

Advance praise for *The Spiritual Guidance of Children: Montessori, Godly Play, and the Future*

With help from the poets, Berryman opens us to the creative center of ourselves, that space where even adults may yet discover the graced mystery of the triune God. Count me as one of many apprentices awed by Berryman's spiritual mastery and life-long friendship with little ones who herald the Kingdom.

—Fred P. Edie, Associate Professor for the Practice
of Christian Education, Duke Divinity School;
Faculty Advisor, Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation

There are layers and layers of meaning here, and this book is not merely one to be read but rather to be engaged as a catalyst—an extended meditation inviting substantive reflection by Christian educators, spiritual directors, pastoral counselors, preachers and congregational leaders alike.

—The Right Reverend Robert O'Neill, Bishop of Colorado

This book, so eloquently written, presents a detailed history of the theory and practice of *Godly Play*. But more importantly, within the pages of this text, Berryman playfully challenges us (as only he can) to place children at the centre of the church—to reorient the church around the mutual blessing of both children and adults. It deserves to be read by a wide audience.

—Dr. Brendan Hyde, Senior Lecturer in Religious Education,
Australian Catholic University

For anyone who has ever wondered about the back-story of *Godly Play*, about its Montessorian roots and its place in the history of Religious Education, *The Spiritual Guidance of Children* is the book to read. Jerome Berryman convincingly argues that childhood catechesis in the post-secular age must take the form of spiritual guidance. His observations of children absorbed in flow, play, love and contemplation have lead him to believe that a Church which dares to “follow the child” will find the strength and vision it needs to renew itself.

—Robert Hurley, Professor of New Testament Studies
and Catechetics, Laval University, Quebec City

Dr. Jerome Berryman asserts that children have the same “existential issues and fears” that we adults do, and that learning the “classic Christian language system” as children is key to successfully managing those issues and fears across the lifespan. He places *Godly Play* firmly in the center of the conversation about how best to instill the Christian language system in children, and by extension, make it all the more useful to their adult mentors and guides. He also asks the startling question: “What if the energy invested in seeking new adult church members were spent inviting children into the congregation with radical generosity and commensurate skill?”

—John Chattin-McNichols, Ph.D. Associate Professor
of Education, Seattle University

Even in his early work in the 1970s, Jerome Berryman wrote with an authority and wisdom *far* ahead of his contemporaries. In this latest book, we are taken further still. Not only is this a first-class consolidation of his 40 years of insight and passion for a Christian approach to children’s spiritual lives—and for evolving an authentically child-centred approach in the Church—this book also provides a most compelling and detailed manifesto for the challenges ahead.

—Rebecca Nye, PhD. Associate Lecturer, The Open
University, Cambridge, UK and Freelance Researcher
and Consultant in Children’s Spirituality.

This richly documented book now gives us the context for the deep thinking and emotion present in the activity of *Godly Play* and introduces us to Berryman’s underlying construct of the *middle realm*; akin to *Flow* and *Zen* that is an outcome of play and “doing *midrash*.”

—Rabbi Dr. Michael Shire, Dean and Professor, Shoolman Graduate
School of Jewish Education, Hebrew College, Boston.

The Spiritual Guidance of Children

Montessori, Godly Play, and the Future

JEROME W. BERRYMAN



Morehouse Publishing
NEW YORK • HARRISBURG • DENVER

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Morehouse Publishing, 4775 Linglestown Road, Harrisburg, PA 17112

Morehouse Publishing, 19 East 34th Street, New York, NY 10016

Morehouse Publishing is an imprint of Church Publishing Incorporated.
www.churchpublishing.org

Cover design by Laurie Klein Westhafer
Typeset by Rose Design

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Berryman, Jerome.

The spiritual guidance of children : Montessori, Godly play, and the future / Jerome W. Berryman.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8192-2840-6 (pbk.)—ISBN 978-0-8192-2841-3 (ebook) 1. Play—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Christian education—Teaching methods. 3. Christian education—Philosophy. 4. Christian education of children. 5. Montessori method of education. I. Title.

BV1536.3.B46 2013

268'.432—dc23

2013022645

Printed in the United States of America

*To all the children
Thea and I
learned from
for so many decades,
and for Thea,
forever . . .*

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preface

This book reframes “Christian education” for children as spiritual guidance. It explores how best to transfer the whole Christian language system, which implies a way of life and spiritual development, from one generation to another.

Everything we do with children in the church guides their spirituality, but in our time, learning *how to speak Christian* is a matter of great importance because Christian language is no longer widely or well spoken. It is meant to be used to make existential meaning, to find direction in life and death, and to celebrate what truly matters. If children can learn this language and its connotations of playful orthodoxy early, then, as with any language, they have a better chance to become fluent, which will contribute to their spiritual quest and flourishing. One needs to know the art of speaking Christian language well to know the art of living well.

The approach to spiritual guidance described here is Godly Play. It came from the tradition of Montessori religious education, which began in 1907 in Rome. From the beginning Maria Montessori was very interested in the spirituality of children and their teachers. When it comes to what one actually does in a Godly Play room there are many publications to introduce this, so the focus of this book is on a new question: How does Godly Play feel and why is that important?

The first chapter challenges the reader to think “bigger” about children’s Christian education by reframing it as the

mutual guidance of children and adults together. Chapters two and three tell the story of the tradition of Montessori religious education, because knowing where Godly Play has come from can help us know where it is going. Chapters four and five describe the “middle realm,” which is how Godly Play feels when children are invited into the domain (the home) of classical Christian language to absorb and activate it to make existential meaning.

