

Cambridge Theological Federation

MA in Pastoral Theology

**M915 Christian Worship & Human Community**

**ESSAY ASSIGNMENT**

Ian Mobsby, Jan 04.

“Explore how ‘Godly Play’ facilitates Christian Worship through wonderment, story telling and symbolism in today’s social context. (5000 Words)

---

As Berryman has said “*Godly Play is an invitation to come and play with God*”.<sup>1</sup> This essay, drawing on the module report and the student’s previous experience of the subject, will explore how Godly Play enables participants to worship God. To do this Godly Play will be defined and explored as a form of Christian Worship. Its components, including wondering and story telling as forms of symbolic worship, will be explored, particularly addressing how God as the Holy Spirit can bring ‘enchristing’ to participants, as a form of God’s grace. Finally, this essay will explore the implications of our current ‘post-modern’ consumer culture, the possibilities and potential hazards of using a Godly Play approach to Christian worship.

Godly Play has its origins in the Montessori approach to education. Jerome Berryman developed the concept as an ‘Advanced Montessori Studies’ research project completed at a Church School in the USA between 1975 and 1985. It has a basis in learning through experience.<sup>2</sup> Berryman describes Godly play as an invitation to play with the language of God, with God’s people, our Christian sacred stories, parables, liturgical actions and silence.<sup>3</sup> Through this ‘wondering’ activity and the gathered community, participants hear the deepest invitation to play with God.<sup>3</sup> Although originally developed for the religious education of Children, it soon became apparent to Berryman that its application was appropriate to both children and adults.<sup>4</sup> As a further development, Godly Play has been used as a form of Church Service in its own right, or has been incorporated into formal liturgical services.<sup>5</sup> To understand how Godly Play can be seen as a corporate act of worship requires further exploration of its content.

Godly play consists of seven set sections which include; ‘Entering the Threshold’, ‘Building a Circle’, ‘Story telling or liturgical action’, ‘Wondering’, ‘Response’, ‘the Feast’ and ‘Saying goodbye’.<sup>6</sup> It is my contention, that these seven set sections reflect the

---

<sup>1</sup> J.W. Berryman, *Godly Play, An Imaginative approach to Religious Education*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991), 1-8.

<sup>2</sup> *Godly Play*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> J.W. Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play Volume 1*, (Denver: Living the Good News Publishing, 2002), 12

<sup>4</sup> *The Complete 1*, 36.

<sup>5</sup> S. Oakland, *Practising Theology: Pastoral Practice Report to EAMTC*, (Cambridge: Unpublished, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> *The Complete 1*, 12-18.

essential activity definitive of Christian Worship, as 'gathering, encounter, transformation and mission'.<sup>7</sup>

In the 'Entering the Threshold' section, participants receive a sense of the importance of place, entering a room of welcome. People are greeted warmly as they enter. At the doorway people prepare themselves to go inside.<sup>6</sup> This can be interpreted as the first part of the 'body of Christ' gathering to worship.

In the 'building a circle' section, participants come together in a tight circle around the facilitator.<sup>6</sup> Again this reflects the gathering of people for Christian worship.

In the 'Story telling or liturgical action' section, the facilitator will complete story telling of a sacred story or parable with props and figures, or complete some form of liturgical action. Both are full of drama; promote the mystical and sense of awe. In this section signs and symbols are presented to the participants utilising the particular strengths of story telling and drama.<sup>6</sup> Godly Play content is organised to meet the Church liturgical calendar year. In autumn, sessions begin with a liturgical action looking at the year in advance and followed by Old Testament stories from Creation to the Prophets. Winter begins with a liturgical action for advent and the feasts of Christmas and Epiphany followed by the parables. In the spring and summer, liturgical action commences with the 'faces of Christ' during lent, followed by Easter presentations of the death, resurrection and early Church. Cloth covers used in liturgical action reflect the traditional white, purple, red and green phases of the Church Calendar.<sup>8</sup>

From personal experience, this time is full of enchantment, excitement and imagination, when done well. From a worship perspective, this section reflects the beginning of encounter, as people respond to the presented symbolic content, which are usually 'official symbols', and encounter God.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Note: See the definition of 'worship' on page 2 of the module report.

