

Berryman and the purpose of religious education: The significance of Berryman's approach to religious education for Catholic schools

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Abstract

Approaches to religious education which are influenced by Jerome W. Berryman's *Godly Play* are becoming commonplace in many Catholic primary schools in various Dioceses and Archdiocese around Australia. Given this growing trend, this article attempts to articulate Berryman's understanding of the purpose of religious education by following four lines of inquiry which emanate from his many writings. In the light of this articulated purpose, some recommendations are posited for Catholic primary schools which draw on the Berryman's pedagogical approach to religious education.

In reading the many writings of Jerome W. Berryman, it becomes apparent that his understanding of the purpose of religious education is not necessarily aligned to the notions of outcomes based curricular, competencies, and the achievement of standards which currently drive most Catholic religious education syllabi in Australia. In fact, quite a juxtaposition can be made when comparing Berryman's approach with these concepts (see for example, Hyde, 2009). Yet the religious education courses directed for use with students in the early years' in a growing number of Dioceses in Australia continue to be influenced by Berryman's pedagogical approach to religious education.

This article attempts to articulate Berryman's understanding of the purpose of religious education by reviewing four major lines of inquiry which emanate from his many writings. The four lines of inquiry reviewed are: (1) children and religious language, (2) play, imagination and the creative process, (3) children's spirituality and religious education, and (4) ethical considerations when working with children. Each of these lines of inquiry reveals important insights concerning Berryman's understanding of the purpose of religious education. A consideration of these is necessary in order to inform policy and practice at the Diocesan level in relation to approaches to religious education which are influenced by Berryman's pedagogical method, since it does not align comfortably with many contemporary notions which drive the curriculum generally. Some initial recommendations are posited for Catholic schools which draw on Berryman's pedagogical approach with the aim of providing an impetus for further discussion.

(1) Children and religious language

The first central thesis in the writing of Berryman is that religious education involves mastering the art of using the language of the Christian tradition (Berryman 1985a, 1985b, 1992, 2009a). For Berryman, this notion involves far more than merely developing religious literacy skills, as is a common feature among contemporary religious education syllabi. That he refers to this as an art form is especially pertinent. For Berryman, religious education is not about filling the heads of children with information and propositional truths. Rather it concerns learning the art of how to use an appropriate language so that children can identify and reflect on their experience of God. Berryman distinguishes four explicit types of language involved in the classical Christian language system – sacred stories, parables, liturgical action, and silence. These are referred to in his writings as the language of God and of God's people (see for example Berryman, 1991, 2002, 2009a). In other words they, together, form the language of the Christian community.

Although children learn to use a variety of different languages associated with the various subject areas of the school curriculum, such as the language of mathematics and the language of science, religious language, according to Berryman (2009a) is not emphasized in schools. As well, when for example, children learn the language of mathematics, they have already experienced the *practical functions* of adding and subtracting as they pile up blocks or take them away in their play. However, the Christian language system is concerned with the functions of identity (sacred story), stimulating exploration of Christian meaning (parables), making accessible the actions of the Christian community (liturgical action), and opening the way to experiencing the presence of the mystery of God directly (contemplative silence) (Berryman, 1991). These four “genres” render a far more difficult, and indeed a “strange” language to teach (Berryman, 1985a).

The most effective way, Berryman (1985b, 1991) argues, for children to learn religious language is to teach it like an art form. The learning of an art requires more than acquiring knowledge about its history and its skills. It entails being able to engage with and use creatively the many elements which comprise that particular art form so as to create and to discern meaning. For example, to learn to paint, one needs to go to the painter who is both a master of her or his craft (painting) *and* a master teacher. To learn the art of using the Christian language system, one must go to:

...a mature artist [who is able to] steer carefully between two ancient and deceptive rocks that guard the narrow passage into the open sea that lies beyond ordinary experience. The sharp rocks of blasphemy (thinking that one is God and can know what every individual child needs and how religious language ought to be used) are on one side. On the other side are the dangerous rocks of idolatry (teaching religious language as an end in itself as if it were to be worshipped instead of God) (Berryman, 1985b, p. 127).