Godly Play feels like the creative process in action. To be more specific it feels like flow, play, love, and contemplation, which are the four dimensions of this process. These dimensions of the creative process share the same structure, so they appear to have differentiated from our fundamental human core. This center point, which we knew as a unity when we were infants, is not just something we do when we create new ideas. It is who we are psychologically, socially, biologically, and spiritually and it is how we know ourselves as well as God.

This kind of guidance follows Jesus’ counsel that in order to be spiritually mature, we need to become like children and to become like children we need to welcome them, which in turn reveals him and the one who sent him. The language of the Christian people flows out of Jesus’ life and words, so it makes sense that this language can be used to guide us back to our source as well as toward our ending.

The last chapter shows how Godly Play’s approach to spiritual guidance has become diffused into the mainstream of Christian education and has been applied in a variety of different situations. When this diffusion and adaptation is combined with clarity about Godly Play’s identity a milieu is created in which further exploration can flourish to find better ways for the mutual blessing of children and adults to guide Godly Play and the church into the future.

acknowledgments

Thea is in every page of this book. She knew many of the people mentioned here and we especially loved our trips to Rome, sometimes with our girls and sometimes alone, to visit Sofia. It does not seem possible that Thea died in 2009, but this book is a kind of birthday present to her. Our girls Alyda and Coleen are also part of this book, as always, but this time Coleen especially thought her Dad would never be done. She witnessed so many revisions that the birth of an actual book seemed unimaginable.

My mentors, Professor Cam Wyckoff at Princeton Theological Seminary and Professoressa Sofia Cavalletti in Rome, supported *something*, when no one knew what it was! Their extravagant generosity and energy was given for itself, a true act of play and blessing. What they helped begin, children have led the way to continue.

Zoe Cole, who helped with the book, considered it strong enough to support by challenging every idea, every chapter, every sentence, and every footnote. Her attention to detail and broad background as a lawyer, a teacher of adults and children, and her work on her Ph.D. at the University of Denver in philosophy, theology, and political thought made her a wonderful conversation partner to move the book along to its completion.

The people at Venice, a superb Italian restaurant nearby, helped more than they may realize. Alessandro Carollo, Christian Della Fave, and Gabriel Aragon created the cuisine for writing and thinking while Nunzio Marino presided over the

dining room to make it a graceful place. Rachid, Victor, and Leticia also deserve special mention.

Finally, Jim Wahler, my editor at Church Publishing, patiently and creatively pulled this project together to give shape to its sprawling ideas so you can now hold it in your hands to weigh its worth. His editorial skill was as important as his ability to keep the project moving. Dirk DeVries, Robin Lybeck, and others at Church Publishing in Denver have been in the background cheering. Their encouragement has been important. Ryan Masteller finished the final editing with competent alacrity and Davis Perkins, the publisher of CPI in New York City, played his part well, as always, for which I continue to be deeply grateful.

Jerome W. Berryman
Denver, Colorado
February 4, 2013

1.

Children and the Quest for Spiritual Maturity

What do children need from adults and what do adults need from children for the spiritual quest? The answer is the same for both: spiritual guidance. Children require adult spiritual guidance, because they need the permission and the means to develop their spirituality. Adults require children's spiritual guidance, because by being who they are, children can refresh and re-center spiritual growth in adults. Without this mutual blessing children and adults are likely to lack the dynamic wholeness and authenticity they were created to enjoy.

What are the means for spiritual guidance? They are the same for children and adults. They come in a toolbox called "classical, Christian language." Children need to begin learning the art of how to use these tools as early as possible to live meaningfully within the existential edges of their being and knowing. Adults need to continue developing this art by renewing what they knew as children of God's presence, so they can think about what this means for their daily lives in richer and more flexible ways.

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The phrase “classical, Christian language” may be offensive to some. It sounds pretentious and overbearing. The phrase feels historically stuck. It snarls and can signify dysfunction. I understand these connotations because I have felt them myself. Still, be patient. Relax. Enjoy the story. It’s about crawling out on a limb.



When I was a child we lived in a brown house on a corner. I could look out of my bedroom window and see my grandmother’s white house on the other corner. Between us was her overflowing flower garden. Across the street I could see the playground of the grade school where I spent eight years and just beyond grandmother’s corner was the solid brick church with its square bell tower. Not every child gets to grow up with such a correlation of space and destiny or the safety and freedom to explore it.

One summer evening I was listening to the grown-ups talking on my grandmother’s porch while I was catching lighting bugs in the twilight. Someone said, “He’d crawled out too far,” and everyone laughed. I moved closer and asked, “What’s ‘too far’?”

“Oh, you know, when the limb breaks off.”

“How do you know when that’s going to happen?”

“You just do.”

“What happens then?”

“You fall.” Everyone laughed again.

“What happens then?”

“Go run and play.” I did, but the next day I began to look at the trees in my grandmother’s yard in a different way.

Then it happened. I climbed up into a large apricot tree and crawled slowly out on a limb, farther and farther and farther.

It began to bend. I didn't hear the sound, like a big stick breaking, until I was on my back in the grass looking up. I was lying amid ripe apricots with the splintered limb beside me. We—the limb, the apricots and I—had all fallen. I can still smell the rotting fruit and hear the buzzing insects. Were they laughing? I was!



The tree this book explores is about Godly Play, a well-developed way to provide spiritual guidance for children and adults *together*. Its goal is for children to enter adolescence with an inner working model of the Christian language system. By a “working model” I mean the ability to use classical Christian language to create meaning about life and death. Since about 1984, Godly Players have thought about this goal in terms of “speaking Christian” as a second language.

“Speaking Christian” as a Second Language

If “speaking Christian” is a second language, what is the first one? It is the language of everyday, which is a loose collection of phrases from technical languages such as engineering, physics, medicine, psychology, and law combined with regional and family colloquialisms.