<sup>8</sup> J.W. Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play Volume 3*, (Denver: Living the Good News Publishing, 2002), 7-10.

<sup>9</sup> Note: See explanation of Sign and Symbol in module report pages 2-3 and table 1.

Such story telling evokes love, strength and generosity for the sake of the world.<sup>10</sup> It enables us to experience life vicariously and holistically as a concrete known world of immediate experience.<sup>11</sup> The conjunction of narrative and ritual action, (in later Godly Play sections), is particularly powerful. Here the divine and human narratives meet, in the stories that are told and in the rituals that are enacted as a response.<sup>12</sup> Such a fusion of the divine and human narratives deepens personal relationship with God and the human relational connections between the participants.<sup>13</sup>

Concerning the gained 'sense of awe', Farley has explored the issue of 'enchantment', regarding the words of power of the Gospel narratives that are used in Godly Play.<sup>14</sup> He states that enchantment assists symbols to exercise certain transcendence over a community and its members.<sup>15</sup> These words are enchanted because they summon and constrain the attention of the group, and demonstrate how finite reality participates in sacred power. Interestingly Farley believes that myth and enchantment have survived as a cultural form in fantasy, fairy tales and story telling in some local cultures, even though in the modernist period (enlightenment until recently), such forms of knowing were generally undervalued. He hypothesises that this is because it is impossible to use language utterly empty of enchantment and symbols.<sup>16</sup> Mystery is never too far out of sight; something of this pre-modern form of knowing has been retained. In application to Godly Play, we can see that the participants can sense enchantment in the symbols presented in narrative and liturgical form, expressing the mystery of God bestowed on such words and action.

In the 'wondering' section the facilitator leads a time of shared exploration and response. Examples of questions are listed in Table X.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> L. Green, *Power to the Powerless*, (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1987), 36.

<sup>11</sup> D.H. Webster, *Shadow into the Substance: Education & Identity in Modern Fantasy* in D.H. Webster, *Voices from the Sun: Religious Education & the Creative Arts*, (Hull: University of Hull, 1989), 26.

<sup>12</sup> *Power*, 37.

<sup>13</sup> *Power*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> E.Farley, *Deep Symbols: Their Post-modern Effacement and Reclamation*, (Valley Forge, USA: Trinity Press, 1998), 5-8.

<sup>15</sup> Note: Farley's analysis can be interpreted as assisting at the symbolic experience stage as outlined in Table 1 in the module report page 6.

## Table X

- (1) I wonder.....
- (2) I wonder which part of the story/liturgy you liked best?
- (3) I wonder which part of the story/liturgy is the most important part?
- (4) I wonder where you are in the story/liturgy or what part of this story/liturgy is about you?

Exploration commences with people making 'I wonder' statements. For example, in the story of Abraham and Sarah that I experienced, one of the participants said, "I wonder what it was like to follow a man who hears a voice you can't hear?", to which the facilitator responded "I wonder?". On occasions when participants reacted with emotional responses or when what they said was unclear, the facilitator would reflect back the question. For example one participant once said "I wonder why God is so mean as to speak to Abraham and no one else?" The facilitator responded "I wonder why you think that God doesn't speak to anyone else in the story?" The facilitator takes each question in turn, and responds by reflecting back wondering questions, where appropriate. Reflecting on symbolic worship, it is clear that in this part of Godly play, the facilitator is allowing time for the working out of cognitive dissonance for individual participants and the whole group.<sup>17</sup> In this activity, the group begin to interpret the sacred story, parable or liturgy, becoming an 'interpretative community'.<sup>18</sup> In reflecting back, the facilitator may question or clarify where the interpretation of the symbol may be unreal, untrue or dubious. By responding warmly to questions, the facilitator is validating responses as real and plausible.<sup>18</sup>