In this Berryman presents two clear understandings concerning the learning of religious language. Firstly, it needs to be taught by a teacher who is her or himself a “master” in its art form. This raises an enormous challenge for many primary classroom teachers who, for various reasons, are not necessarily masters of this particular art form. Secondly, the purpose of mastering the art of using the Christian language system is not to use this as an end in itself, which equates to little more than idolatry (see also Miller, 1973). It is not simply concerned with acquiring religious literacy. Rather, the purpose is to enable the individual to create and to discern meaning and purpose in life, which discloses the presence of the Creator with whom the individual can be in a complex living system of relationships with self, others, nature and the Creator (Berryman, 1985b).

(2) Play, imagination, and the creative process

If learning the art of using the Christian language system is a key tenet of Berryman’s understanding of the purpose of religious education, then the particular way in which it is learnt provides a second line of inquiry. For Berryman, teaching the Christian language system as an art form involves the notions of play, the imagination, and the creative process. Berryman has written extensively about these interconnected areas (see for example Berryman, 1982, 1990, 1991, 2005). It is at this juncture that his work begins to depart from the theory of Maria Montessori (1946/1989, 1949/1998) – a primary influence of Berryman’s own thinking – who stressed the child’s love of and preference for work, as opposed to play, and who viewed suspiciously the concepts of the imagination and creativity – both of which are central in Berryman’s pedagogical approach to religious education (see Hyde, 2011).

For Berryman (1991, 2005), play is at the heart of creativity, and creativity is at the heart of all creatures created in the image of the Creator. Rather than enabling one to retreat from reality, as is commonly understood in Montessorian thought, the creative process takes one deeper into reality. Therefore, Berryman (2005) argues that religious education must be grounded in play and the imagination, and must enable participants to engage freely in the creative process.

As well as drawing upon the classical texts of Callois (1961) and Huizinga (1955) in his writing, Berryman, in particular, utilizes Garvey’s (1977) description of play as being pleasurable and spontaneous, as having no extrinsic goals, as involving deep engagement on the part of the players, and as having systematic relations to what is not play: creativity, language learning, problem solving, the development of social roles, and other cognitive and social phenomena. Critics may question whether all play for children is in fact always pleasurable. For instance, some play can involve pain and discomfort, such as when one plays football and gets injured, or when one is practising for a particular sport and one experiences muscle soreness and the like. However, Berryman would argue that, in the long

run, such pain is in the service of the satisfaction derived from the overall achievement. When one plays a game in which one wins, the pain that may have been experienced quickly fades as the elation of having won the game takes over. If one loses, one looks forward to the next game and the continued improvement that practice can bring¹.

For Berryman, play enables children to live at the edges of their knowing and being (see for example, Berryman, 1991) so as to discern meaning and purpose in life, and so to encounter the presence of God. While this notion is explored further in relation to the following line of inquiry (children's spirituality and religious education), it is pertinent to note briefly here, since playing at the edges of knowing and being provides *the means* by which children engage in and learn the art of using the Christian language system.

However, play for Berryman is not a laize-faire activity. It does not entail "anything goes". All play involves some type of guiding structure and rules, even if these are made up by the player, or players as the play itself progresses (see for example Brewster, 1971; Huizinga, 1955). In religious education, the Christian language system itself, along with the prepared environment of the religious education classroom, which itself ought to be infused with this language system, provide the rules and structures which guide the play (Berryman & Hyde, 2010).

Play enables children to engage freely in the creative process as a means by which to address problems of meaning and value in life. Both imagination and creativity, Berryman (2005) argues, have been deeply associated with religion in its broadest sense since prehistoric times. Religion's fundamental function has been to enable people to cope creatively with the troubles encountered in life (such as death, isolation, aloneness, and the need to seek meaning) and to celebrate instances of survival. Imagination and creativity enabled communities to produce art, symbols, rituals and stories as means by which to give voice to the community's experience of the sacred. The symbols and stories imagined and created by human beings thus aided in the imagination of others in their confronting of death, aloneness, and the need to seek meaning. In other word, for Berryman, the imagination and creative processes are indispensable elements of religion, and by extension, religious education (Berryman, 1990; Berryman & Hyde, 2010).