We usually think of a “second language” as a foreign language, such as Spanish or German. In those cases we are aware that we need to get the words and gestures right to communicate. We also understand that knowing the cultural context is fundamental to understanding the meaning of the words. The same is true for specialized languages within English, such as law or medicine. Each has its technical vocabulary, gestures, and a cultural context. It may take years of graduate training

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to learn to speak such languages. Speaking Christian is also a specialized language within English, but its “foreignness” often goes unnoticed or underappreciated.

Learning “Christian” as a second language is more complex than often realized, because the language system is so odd. Its toolbox contains sacred stories, parables, liturgical *action*, and contemplative *silence*. Each of these four genres requires a different skill, awareness of tone, and a special art for using its form and content to make meaning.

Learning how to use this odd language is like learning any art. For example, how does one learn to be a painter? Can you learn this art by selling paintings, studying art history, manufacturing paintbrushes or paints, being the curator of an art museum, or knowing painters socially? No. To be a painter you need to paint. The same is true for the art of speaking Christian. You have to use it to know it and the earlier you begin to know it, the easier it is to become fluent, as with any language. Godly Play helps children learn this art early, so they can become artists of the Christian life.

The way Godly Play contributes to this art is by helping children associate Christian language with the creative process while they are using it to make existential meaning. This grounds them in their tradition and yet leaves them creatively open to explore the world with a kind of playful orthodoxy. This phrase, *playful orthodoxy*, sounds like an oxymoron only because *orthodoxy* and *play* are seldom associated. *Orthodoxy* usually stands for closure and *playful* nods toward openness. Together, however, they provide a safe place to venture out from and return to with the passion to know new people and ideas, as well as to meet the future in creative ways. Helping children get a feel for playful orthodoxy, as they learn to speak Christian, is more important than one might think, because

Christian language needs to be absorbed and activated by the whole person, since our existential limits involve every bit of who we are. This is why Christian education is bigger than you may think.

Christian Education Is Bigger Than You Think

Teaching a *specific* religion to children today is sometimes quietly dismissed or loudly rejected, but this response is largely irrational. It comes from thinking too small about Christian education. There are at least seven reasons for this. Most people, growing up inside or outside the church, have never experienced Christian education's comprehensive wholeness, which is more like spiritual *guidance* than *education* in the narrow sense.

First, most people don't usually realize that Christian education's larger vision involves communicating with and caring for the wholeness of the child's body-mind-spirit unity. When the body and spirit are ignored you get Christian education reduced to memory, reason, and will. The teaching becomes a transfer of church "facts," the telling and memorizing of Bible stories in clever ways, or learning reasons to believe. When the mind and spirit are trimmed away the result is adult-created art projects for children to copy, activity-as-entertainment, and force fed, high-energy games to keep children busy and out of the way. When spirituality is ignored, religion is taught as an empty practice, which is fruitless and obnoxious. When any truncated version of Christian education is substituted for the larger vision, then the teaching and learning loses touch with the existential reality of the children's lives.

Gabriel Moran, the great Roman Catholic educator, theologian, and linguistic philosopher began teaching and reflecting

on teaching religion in 1958. After about forty years of experience he reduced what he was doing to two words in the title of his book, *Showing How*.¹ You probably already agree with him. Have you ever said ironically, “Do as I *say* but not as I *do*,” and then laughed? The laughter shows that you already know that Christian education is about “showing how,” rather than *talk-ing* about something the children are supposed to think, feel, or do. It takes the whole person to show how the whole person is involved in the Christian life. This is why showing how is more important than explaining how in Christian education.

Christian education is also larger than commonly thought because it involves children in absorbing and activating the whole Christian language domain. This immensity is missed, because many adults are unclear themselves about the scope of Christian language as a system and the uniqueness of how its sacred stories, parables, liturgical action, and contemplative silence are integrated into a way of speaking and living. Some adults have also not realized that the primary function of this language domain is to make *existential* meaning, which is to think personally about who we truly are and the limits to our being and knowing. This may sound boring, but children are very happy to have a way to cope with their existential limits.

It is sometimes thought that children are not aware of their existential limits, so it is assumed that they would not be interested in learning how to cope with them, but that is an adult fallacy—one that results in the repression of childhood memories and gives too much credence to adult language and routine. Children grow so fast and experience so much chaos that they are always in touch with their limits. This is why Christian language is important to children and makes them happy to find adults who will help them cope with their boundaries by giving them this language.

The third reason many think too small about Christian education is to hide rather than celebrate God's vastness. Since God's presence is overwhelming, we often try to reduce God to something more manageable than infinity to teach.

In the middle of the last century when Christianity was supposedly in its modern ascendancy, J. B. Phillips, a biblical scholar and theologian, published a little book with a big challenge: *Your God Is Too Small*.² He described thirteen small gods, which often masquerade as the God of Christianity. They are: the "Resident Policeman," "Parental Hangover," "Grand Old Man," "Meek-and-Mild," "Absolute Perfection," "Heavenly Bosom," "God-in-a-Box," "Managing Director," "Second-hand God," "Perennial Grievance," "Pale Galilean," "Projected Image," and "Assorted." He concluded that there must be more than elusive sparks and flashes of the divine when one takes seriously what might happen if God really did enter life on our planet. How would that work? Would not God need to be completely divine and completely human at the same time? But that's impossible, isn't it? It is only impossible if your thinking about God is too small. Christian education is about the big God.

A fourth way people try to shrink Christian education is by sending children off to be "educated" instead of being involved in the whole church. What if the energy invested in seeking new adult members were spent inviting children into the congregation with radical generosity and skill? Much of the decline in church membership comes from children leaving and not coming back. Perhaps, if we provided something useful for the development of their spirituality and they were part of the community, then they would remain. Of course, they would critique what is going on from their generation's point of view, but they would do this as insiders rather than outsiders, which is what the church needs.