In the 'Response Section', after wondering, there is silence for reflection. In this time the facilitator puts away the props. Each participant is given the opportunity to choose a medium of creative expression, perhaps painting, drawing, moulding, reading or writing, as part of the reflection process.<sup>8</sup> This approach allows thoughts to be considered deeply, as part of the cognitive process of resolving cognitive dissonance and responding to the plausibility structures expressed in the wondering section. From personal experience, this section felt deeply spiritual; a form of prayer and further time of encounter with God. People work alone, yet in parallel on their selected activities. I remember thinking how strongly this felt like church.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Deep Symbols*, 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> See the cognitive section of the module report pages 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> See third paragraph page 5 of the module report.

In the feast section, adults and children come back together as a community to form a circle. They eat and drink together and prayers are said.<sup>8</sup> In an experience of Godly Play using the Parable of the Samaritan, I was deeply moved by the sense of people trying to put into practice what they had just learnt through exploring the story and encountering God, with both adults and children seeing others as 'their neighbour' and expressing tenderness and care. For me there was a strong sense of transformation, that people were changing their behaviour in response to the story and what they had learnt of God and themselves. The feast acts as a ritual action<sup>19</sup> to reinforce the learning and spiritual experience of the presented symbol and related wondering.

In the 'Saying Goodbye' section, the facilitator waits by the door. Each person in turn goes to the door says goodbye to the facilitator who responds by saying 'thank you for being with us'. The participants then take their experiences and thoughts into the world.<sup>8</sup> This section again tallies with the sense of transformation expected of Christian worship.<sup>20</sup>

Such a fusion of narrative and ritual response enables the participants to fashion their human narratives, composed of so many events of ordinary life, in the light of the divine presence. Ordinary life is transformed when we recognise that our stories bear the presence of God.<sup>21</sup>

If the above analysis of Godly Play is correct, then it is clear that Godly Play conforms to the definition of worship we have taken, and enables 'enchristing'.<sup>22</sup> Further, the process of Godly Play conforms to the expected pattern for using symbolism effectively in Christian worship, from presentation of the symbol, through to transformative worship.<sup>23</sup>

In his written reflections of his work, Berryman makes connections between the story telling, wondering and responding of Godly Play with the ancient practice of 'lectio divina'. This form of ancient worship was used by intentional Christian religious communities as a

---

<sup>19</sup> Note: See module report bottom paragraph page 5-6.

<sup>20</sup> Note: See module report paragraph 3 page 5 –6.

<sup>21</sup> *Power*, 37-40.

<sup>22</sup> Note: See module report paragraph 2 page 2.

<sup>23</sup> Note: See module report Table 1 page 6 as a summary of this process from symbol to transformative worship.

spiritual discipline of holy reading, wondering and responding to scriptural texts.<sup>24</sup> It was an activity based on meditation and prayer. The reader came to the text to seek an intuitive understanding, to grow in wisdom, to savour the aesthetic value of the words and ultimately to encounter God.<sup>24</sup> This monastic approach to a form of worship is very similar to Godly Play.

Godly Play, as an approach to worship and knowledge formation has strong similarities to pre-enlightenment modes of thinking and knowing. It is less about critical objective data or the scientific method of knowing through critical objective enquiry. This approach rejected subjective knowing as myth and fantasy, in favour for an objective approach to knowing through fact.<sup>25</sup> Godly Play, is therefore a re-contextualisation of the place of the subjective experience as a way of knowing. It may be a co-incidence, but the rise of this form of education and worship strongly corresponds with social change within western post-industrial countries who have faced major social and economic change including globalisation that has led to the rise of what some call the 'post modern' or 'liquid modern' culture. In this form of society the values concerning subjective and objective knowing have been revised to re-value the subjective as equal and sometimes over the objective.<sup>26</sup>

Before leaving the area of worship and Godly Play, we must further explore the role of the Holy Spirit, Grace and the Sacraments involved in this way of worshipping and knowing.