While the creative process has been widely studied, Berryman intertwines the work of three theorists to apply this concept to religious education. Firstly, he draws upon Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) insistence that creativity "occurs in the interaction between a person's thought and sociocultural context" (p. 23) and is made up of three components: the domain (such as mathematics, or indeed religion); a field (consisting of people who act as the gatekeepers to the domain, such as teachers, critics, clerics, or administrators, all of whom act so as to decide whether a new idea should be included in the domain); and the individual person, who uses the symbols of a given domain to develop and shape a new idea.

In arguing that religion is a domain of creativity Berryman then proceeds to draw upon the work of Loder (1981), envisaging the creative process as consisting of five steps or phases. The first consists of a disruption of one's circle of meaning, wherein an established idea or meaning is broken in some way. This could occur, for instances, by being challenged, or through a critical event in one's life, such as the death of a loved one or some other type of traumatic event. The second step involves the scanning for a new frame of meaning to cope with the disruption, and to restore cohesion. This step could last for hours, days, or even years, and may occur either consciously or unconsciously (Berryman 1991, 2005). The third step is insight. A new and more adequate pattern is formed and becomes a new frame of meaning, using the symbols of the given domain (in this case, religion) to develop the idea. The fourth step involves the new insight being articulated, verbalised and evaluated by the rules and structures of the domain in which it was discovered until there is closure. The gatekeepers, to use Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) term, are involved at this point, deciding whether or not the new idea should be included within the domain. Closure is the fifth step.

As well, Berryman draws on the work of Howard Gardner to provide further clarity in relation to the creative process, in particular, Gardner's notion of creativity styles (Gardner 1993). Gardner applied his theory of multiple intelligences to creativity, identifying the different ways in which people create. For instance, Igor Stravinski is Gardner's exemplar for musical-rhythmic intelligence and T.S Eliot typifies the way in which an individual's creativity might be expressed through a verbal-linguistic frame. For Berryman (2005) an awareness of the different ways of knowing, and different styles of creativity, enables religious educators to take into account the particular ways

¹ This particular idea was developed in conversation with Jerome W. Berryman during the author's time as a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for the Theology of Childhood in Denver, Colorado, USA, December 2009 – January 2010.

in which children demonstrate a preference for learning and expressing their creativity. It may also enable children themselves to become aware of their own particular talents.

From this second line of inquiry, it is possible to deduce, then, that Berryman believes that play is the most effective way to teach children the art of using the Christian language system, since play enables children to draw upon their imagination and to use the creative process as a means by which to address problems of meaning and value. However, a challenge here for teachers in Catholic schools is that play is a freely chosen activity. It cannot be forced, and has no extrinsic outcomes (Garvey, 1977). Although Berryman notes that children therefore need to be “invited, guided, and intrigued to take part” (Berryman, 2005, p. 447), the voluntary notion of play presents a challenge which needs to be considered and borne in mind for religious educators working within the context of Australian compulsory schooling.

(3) Children’s spirituality and religious education

Religious education involving children learning to master the art of using the Christian language system (the first line of inquiry) by playing at the edges of their knowing and being (the second line of inquiry), gives rise to a third line of inquiry, that being children’s spirituality and religious education. The purpose of playing at the edges of one’s own knowing and being is to confront, address, and cope creatively with one’s existential limits or issues (Berryman, 1985a, 1991, 1992, 2002, 2009a). The notion of existential limits are derived from existential psychotherapy, in particular from the writings of Reinhardt (1960), Yalom (1980) and Cooper (2003), and consist of death, freedom, isolation, and the need to create meaning. Religions have, for centuries, helped individuals and communities to address and to cope creatively with these four existential limits (Berryman, 2005). While children encounter and speak about them in different ways to adults, Berryman maintains that they are nonetheless real for children.

Playing at the edges of one’s knowing and being so as to discern creatively meaning and purpose in life is concerned with spirituality, and Berryman has made several contributions to the theme of children’s spirituality in relation to the religious education of children (see for example, Berryman, 1997, 2004). However, his key contribution lies in his articulation of the nonverbal dimension of spirituality in relation to young children (Berryman, 2001). Here Berryman argues that spirituality is primarily nonverbal and, in young children, it is signaled by play. The task of the religious educator is to guide the child from nonverbal spirituality into religious language, and to keep that language rooted in the creative spirituality of the child.