Excluding children from the congregation can be obvious as well as subtle. Obvious ways have been catalogued many times, but a more *subtle exclusion is to not teach Christian language* to children so they can speak the language of their community! When teaching Christian language fails, exclusion is taught by default. Children may even be included politically in the church but if they are not included spiritually and linguistically they are not full members.

Ignoring children in the church is an unrealized defensive act. Children present a powerful challenge to what adults conceive of as spiritual maturity. Jesus was very forthright when speaking about this error, made by his disciples, as well as us. He said that if you want to become spiritually mature you need to become like a child (Matthew 18:3, Mark 10:15, Luke 18:17) and if you really want to know him and the one who sent him, you need to welcome children (Mark 9:37). His seriousness about this was expressed in the millstone texts, which were also recorded in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew 18:6, Mark 9:42, Luke 17:2).

The power of becoming like children and welcoming them cannot be understood if it is not experienced, but it can't be experienced if adults avoid being with children in the church. If Jesus' disciples didn't understand this, why should we expect people to "get it" today? One reason we should expect more from adults today is that we have a more open view of children in our society than the disciples did in the first century. This is often blocked, however, *in the church* by the *de facto* theology of children, which still functions informally. We have an unspoken theological heritage of ambivalence, ambiguity, and indifference toward children that still outweighs our understanding of children as a means of grace.³

A fifth reason we think too small about Christian education is that we underestimate the role it plays in the constructive

communication *among all the world's religions*. This lack of appreciation is changing,⁴ but Christians need a deep and solid, yet open and creative appropriation of their own *language and way of life* to be able to talk with people of other religions from depth to depth. This is of growing importance because the people from other religions, who used to live across the oceans, now live across the street. It is sobering to ask what we are teaching about Christianity by the way we live our daily lives and the language we use to talk about life and death.

Communicating from depth to depth is not just a matter of communicating what Christianity is. It is also about putting ourselves in the shoes of people from other religions, but this is impossible if we have never mindfully experienced walking in our own shoes as Christians. One needs to know the pinching limits and the expansive beauty of our own shoes to fully appreciate what it is like to walk in the shoes of others.

Communicating from depth to depth is the only way to build trust, despite difference, that is strong enough to deal with the stress and strain caused by the violent aberrations found in all religions. Communicating from depth to depth with perspective is how the religions of the world can become the solution for violence rather than its cause. This large and noble calling for Christian education goes far beyond fomenting suspicion or advocating for blandness as the only alternatives to religious differences. It challenges us to move forward with people of other religions to help heal the earth.

There is a sixth way that Christian education has been diminished. This has to do with gender. Children need to experience men and women working *together* with them in Christian education. Christianity is not about being male or female. It is about working and praying together regardless of differences. Most Christian educators know and deeply care that

an all-female church school teaches something they don't mean to teach.

I can't help but smile as I write this. Thea and I worked together in Presbyterian and Episcopal parishes for nearly fifty years. The roles associated with males and females were always being challenged back and forth between us and with the parish. There was laughter, seriousness, frustration, teasing, and uproarious satire. Still, it was only occasionally that we were able to satisfy our ideal of a man and woman working together, as we did, in each Godly Play room. Teaching such wholeness is not just a matter for the church but it is important for the future health of our species.

Finally, Christian education is reduced when it does not help enrich the wholeness of our species. The wholeness I am referring to is not just about being male and female. It is about the millions of years it took to develop a brain big enough to support the kind of thinking we take for granted today and the social patterns needed to support infants, during their long apprenticeship compared with other species, to become human. This all came together about thirty thousand years ago to produce a human being,⁵ but today we are in danger of shrinking our view of humankind when we take too small a view of Christian education.

Steven Mithen combined knowledge about prehistory with modern cognitive science to stake out a theory about our humanity. First, our ancestors had minds dominated by a general intelligence. Second, their general intelligence divided into specialized intelligences, like the blades of a Swiss army knife.⁶ Finally, cognitive fluidity developed to the point that the special intelligences could work together. Art, religion, and science (making and using tools) began to blend to create the modern mind.⁷

Here is where Christian education comes into play. Our ability to blend art, religion, and science is being challenged today by new kinds of rigidity. The abstract mind is being expanded electronically at the expense of face-to-face communication. Modern multi-tasking moves us toward thinking in modules like a Swiss army knife. The struggle with information overload overwhelms us and causes chronic reductionism, so we tend to think in bumper stickers and sound bites. Finally, there is the temptation to diminish religious experience and beauty in favor of a dominating hyper-module for science. These four tendencies toward rigidity reduce our cognitive fluidity, which fractures the wholeness of what it means to be human. If Christian education emphasizes the fluidity of children's thinking in art, religion, and science, then it can contribute to children being more human than Neanderthal and place Christian education at the leading edge of human development.

If Christian education is larger and more expansive than we have previously imagined, then we need to be especially careful about shrinking it down to irrelevance. Still, the Sunday school has a long and distinguished history, so we need to know where it has come from to know where we should go from here.

The Sunday School Movement and Its Critics

The Sunday school movement began as a project to help prevent children in the English slums from falling into a life of crime because of neglect and illiteracy. Additional motivations were to protect the Sabbath from misuse and property from destruction on the only day of the week when children were not working at such tasks as sweeping chimneys, toiling in the mills and mines, bottling and labeling boot black, or mass-producing pins by hand. The goals of literacy, moral development, and

Christian evangelism converged to find a way to bring young people into churches to worship on Sunday and learn how to read the Bible to improve their lives.