In the module report on symbolism and worship, the role of the Holy Spirit in wondering was briefly mentioned, and requires further enquiry. As Christians we cannot believe that gaining increased knowledge or understanding of God through knowing is a purely human cognitive process. A Christian approach focuses on God disclosing such wisdom through encounter with God through the Holy Spirit. In exploring this, consideration needs to be given to an authentic understanding of God the Holy Spirit.

In 2 Corinthians 3:16-18, we understand that when people turn to the Lord 'the veil is removed', which is freedom.<sup>27</sup> 'The LORD' of whom this passage speaks is 'The Holy

---

<sup>24</sup> *The Complete 1*, 19, 21-22.

<sup>25</sup> *The Complete 1*, 21-22.

<sup>26</sup> *The Complete 1*, 21-22.

<sup>27</sup> Note: Translation taken from the NRSV.

Spirit', and the result of that clear vision of Jesus Christ is, that we ourselves begin to be changed 'into the same image'<sup>28</sup> as Christ . The focus of the text is then thrown onto the end of verse 18, 'for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit'. As Taylor has said, the relationship between the Spirit and the new relationship with Jesus is indistinguishable.<sup>29</sup> The Holy Spirit is dynamically involved in the gap between us as individuals and communities with God. Taylor has called the Holy Spirit the 'Go Between' God, between people and God, to reflect this. God the Holy Spirit is instrumental in the development of what has been called the 'I Thou' relationship.<sup>30</sup> It is here that we understand The Holy Spirit to be 'the counsellor' that Jesus talked about, who would follow him and guide Christians after his death, resurrection and ascension.<sup>31</sup>

From our understanding of the New Testament and the Doctrine of the Trinity as the Divine Persons, God calls people into relationship, whose response is to try to connect with what they experience as an elusive presence.<sup>32</sup> We cannot fully capture our experience of God in any activity, story or rite, yet it is God's presence that invites us endlessly to follow what glimpses are disclosed through the Holy Spirit.<sup>32</sup>

The importance of 'wondering' or 'lectio divina' is the involved dynamic of the Holy Spirit in these activities of worship. God the Spirit draws people's attention to Jesus Christ in whom alone the meaning of personhood is fully revealed, which began in the Church at the point of Pentecost and has continued to this day.<sup>33</sup> It is this openness to attention that enables Christians to know God through experience. As Taylor states:

*True attention Is an involuntary self-surrender to the object of the attention.<sup>34</sup>  
The Holy Spirit is that power which opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality. If one is open to towards God, one is open also to the beauty of the world.<sup>35</sup>*

---

<sup>28</sup> Note: Some translations are more explicitly "into his likeness".

<sup>29</sup> J.V. Taylor, *The Go Between God*, (London: SCM, 1975), 107-110.

<sup>30</sup> *The Go*, 8.

<sup>31</sup> John 14: 15-27.

<sup>32</sup> *The Complete 1*, 25-26.

<sup>33</sup> *The Go*, 107-117, 199.

<sup>34</sup> *The Go*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> *The Go*, 19-19.

This form of spiritual discipline, has been frowned upon by many since the enlightenment until relatively recently. For many people, attentive listening and sensing is very difficult. When attempted on their own participants can be easily distracted or find it difficult to motivate themselves, but may experience profound encounters with God in groups through this form of attentive sensing.<sup>36</sup> In Taylor's reflections of such gatherings, he noticed that there were moments of profound recognition, with comments such as 'we found' or 'it came to us'. The group in its togetherness was given moments of insight and liberation, which no member could have received singly, even in the company of others.<sup>37</sup> It is these same group encounters through the Holy Spirit that we see in Godly Play. It teaches the classic rhythm of life modelled in the bible; the alternation of action, reflection, engagement and prayer as a spiritual rule of life<sup>38</sup>; a way of worshipping and knowing God as a fusion of a human cognitive process and the ministry of God the Holy Spirit. Such an outworking of the Holy Spirit is therefore one of the means of grace.