A difficulty in exploring this line of inquiry is that Berryman does not explicitly describe what he understands by the term “spirituality”. This is critical, since spirituality is a contested term. For instance, while Hay with Nye (2006) argue for descriptions which are inclusive and demonstrate a breadth of conceptual meaning, Erricker (2001) argues for a *diatactical* conception of spirituality, whereby one’s worldview arises out of the relationship between the individual and the many factors which impact upon the individual. While such an exercise is both imaginative and provisional, Erricker maintains it is essential in addressing the problematic domains of experience. Some, such as Wright (2004) insist upon conceptions which include a Transcendent dimension, whereas the Humanist Philosopher’s group (2001) and Watson (2009) do not. Although there are some vague and imprecise references to spirituality as a human universal trait in his work (Berryman 1997), the term is left largely undefined, although his writing suggests that he seems to place an emphasis on its relationship with religion.

Contemporary understandings of spirituality indicate that it is concerned with a sense of connectedness and relationship with the deep self, with others, with nature, and with God (see for example de Souza 2006; Eaude, 2005; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008). If one scrutinises Berryman’s work closely enough, references to these four dimensions of spirituality can be found in his writing. For instance, in discussing the notion of a theology of play, Berryman (2002) argues that such a concept concerns the quality of loving relationships people experience with the deep self, with others, with nature, and with God. According to Berryman, children tend to be more open to spirituality than many adults because they draw upon the nonverbal system of communication to express the spiritual. Adults tend to rely more upon their ability to use words and language, which often cannot adequately express the spiritual. Through their playing at the edges of their knowing and being – the nonverbal communication system, Berryman maintains that children begin to express their spirituality through each of these four dimensions in relation to the existential issue they address. Learning the art of using the Christian language system, and guided by the religious educator (the master artist and teacher), children are empowered to use that language system in a creative and

meaning way to give voice to their spirituality. In other words, they are guided from nonverbal spirituality into religious language.

(4) Ethical considerations when working with children

Each of the three lines of inquiry above give rise to a consideration of how educators interact with children in teaching the art of using the Christian language system – in guiding them from non-verbal spirituality into religious language to enable them to play and to creatively address existential issues in their lives. Such an ethical consideration becomes the fourth line of inquiry. Some may not immediately recognize this as a theme of Berryman’s writing, but it is not surprising since, from 1974 until 1984, he taught and consulted on medical ethics at the Institute of Religion in the Texas Medical Centre in Houston. This theme is one which surfaces in much of his work explicitly (e.g., Berryman, 1978; 1989) as well as implicitly, often woven into the fabric of the text itself (see for example, Berryman 2008).

In his writing, Berryman addresses the critical issue of the child’s right to be heard and consulted when adults work and engage with them in a range of contexts, including research, education, and worship. While children do not think and feel as adults do, “the conclusion that they should not be included in the ethical discussion is a cruel distortion of what I consider to be the main purpose of having an ethical discussion with another human being, especially a child” (Berryman 1978, p. 85).

In later writings, Berryman focuses quite explicitly on the power differential which exists between children and adults in classroom and worship contexts, noting in particular the “double bind” (Berryman, 2009b) in which children can be placed. If children acquiesce to the language of the adult in order to please the adult, they have to give up not only the language with which they are attempting to make meaning, but also the immediacy of God which has been experienced. If they do not accept the preferred language of the adult, they risk alienating the adult. Either way, the result for children (and also for adults) is painful. In other words, Berryman views children as having agency. They are capable learners who are able to act upon their world and use the Christian language system they are coming to master in creative ways. Although their use of language may not always reflect the adult conceptions of language, it nonetheless has meaning for them in addressing existential issues and concerns.

Writing from as early as the mid 1970s, Berryman was, in many ways, ahead of his time in relation to this particular theme. He advocates for the rights of the child, based on scriptural accounts of Jesus and his respect for children, in relation to ethics, theology and religious education in ways that later writers, for example Bunge (2001), Grajczonek (2007) would eventually come to do. Berryman’s writing in this area focuses on the practical – putting ethics into action when engaging with children, regardless of the specificities of the context.