Newspaper editor Robert Raikes is often credited as one of the founders of the Sunday school. He lived in Gloucester, near the English border with Wales and his first school opened in Sooty Alley in 1780 over the objections of various groups, including the Archbishop of Canterbury. He experimented for three years with poor children from the factory districts and then published the results in his own newspaper, the *Gloucester Journal* on November 3, 1783.

Raikes wrote that the “lawless state of the younger class” was curbed and “where this plan has been adopted, we are assured that the behavior of the children is greatly civilized.” Children learned how to read in Sunday school but not always to write because of a fierce debate about whether writing was a proper activity for the Lord’s Day. They also memorized a catechism and attended worship.

Discipline was strict for these children from six to fourteen years of age. “Some were hobbled with heavy weights, logs, or shackles bound to their ankles.”⁸ Nevertheless, some, like Charles Shaw, remembered this experience as “an oasis in the desert to me,” as he wrote in his memoir of an impoverished childhood in the Potteries during the 1830s.⁹

John L. Elias, a longtime professor at Fordham University, traced the growth of the Sunday school from the late eighteenth century to today by saying, “It went from being a school for the poor and working classes to an instrument of evangelical or revivalist Protestantism to what it is today, a school for the education of Protestant believers of all ages.”¹⁰ While the Protestant approach was usually located in the local church, the Roman Catholics set up a parallel school system in the United

States. It was often organized around ethnic parishes, to serve the many Roman Catholic immigrants arriving from Europe during the nineteenth century. Both strategies used teacher-focused authority and instruction as their *tour de force*.

Sunday schools spread in the United States as well as in England. The non-denominational and evangelical American Sunday School Union was formed in 1824 in Philadelphia and swept across the country, even sending missionaries to other countries. Another example from a very different theological orientation was the Sunday School Society. Its origin was in “Sabbath” schools set up by Unitarian ministers in Boston. By 1831 it too had spread across the country.

Despite the success of the Sunday school movement, it also had its critics. In 1837 at a meeting of the Sunday School Society William Channing, a Unitarian minister, “criticized the Sunday schools for their mechanical teaching and lifeless way they handed on the faith.”¹¹ Channing was speaking to his fellow Unitarians when he expressed his concern that this approach was “stamping our minds on the young, making them see with our eyes, giving them information, burdening their memories, imposing outward behavior, rules and prejudices.”¹²

Negative responses were also aroused when African Americans learned how to read in Sunday schools. Following Nat Turner’s 1831 slave rebellion in Virginia, many southern states prohibited the education of slaves and free blacks. It was rumored that Nat Turner (1800–1831) had learned to read in a Sunday school, although his autobiography, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, did not mention this. The reality was that most Sunday schools were white and ignored the reality of slavery.

Perhaps the best way to sense the milieu of the nineteenth-century Sunday school is to remember that Charles Dickens (1812–1870) published *A Christmas Carol* in 1843. His father

was in debtors prison and Dickens himself worked ten-hour days as a child pasting labels on pots of boot black. The sadistic brutality of life as an apprentice and in schools runs like a river through his novels, such as *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *David Copperfield*, and *Great Expectations*. Many poor children knew little more than neglect and violence while the rich children were pampered and idealized.

One of the greatest paradoxes in the history of childhood appeared in England during the nineteenth century. Children were romanticized and at the same time seen as uncivilized savages. The poetry of William Wordsworth and such stories as *Peter Pan* and *Alice in Wonderland* glorified children, while in the mills and the mines they lived like animals and were thought of in those terms. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the view of children began to change in society and among educators both in England and the United States.

In the United States John Dewey published *The School and Society* in 1900. He advocated for children *interacting* with the curriculum. He wanted them to be at the dynamic center of their own learning rather than only receiving instruction. Dewey also wanted education to include teaching children how to assume responsibility in a democratic society and to become leaders, rather than only learning how to be submissive to authority.

In 1903 the Religious Education Association was founded to bring the latest ideas in education, such as Dewey's, to the task of religious education. As the twentieth century continued so did the Sunday school, albeit with a new professionalism, especially when it was integrated into the programs of the mainline denominations. Still, a joke that had circulated during the late nineteenth century was still told: "When is a school not a school? When it is a Sunday school."

By mid-century, Christianity was apparently flourishing in the cities, suburbs, and countryside following World War II. Still, there were unsettling comments about Sunday school. The February 11, 1957, copy of *Life* magazine called the Sunday school “the most wasted hour in the week” and published a long and thoughtful article by Wesley Shrader, Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at Yale Divinity School. The nature and effectiveness of the Sunday school was a question that was still being treated seriously in the public media.

In the 1960s the “death of god” movement appeared, which raised serious questions about the efficacy of Christian education, whether the death-of-god theologians had been read or not. The April 8, 1966, cover of *Time* magazine asked the question, “Is God dead?” in red ink on a black background. The articles inside discussed how atheism was growing in the United States.

When the 1970s began, John Westerhoff challenged the church’s practice of Christian education with his *Values for Tomorrow’s Children*. By mid-decade he sharpened his critique of the Sunday school with *Will Our Children Have Faith?* This book hit a raw nerve. New editions were published in 2000 and 2012—this last volume including forty-five pages of commentary on the first two editions as well as updates for each chapter.¹³

Westerhoff was critical of the “schooling and instructional model” and proposed a broader vision of education that included children’s immersion in the life of the parish rather than relying on an hour of instruction each Sunday. He also published his ideas about faith development growing like the rings of a tree. People began to talk about faith being “caught, not taught.”¹⁴ Westerhoff’s view of “socialization” involved such things as sharing a tradition, involvement in liturgy, purposeful

interactions among three generations, and acting in society for justice as a community. It also involved children moving through *affiliative*, *searching*, and *owned* stages of faith. Nevertheless, the instructional model, which was more familiar and specific about its goals and objectives, continued to dominate. The 1970s closed with people being more sensitive to the context within which the teaching took place, but old habits were hard to break.