Godly Play allows people to experience a graceful God who is real and accessible in all the mystery of life, both sad and joyful.<sup>39</sup> This discloses a sacramental function of the symbolism used in Godly Play. Rahner describes this coming of grace as a gift of God to people through sacramental symbols, which occurs because they signify God.<sup>40</sup> God is made present and participants receive from God a form of 'interior grace'.<sup>41</sup> Not only are the symbols part of this sacramental sense of God's presence in Godly Play, but also the importance of place and time. As people prepare to enter the room to encounter God and

leave, the sacramental importance of place to encounter God and receive grace is made. A pattern of attending Godly Play sessions over a period of time is also a 'sacramentalisation' of time. So not only is the Holy Spirit involved as the 'Go Between God', enchristing people, but we also gain the idea that Godly Play groups represent the "body of Christ" or a local form of the Church which is called by God to be the visible outward expression of God's grace. By being Church, God's grace is given expression

---

<sup>36</sup> *The Go*, 15-6.

<sup>37</sup> *The Go*, 16.

<sup>38</sup> *The Complete*, 19.

<sup>39</sup> *The Complete*, 18-9.

<sup>40</sup> K. Rayner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, (London: Burns & Oates, 1963), 34-41.

<sup>41</sup> *The Church*, 35, 37.

and embodiment, and by being embodied, is present.<sup>42</sup> So, 'Godly Play' may be officially an educational programme that enables people to know God, but because this knowing is about encounter with God through the Holy Spirit in forms of groups modelled on "the body of Christ", this form of learning is also symbolic and sacramental worship.

On reflection, we can also see that the role of the facilitator is key and highly skilled. It appears to be an almost priestly vocation. We must remember that Berryman himself was an Anglican Minister. It is no surprise then that some Anglican churches are using Godly Play in their formal worship services. There are striking similarities between the role of Jesus as parable-teller and the role of the Godly play facilitator. Such an approach invites encounter through stories. This way of telling stories relates to the oral tradition that informed the biblical narratives in the first place. Such story telling needs practice and requires mature spiritual understanding. No surprise then that Berryman talks of the facilitators learning about having a Christian spiritual rule of life.<sup>43</sup> Godly Play facilitators can be seen to be following the ways of Christ.

To understand the advantages and disadvantages of Godly Play, requires us to explore the social context. For the purpose of this essay, it is assumed that in the UK we are largely living in what is called a 'post-modern' or 'liquid modern'<sup>44</sup> consumerist society. Postmodernism has many meanings:

*"As a term for the historical shift, the rise of a new epoch, it names a liberation into plurality (from provincialism), relativity (from absolutism), and difference (from the old frozen authorities). At the same time it describes the void and anxiety we experience when our very selves are dispersed, beaocratized, isolated, and rendered autonomous."*<sup>45</sup>

This change in cultural paradigm means in practice that global economics and consumerism is increasingly replacing inherited modes of culture.<sup>44</sup> There is a new master narrative to replace the old modernity paradigm, which is critical of any all-

---

<sup>42</sup> *The Church*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> *The Complete*, 19.

<sup>44</sup> For a social analysis of the antecedents and results of the phenomena of 'liquid modernity' see Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 1-15.

<sup>45</sup> *Deep Symbols*, 12.

encompassing beliefs such as the Christian narrative.<sup>46</sup> In such a culture of relativity Christianity is one amongst a cacophony of other voices. The Church, as a form of institution, is often seen in negative terms as a form of collective oppression, by dominating power structures.<sup>47</sup> Alongside this, people are increasingly defining who they are based on consumption – by what they wear and the cars they drive.<sup>48</sup> People are then constantly having to reinvent themselves and in a world that is constantly fluid.<sup>48</sup> However, at the same time, there is a resurgence of spiritual meaning or questing, in the response to the question ‘who am I’ and ‘is there more to life?’<sup>49</sup> So in this form of culture what advantages does Godly Play bring?

