silent and can still communicate in their silence the human beings in the room are the only ones who can “make silence” and communicate back-and-forth in multiple ways through their relationships. This makes these four kinds of communication, a substantial part of the complete Christian language system, and the part-whole relationship clear to the children at the level of intuition from age two years onward. The complexity of the Christian system is not simplified but presented appropriately in this way so that the whole system is taught when any part of it is taught.

The spirit of the teaching is playful, but is also tough and clear about the rules. No game, even language games, can be played without rules. They provide safety and the means for being together. A clear ritual, then, defines the time spent. It is as carefully thought out as the space has been in which the play takes place. The deep structure of the Holy Eucharist provides the rules for profoundly playing this orthodox yet open, Christian language game.

Children are invited to enter the teaching/learning time and space after they are “ready.” They need to learn how to be ready, because this language does not work unless people can make the “odd discernment” necessary for it to work. They bring their existential troubles with them to be juxtaposed with the power of religious language and God’s presence. The lesson is then presented and in the wondering and expressive art that follow these troubles can be creatively coped with while the language is being learned. This shows that it is important and the pleasure of learning it comes from the satisfaction of deep existential meaning. A feast and prayers are shared and respectful good-byes are said, one by one, with a sense of blessing and constructive closure.

The adult guides show, rather than merely talk directly about, how to use the language to make meaning. It takes being ready, wonder, and play. It is assumed that children naturally know God. What they lack is the language and a community in which to be at play with God, as

creators created in God's image. Learning the art of how "to speak Christian" in this way supplies what nature cannot provide for their spiritual maturity.

The curriculum is an integrated spiral for children usually about 2-12 years of age. If adolescents have grown up in such classes many additional options for teaching are available, for the language is already creatively rooted. Adolescents who have not been raised this way can benefit by starting at the beginning with this approach, as can adults.

The basic lessons are returned to year after year. This repetition provides a way for children to practice one of the unique properties of this language system. The new can be found in the old. The content of this kind of language is never exhausted, but it takes practice and creativity to find its hidden meanings and God's presence there.

On the other hand, the spiral of the curriculum adds complexity and additional lessons as the years go by. For example the lessons about The Creation and The Faces of Christ (the story of Jesus) are told as single lessons and then children are invited to formulate an incarnational theology by placing the tiles from the two lessons together, as they see fit, into an integrated whole. Later, about age ten or eleven years, The Creation, The Faces, and the lesson about Paul are joined with part of the lesson about Holy Baptism to create an experience of the Holy Trinity. This recapitulates the development from narrative to concept in the history of theology and parallels the stages of faith development children are moving through at this time in their lives.

It is not possible to describe the whole method here, but resources are readily available to do so. The method is called Godly Play™ and was explicitly begun about 1972, although some of the theoretical aspects date back to 1960. See for example: Godly Play (Berryman 1991) Teaching Godly Play (Berryman 1995) and The Complete Guide to Godly Play (Berryman 2002, 2003). The history of this method's relationship to Montessori education is traced in Volume 1 of The Complete Guide (Berryman 2002). Two important websites are also available: [godlyplay.org](http://godlyplay.org) and [godlyplay.com](http://godlyplay.com).

## **Conclusion**

The ability of religious education to ground religion in the creative process is critical for the survival of the human species. When religion is grounded in power its danger to life has been made obvious by centuries of violence. Furthermore, the only kind of religion able to counter the threat of power-based “religion” is religion rooted in creativity. Out-creating the destructionists is our only hope.

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