As the 1980s began Westerhoff's socialization model was elaborated by adding a historical perspective in *A Faithful Church: Issues in the History of Catechesis*. This book was a collection of articles, written by historians of religious education, "to help contemporary Christians move from a school model of Christian formation to a fuller catechesis." Westerhoff and his co-author hoped that the sociological model for education would "be aided by a historical argument," because the school model was "actually a relative late-comer on the scene of socialization into the church."¹⁵ The book also urged the use of the term *catechesis* instead of *education*, because historically catechesis "includes every aspect of the church's life."¹⁶

Despite the efforts of Westerhoff and others to reform Christian education, the Sunday school continued to meet at its regular time and in its customary ways, even though nationwide there was a general decline in attendance, as the Sunday holiday became more secular than religious in observance. This was despite tremendous energy being applied to the educational task by experienced and concerned Christian educators in the parish, including myself, and there were many local exceptions to this downward trend.

The church school ceased to be a matter of national media attention in the decades that followed. The decline of interest in the Sunday school was accompanied with a rise in interest

about spirituality, unrelated to church programs. For Christian educators this raised a troubling question. Had the church been unintentionally teaching children the wrong lesson? Did the teaching and socialization models combine somehow in their actual practice to promote a hidden curriculum, which taught that spirituality has nothing to do with church? We may have been thinking too small for too long about what it means to transfer a whole language system and way of life from one generation to another!

An Alternative to the Schooling and Socialization Models

Attacking the Sunday school is easy. Most experienced Christian educators are more aware of the paradoxes and problems involved in their work than their critics. What is difficult to do, however, is to present a detailed alternative to the status quo with a method, curriculum, theoretical foundation, and history to deepen or even reframe the discussion about what is best for the spiritual quest of children.

Godly Play is an effort to provide a well-developed alternative to the schooling and socialization models in order to further the conversation about what is best for children and adults in the church. This alternative comes from a tradition outside the Sunday school movement, so it brings with it a different perspective. This alternative, like the Sunday school, has a history. It began in 1907 when Dr. Maria Montessori opened her first school in a Roman slum, four years after the Religious Education Association was founded in the United States. The story of four generations of this tradition will be told in the next two chapters with gratitude to show where Godly Play has come from and the complexity of its foundation.

In 2012 Diana Butler Bass looked back over the last few centuries of Christian history in the United States and argued that today we are experiencing “The Great Reversal.”¹⁷ It is a spiritual awakening like those that took place during the periods of 1730 to 1760, 1800 to 1830, and 1890 to 1920. The present awakening began in 1960 and still continues. It is longer in duration than previous periods and the experience of spirituality comes *before* commitment to religion. Often there is no interest in religion at all! Bass described the old process as believing-behaving-belonging, but today the steps in the process are belonging-behaving-believing. The experience of God and the action that flows out of that awareness come before and often instead of joining a church or believing in doctrines and creeds.

In 1960, right on time according to Bass’s chronology, I found myself objecting strenuously to the believing-behaving-belonging approach being taught at Princeton Theological Seminary in the required Christian education class. Dr. D. Campbell Wyckoff arranged for me to take a tutorial with him instead of the class he taught. I will be eternally grateful for his understanding. I was experiencing a conflict that I could not articulate. In the tutorial he assigned me the task of writing my own theory of Christian education, which I am still working on today, over fifty years later.

It took another decade for me to discover a method to do what I had intuited needed to be done. This insight came as Thea and I watched our girls in a Montessori school. At the beginning of the twentieth century Maria Montessori had argued that children were inherently spiritual and trained her teachers to guide children’s spirituality, which includes their educational drive, to fulfill itself in their lives.

If you ask a Montessori child, “Who taught you that?” she or he is likely to say, “I don’t know. I guess I taught myself.”

This approach encouraged self-direction rather than being other-directed, which made it especially appropriate to honor children's personal experience of God. Since one must die for oneself, learning to live well also needs to be personal. This approach to Christian education recognized that children have an "owned faith" from the beginning and supported a life long journey toward greater maturity based on this. The Montessori approach largely bypassed Westerhoff's "affiliative faith," living by the faith of other people, to encourage children's personal quest alongside adult mentors, teaching each other mutually across the generations.

I soon discovered that not everyone agreed that Montessori education was the solution to the church's education problems. Even the mention of the word *Montessori* was sometimes enough for me to be shown the door. There was an uneasy sense that something had been turned upside down in Montessori education, which made church leaders suspicious despite a great deal of talk in the church about child-centered education. There were also many practical concerns that looked insurmountable, all of which are still relevant today. Six of these perceived problems are still worrisome and deserve comment.

The first concern is that Godly Play is "too difficult." The children's mentors need to be well-trained, whether they are volunteers or not. Godly Play is also expensive, but I must add that this investment is for the long term. The expensive materials last at least twenty years and well-trained mentors don't burn out. Children's *spiritual guidance* is also considered too difficult to take responsibility for, because it requires more specific and personal responsibility than either the schooling or socialization models require. This is because more attuned care and consistency is needed for children to provide such guidance. They are more vulnerable when they open up to wondering

about their existential issues, so they need a safe place to do this and well-prepared people to guide them. People who work with children need to be more responsible than those who work with adults. Adults should be able to compensate for the deficiencies of their teachers. Children absorb them.