### **Advantages**

Firstly, Godly Play, as a form of symbolic worship, holds the same benefits as outlined in the module report.<sup>50</sup> In addition, as the Drapers have outlined, the shift away from enlightenment values has given the Church an exciting opportunity to reclaim elements of our traditional Christian heritage, which were jettisoned with the reformation.<sup>51</sup> Contemporary culture is resistant to claims of objectivity, so that many of the symbols and elements of worship that ‘worked’ in pre-modern culture might be just as effective in post-modern times in provoking subjective reactions. Such ancient symbols may need some re-working or reappropriation for contemporary culture. Such a fusion of the ancient tradition with contemporary culture can bring about exciting possibilities. In Godly Play I would argue, we see such an outworking of a reappropriation of the old into the new. In fact this is nothing new. Jesus, in his most powerful and enduring of Christian acts, recapitulated the Passover feast within the Eucharist at the last supper, a mysterious reality of bread and wine.<sup>52</sup> Given the resurgence of story telling, spirituality and other subjective ways of knowing, Godly Play’s use of such approaches as a form of education and worship makes it highly culturally accessible. It doesn’t tell people what to believe, but promotes understanding or personal revelation and encounter by the Holy Spirit. This approach is sensitive to the fact that many in contemporary society are resistant to claims of objectivity as knowing.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> *Deep Symbols*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> G. Lynch, *After Religion*, (London: DLT, 2002), 3-9.

<sup>48</sup> *Liquid*, 53-90.

<sup>49</sup> M. McCarthy, *Spirituality in a Postmodern Era* in J. Woodward, S. Pattison (eds.), *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral And Practical Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 193-205

<sup>50</sup> Note: See Module Report pages 3-6.

<sup>51</sup> K.Draper, B Draper, *Refreshing Worship*, (Oxford: BRF, 2000), 76-8.

<sup>52</sup> *Refreshing*, 81-2.

The approach taken by Godly Play is also sensitive to some of the learning values of education policy. Webster proposes that there are five areas which education should aspire;

1. to meet peoples search for meaning, to facilitate questing and exploration.
2. promoting openness to life, attending to experiences and thoughtful awareness.
3. the sense of an integrated worldview.
4. promoting self-growth through creative experience.
5. being able to engage with rights and responsibilities, and seeing the 'bigger picture'.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>54</sup> <sup>55</sup>

Godly Play appears to meet all five of these educational aspirations.

Berryman himself claims that Godly Play is an exciting way of experience, when many find religious education and worship to be boring. Even though it is very grounded, it offers a contemporary and accessible version of the 'lectio divina', which helps people know God through the use of a pre-modern form of worship in a post-modern context.<sup>56</sup> Counter-culturally Godly Play teaches kindness and mutuality through rituals, and therefore attempts to bring value to being human in an increasingly dehumanising society. That everything in God's creation is charged with the possibility of holiness; including each of us, places us in relationship with everything in creation. It therefore challenges non-stewardship consumptive understandings of the planet and connects with ecological justice.<sup>56</sup>

In a post-modern culture of increased social isolation, Godly Play is counter-cultural in the sense that it enables people to belong. It helps people to become more human, through their connection with God. Its warmth in personal greeting and departure emphasise this sense of community. In a way, it is a strong statement of welcome to the stranger, and

---

<sup>53</sup> D.H.Webster, *Voices from the Sun: Religious Education & the Creative Arts*, (Hull: University of Hull, 1989), 10-15.

<sup>54</sup> T. Shadow, *Into Substance: Education and Identity in Modern Fantasy* in D.H.Webster, *Voices from the Sun: Religious Education & the Creative Arts*, (Hull: University of Hull, 1989), 22-6.

<sup>55</sup> E.Musty, *Opening their eyes, Worship and RE with Children with Special Need*, (Ongar: Good News Press Ltd & National Society (Church of England) for the Provision of Religious Education, 1991), 6-31.