Discussion and recommendations for Catholic schools

Each of the four lines of inquiry pursued above reveals critical insights concerning Berryman’s understanding of religious education. Such understandings include learning the art of using the Christian language system, play and creativity in using that language system, playing at the edges of knowing and being, and viewing children as being capable in each of these endeavors. In essence then, and in combining the insights gleaned from each line of inquiry, it is possible to say that Berryman understands the purpose of religious education to involve children, as active and capable learners, engaging in the art of using the Christian language system to enable them to play at the edges of their knowing and being so as to creatively address the existential issue in their lives. Although such a statement is a summation, when it is juxtaposed with the purpose of religious education as expressed in contemporary diocesan syllabi which are influenced by outcomes based approaches, it becomes clear that while there may be some points of convergence, there is a tension between Berryman’s understanding and that which is expressed in such diocesan documents.

Most contemporary Australian diocesan documents and policies on religious education, in being influenced by trends in western education generally, place an emphasis on the achievement of learning outcomes, competencies and standards. In contrast, Berryman’s understanding of religious education is far more open. It is not concerned with the achievement of outcomes and demonstrable skills and abilities. Rather, it has its focus on using religious language

through play and creativity in confronting existential issues. In fact Berryman argues that the Christian language system is significantly different from the language of the secular curriculum. Therefore, transferring methods for acquiring the language of mathematics, or science, or history to religious education will, according to Berryman, prove to be problematic since the language systems are so different (Berryman, 2009a). Teachers in Catholic schools utilizing elements of Berryman's approach to religious education (as best expressed in Godly Play) within, or in conjunction with their diocesan syllabi, need to be aware of this tension in purpose, lest the elements of Berryman's approach being utilized become skewed. While most diocesan religious education syllabi are concerned with the achievement of demonstrable and measurable outcomes, such a notion does not really feature in Berryman's understanding of the purpose of religious education.

However, this does not mean that elements of Berryman's approach cannot be drawn upon in Catholic schools. They can. However religious educators need to be cognizant of Berryman's different understanding of the purpose of religious education. In this final section, four recommendations are briefly posited for teachers in Catholic schools who utilize elements of Berryman's approach to religious education. These are not exhaustive, but are offered in the hope that they might provide an impetus for further discussion:

1. Teachers need to be aware of Berryman's understanding of the purpose of religious education, and to see how this may be quite different to the nature and purpose as expressed in the religious education syllabus with which they are working. This is best achieved through reading, ongoing systematic professional learning, and, ideally, some formal training in Berryman's Godly Play methodology.
2. Given Berryman's focus on religious language, and the need to approach it as an art, teachers need to become familiar with this art form, and to develop some mastery of this art form so that they can competently mentor and guide the children they teach in coming to master it. This is a challenge, since, for many reasons, teachers are not necessarily masters of this particular art.
3. Since genuine play and creativity are central elements of Berryman's approach, teachers need to look for opportunities of incorporating play and creativity into their religious education. This is not as easy or as straightforward as it may seem. Outcomes based approaches do not place an emphasis on play and creativity – at least not in the way that Berryman describes them. What may appear as play in the curriculum may, when analyzed, amount to little more than a highly controlled activity in which children are required to participate (see Hyde, 2009). This is not Berryman's understanding of genuine play and creativity. To incorporate these elements effectively into religious education may prove quite challenging.
4. There is a need for teachers to be ethically sensitive towards the children they teach, and to honor their voices in the educative process. This concept involves much more than simply “negotiating the curriculum” with children. It requires teachers to recognize children as theologians who are seeking meaning and direction in relation to their existential issues and concerns (Berryman, 2009c). Religious educators need to respect the theological inquiry of children. Most contemporary approaches to religious education which are influenced by outcomes based approaches do not necessarily recognize students in this same way.

Each of the above four points emphasize the need for some type of formal training in Berryman's approach to religious education. Yet, while Godly Play training courses are becoming available in Australia, there is as yet, no training in Berryman's approach which specifically includes a focus on the use of the Godly Play methodology in the compulsory classroom setting of Catholic schools. This is an area which needs to be addressed, with training tailored to meet this particular need.

Nonetheless, each of the four lines of inquiry explored above indicates that Berryman's approach to religious education is thought-provoking, stimulating, and at times challenging for teachers in Catholic schools. However, those who have drawn upon and utilized his pedagogical approach, or elements contained therein, are able to attest to its unique synthesis of practice, curriculum, and foundational theory in religious education, and to the unique contribution it makes to religious education in Catholic schools.

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