Another kind of practical resistance comes from the seemingly compulsive attention in Godly Play to the details and beauty of the prepared environment for teaching and learning. This is very *Montessori*, as you will see in the next chapters, but this is a strange objection. Adults are fastidious, even combative, about caring for the space in which *they* worship, but the place where children learn to speak the language that enables them to worship with the community is often barren and neglected. It is used for many other kinds of activities, so the space does not feel like it is truly for children. Godly Play attempts to integrate what takes place in the church's worship with what happens in the church school. The same standard of care is assumed for both settings.

A third kind of concern is about what goes on in the Godly Play rooms. Some worry that this is some kind of cult. Parents don't want their children to become religious fanatics or bigots. What they don't realize is that Godly Play helps children become deeply grounded in classical Christian language *and at the same time* enables them to be more self-directed and creatively open in their spirituality to new ideas, new situations, new people, and the future. The goal is not to take over children's spirits, minds, or bodies, but to free them to move in an integrated way toward a constructive, self-directed, life-long growth in God and in the church community.

A fourth concern is the opposite of the fear that Godly Play is rigid and over-controlling. People worry that Godly Play is too open. It is considered a breeding ground for little heretics.

This is very unlikely, because the environment surrounding children in a developed Godly Play room places them physically, mindfully, emotionally, and spiritually in the center of the sacred stories, parables, and liturgical action materials of the Christian language system. Their absorption and activation of this language takes place within a space infused with the contemplative silence of the classical Christian tradition. The objects for the lessons come literally from the surrounding shelves and are returned to that context when the lesson is finished. Besides, Godly Play always invites God, verbally and nonverbally, to come join in the theological play. This means that the power of the whole Christian language system, the presence of the well-trained mentor, the wisdom of the community of children, and God's presence in the room make it a place for playful orthodoxy rather than casual heresy.

Godly Play also troubles people by placing a confusing emphasis on Christian language *as a means* rather than as an end in itself. The themes in Jewish and Christian theology about idolatry, blasphemy, and hypocrisy are taken seriously, so the *art of using* sacred stories, parables, liturgical action, and contemplative prayer to make existential meaning is what is taught. Memorization takes place, nevertheless, sometimes directed but mostly self-motivated. The words and actions of the four genres, then, are not memorized for themselves, as if they were magic, but because they are useful to make meaning. Such learning is very satisfying and makes children deeply happy.

When *content* is over-emphasized the lesson becomes distant or irrelevant history and the words are worshipped instead of God. When *process* is over-emphasized the deep grounding in the classical language gets lost in cartoons, sparkles,

high-energy games, and other distractions. Godly Play emphasizes a balance of content and process that is unique for each child in the Montessori manner, so a class of twenty children becomes twenty classes of one as well as a community.

A final concern is sometimes more felt than named. Shifting to Godly Play encourages a shift in thinking about the place of children in the community of the church. This is probably the cause of the greatest *implicit* resistance. Sometimes Godly Play is tried, despite this unacknowledged resistance, but such trial runs are usually brief and half-hearted, so the project fails and the curriculum is blamed.

Godly Play comes and goes. Sometimes it starts up, fails, starts again years later, and fails again. God laughs and plays. Sometimes it also becomes a lasting tradition in churches, schools, hospitals, and other settings. Children have the same teachers and touch the same materials their brothers and sisters used. Perhaps, one day, *their* children will also find their way into Godly Play.

Godly Play is not meant to be the latest, greatest thing in Christian education. It is not good *because it is new!* It is meant for the long run. New mentors stand in for previous generations of guides while the Godly Play rooms and their process remain much the same but deepening in beauty and detail. Sometimes the latest, easiest, most media-savvy thing is not what is needed to build a foundation for life-long learning. An approach that involves the mutual blessing of children and adults in an oral tradition is probably a better way to transfer the whole Christian language domain and way of life from one generation to another.

This final concern about the danger of Godly Play re-orienting the whole church deserves additional comment. The possibility that Godly Play will reshape the concerns of

a parish, school, or other institution is real. Let's call this the "Copernican revolution problem."

A Copernican Revolution in the Church?

Placing children instead of adults at the center of the circling bodies in the church is as unthinkable in our time as the solar system was in Copernicus's (1473–1543) day. It is hard to imagine that children are teachers as well as learners, but even when this shift takes place, things will go on pretty much the same. The sun will still "come up" in the morning and "go down" at night in Christian education.

All the activities usually found in an excellent ministry with children and families will continue. Children's choirs will meet. There will be vacation Bible school. Children and families will engage in service projects, spring festivals, slightly silly plays and musicals about the Bible to laugh together, and visits will be made to other places of worship to compare them with their own. Preparations for Holy Baptism and receiving Holy Communion will proceed with customary care. Children will continue to help in worship as greeters and acolytes. They will help take up the collection and bring the gifts forward with the adult ushers. Visits to mothers and their newborn babies will be delighted in. Going to visit the sick and shut-ins will continue. There will be parties for parents, workshops about toys, community networking, and other relevant things to make life for families better. Retreats for children and parents (and grandparents) will continue. Older people will be borrowed as unofficial grandparents during church so children can sit with them at times as well as with their parents to the benefit of all.

The caring and careful creativity of Christian educators abounds! Their ability to keep in motion all the activities

mentioned above *and even more* is impressive and sometimes downright miraculous. What Godly Play adds at the center of such a mix is a place where children can absorb and activate classical Christian language to give the rest of the ministry with children and families more depth and meaning.

To keep this new orientation from collapsing two questions need to be asked about every expenditure and program in the church: How will this action impact the spiritual guidance of children? How can children be involved in an appropriate way? Both questions are about children, but they also involve adults. They open up opportunities for adults to mature in their own spirituality by working with children and thinking more carefully about their place in the community.