<sup>56</sup> *The Complete*, 18-19.

again makes this form of Church an accessible and public space.<sup>57</sup> As symbolic space, it enables a fusion of both public and holy space.<sup>58</sup> Often the only public spaces of social interaction are the shopping centre, public transport, bars, cafes, pubs and clubs. Godly Play might assist in opening up Church buildings to become increasingly public as well as holy spaces.

Regarding the Church, Anderson and Foley state that its future depends on the capacity of local churches to foster an environment in which the human and the divine narratives regularly intersect. Such a weaving in the image of Jesus Christ deepens these narratives and our relationship with God and our connections with one another.<sup>59</sup> It is my belief that Godly Play does this and so contributes to new, (or old) ways of being Church.

Finally, the approach of Godly Play returns to a pre-modern understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit as the means of gaining spiritual knowledge. Taylor's approach outlined earlier resonates with the sense of spiritual journeying, which is, in my belief also present in Godly Play. The focus on spiritual attention takes us back to earlier spiritual disciplines that can aid us. In our age of self-help groups and new age spiritualities, this approach to the Holy Spirit, in my opinion, is accessible to our culture if it is framed correctly to resonate with local culture. This return to an old pneumatology frees the church from some of the inflexibility's it gained in the modernist age, to respond creatively in mission. I believe that Godly Play can be a vital resource in such a creative and worshipful activity.

### **Disadvantages**

Again, Godly Play as a form of symbolic worship has the same potential dangers as outlined in the module report.<sup>60</sup> In addition there are concerns that symbolic worship may not be so helpful in our post-modern context as we have assumed. Farley has identified that when culture changes or when people from one culture are absorbed into another, then the original deep symbols tend to disappear or survive as a subset of a new master narrative. These symbols are then significantly weakened. Where the official sign

---

<sup>57</sup> P.J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life*, (X:Crossroad, 1981), 120-34.

<sup>58</sup> D. Torevell, *Loosing the Sacred: Ritual, Modernity and Liturgical Reform*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 177.

<sup>59</sup> H. Anderson, E. Foley, *Mighty Stoires, Dangerous Rituals: weaving together the human and the divine*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 40-1

<sup>60</sup> See Module Report pages 6-8.

value is quite 'set' then the symbol will face disenchantment as it is not free to change in a new context.<sup>61</sup> In application, Godly Play uses traditional interpretation of official symbols and sign value, which may prevent the potential of symbolic worship being truly realised and transformative in a post-modern context. Secondly, there is a real problem culturally in a form of faith that takes subjective experience and makes objective truth claims from this, in a culture where there are no overarching metanarratives.<sup>62</sup> There are potential problems in the outworking of the Godly Play process when such metanarratives are named, particularly in the liturgical action section, as this could be perceived culturally as an attempt to control. Additionally some hold a negative view of liturgy and ritual action, no longer having a sense of a rite as something creative and restorative, but rather a stale act of repetition, the opposite of freedom.<sup>63</sup> Godly Play's reliance on liturgy and ritual action as part of the process for encounter with God, may prove to be a cultural barrier. In contemporary secular culture many use jogging, the gym, work and many other activities to be ritual moments based on consumptive choice.<sup>64</sup> Will the ritual action of Godly Play really compete with these, or does it remain relatively culturally inaccessible?

Crichton states that in a post-modern consumerist culture there has been a removal of reverence and transcendence.<sup>65</sup> If this is true, then it may be a mistake to try to rehabilitate pre-modern forms of worship that focus on mystery, enchantment and creative exploration such as Godly play in the hope that they may resonate with our present contemporary culture, where consumption has a new bearing on life.

We have in the advantages section talked of the possibility of creating new symbols or new sign meaning of old symbols. There is a danger in this, in a culture that is 'dumbing down', of creating what some call, secondary symbols. Some have argued that the Church is eroding the power of symbols by using these secondary symbols, which simply express the inclinations of the present cultural modes of communication rather than bringing Christian transformative meaning or authentic encounter with God.<sup>66</sup> In Godly Play there is the potential danger of using such secondary symbols which could bring

---

<sup>61</sup> *Deep Symbols*, 13-15.