Many adults won't like this re-centering or see its relevance. They are no more likely to look at the church in this way than the clergy were likely to look at the moon through a telescope in Copernicus's time. The moon was supposed to be perfect since it was closer to God than the earth, so if they saw imperfections on the moon, such as craters, they might become disoriented and disillusioned. They might even lose their faith. The re-centering of the church around the mutual blessing of children and adults may also reveal imperfections in the church that are disorienting and disillusioning, but such a shakeup can open up more flexible and creative ways to think about how and why one is involved in the church's community.

Copernicus's revolution was so fundamental that it changed the way words were used, so we can expect that the re-centering of the church will do the same. Who will really want to say "the spiritual guidance of children" instead of "Sunday school"? It is an awkward phrase without alliteration, but beyond the words this implies taking responsibility for mentoring children's spirituality for their life-long learning. Seeing the church as a womb

in which the spirituality of mutual blessing is generated requires a different vocabulary, something still being searched for. It will be as different in our time as talking and thinking about the solar system was in Copernicus's time.

The shift in thinking about cosmology in Copernicus's time also had long-term implications. A larger vision of Christian education will, too. Landing on the moon, satellites, information about Mars and other planets would not have been possible without re-mapping the heavens. The same will be true when children begin to absorb and activate the whole Christian language system at an early age. A re-blending of Copernicus's unity of art, religion, and science, which was displayed so wonderfully in his creativity five hundred years ago, may once again be part of the ministry of the local church.

Dava Sobel described in rich detail how Copernicus was engaged in the art, religion, and science of his time when he made his discovery.¹⁸ He often wrote of the beauty of the heavens and translated poetry that interested him from Greek to Latin, integrating science and art. He was also a canon of the diocese, even though he was not permitted to say Mass, since he was not ordained. Still, he earned a doctor's degree in canon law in Italy while pursuing his cosmological studies there. His duties in the Cathedral Chapter were a brilliant blend of being a practicing physician and engaging in the business of the diocese—including a revision of currency as well as building a laboratory in which to study the stars. Blending science, religion, and art, as Copernicus did, can bring the church back to being on the frontier, the creative edge, of human endeavor.

Finally, like the new cosmology of Copernicus, a reorientation of the church around the mutual blessing of children and adults will take some getting used to. The pain, brilliance, and drama of the solar system's advocacy in the lives of Tycho Brahe

(1546–1601), Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), and Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) is well known. Those who advocate for the re-centering of the church around the mutual blessing of children and adults can also expect some difficulty—ambivalence, ambiguity, and indifference about children will likely be the response. Advocacy may be job-threatening but not life-threatening. What needs to be kept in mind, however, is that today there is no university in the world that still teaches the old pre-Copernican cosmology. Will something like that take place in a re-centered church?

Conclusion

A call to re-center the church around children is, indeed, crawling out on a limb, so we need to consider the tree from which the limb has grown to see how strong it might be. To do this we will explore the Montessori tradition from which Godly Play grew. The story of the first two generations of this tradition will be told in the next chapter.

notes

Chapter 1

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3. Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* (New York: Morehouse, 2009), 197.
4. Books reflecting this change include Kristin Herzog, *Children and Our Global Future: Theological and Social Challenges* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005); Marcia J. Bunge, ed. *The Child in the Bible*, with the assistance of Terrence E. Fretheim and Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 2008); and Don S. Browning and Marcia J. Bunge, eds., *Children and Childhood in World Religions: Primary Sources and Texts* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009).
5. Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind: A Search for the Origins of Art, Religion and Science* (London: Phoenix, 1996), 69–78.
6. Mithen, *Prehistory of Mind*, 36.
7. Mithen, *Prehistory of Mind*, 173.
8. James E. Reed and Ronnie Prevost, *A History of Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 257.
9. Hugh Cunningham, *The Invention of Childhood* (London: BBC Books, 2006), 131.

10. John L. Elias, *A History of Christian Education: Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Perspectives* (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 2002), 166.
11. Elias, *A History of Christian Education*, 166.
12. Elias, *A History of Christian Education*, 166.
13. John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 3rd ed. (New York: Morehouse, 2012), 52–79 for community and 89–105 for faith development.
14. A phrase generally attributed to Westerhoff.
15. John H. Westerhoff and O. C. Edwards, *A Faithful Church: Issues in the History of Catechesis* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1981), v.
16. Westerhoff and Edwards, *A Faithful Church*, 4–5.
17. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 201–214.
18. Dava Sobel, *A More Perfect Heaven: How Copernicus Revolutionized the Cosmos* (New York: Walker, 2012), 3–79.

Chapter 2

1. Anna M. Maccheroni, *A True Romance: Doctor Maria Montessori as I Knew Her* (Edinburgh: Darien Press, 1947); E. M. Standing, *Maria Montessori: Her Life and Work* (New York: Plume, 1984); Rita Kramer, *Maria Montessori: A Biography*, with Foreword by Anna Freud (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1988); Phyllis Povell, *Montessori Comes to America: The Leadership of Maria Montessori and Nancy McCormick Rambusch* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010). Povell's work draws largely on Valeria P. Babini and Luisa Lama's *Una "Donna Nuova": Il femminismo scientifico di Maria Montessori* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2003). In addition to these written sources, I have incorporated the oral tradition that was part of the training course in Bergamo, Italy, where I studied from 1971 to 1972 at the *Centro Internazionale Studi Montessoriani*. Mario Montessori founded the school in 1961 and was still part of the faculty when I was a student.
2. Kramer, *Maria Montessori*, Preface. Kramer, who comes to Montessori-based Christian education from a Jewish background, is also "more complicated and interesting" than her single book about Montessori might otherwise suggest.