<sup>62</sup> *Refreshing*, 81.

<sup>63</sup> *Loosing*, 165-6.

<sup>64</sup> L.A. Hoffmann, *The Art of Public Prayer*, (Woodstock, USA: Skylight Path Publishing, 1999), 56-7.

<sup>65</sup> J.D. Crichton in *Loosing*, 161.

<sup>66</sup> *Loosing*, 173.

unorthodox sign value, reflecting a fusion of new age 'pick-and-mix' spiritualities which are not Christian or transformative.<sup>67 68</sup>

Finally and more seriously is the role of the facilitator. There are inherent dangers in any power relationship, and forms of worship that rely on a single person as a focal point, which are open to abuse. In the reading I have done on Godly Play facilitation, there is little said about accountability other than training requirements and the need for a spiritual rule of life. Such leadership comes with potential dangers of using over-sanctification of symbols as a form of control as outlined in the module report.<sup>69 70</sup> Having clear accountability structures is key to the prevention of such symbolic worship becoming abusive. Many in contemporary culture, (and rightly in my view) are weary of power abuse and want to know that activities are safe before they consider attending or participating in spiritual events.

To conclude, this essay has explored Godly Play and its seven component parts of: entering, building a circle, story telling or liturgical action, wondering, response, the feast and saying goodbye. In these constituent parts, the relevance of Godly Play as a form of symbolic Christian Worship was made, drawing on the analysis made in the module report. Connections were made between Godly Play and an ancient form of Christian worship called "Lectio divina". The role of story telling, enchantment and wondering as enabling worship were further explored, as legitimate components to worship. The essay explored the connections between Godly Play; the role of the Holy Spirit as the 'Go Between God'; the nature of sacramental symbolism as an initiator of grace as a gift of God; and the role of the Godly Play Group as an authentic form of the 'body of Christ'. Finally in the worship section, the role of the facilitator was explored with connections to Christian Ministers and following Jesus.

In the section looking at social context, postmodernism was defined and its implications for worship discussed. In the light of these findings, the advantages of using Godly Play were explored including: the benefits of using storytelling and spiritual wondering in a

---

<sup>67</sup> G.Cray, *The eucharist and the post-modern* in P.Ward (ed.) *Mass Culture*, (Oxford:BRF, 1999), 74-94.

<sup>68</sup> J.Drane, *The MacDonalidization of the Church*, (London:DLT, 2000), 154-7.

<sup>69</sup> R Kappaport, *Ritual And Religion*, (Cambridge:CUP, 1999), 440-2.

culture that is open to such pre-modern approaches; and as a form of worship utilising an old pneumatology that opens up people's awareness to God in the world. Modern approaches to education were explored which appeared to be harmonious with Godly Play, enabling participants to gain a sense of rights and responsibilities, the need for mutuality and nurture, and a sacramental understanding of life. Lastly it was noted that such forms of 'group' were increasingly culturally accessible.

In the disadvantages section, possible difficulties from a contemporary cultural perspective in accessing Godly Play was explored. The danger that historic symbols and their sign meaning could be lost or at best would not relate to an overriding secular metanarrative was outlined as was a fear that in a culture that devalued ritual and liturgy, such approaches as Godly Play might prove inaccessible. As a response to the gap between Christianity and culture the use of secondary symbols brought the danger of bringing unorthodox sign meaning, which was a potential danger also in Godly Play. Finally the dangers associated with the facilitator as a power relationship were explored, where reading of Godly Play material appeared not to address the central need of accountability to prevent worship becoming abusive

However, with appropriate safeguards, Godly Play remains a great gift and opportunity for the church. From personal experience, it has been the only worship event that I have facilitated that holds the attention of both adults and children. At times you could hear a pin drop in an atmosphere of silent awe, as the ancient narrative of Abraham and Sarah unfolded. It is faithful to the tradition yet also contextual within a post-modern society. It brings back, after the ravages of modernism, the importance of enchantment and wonderment, and an understanding of the Holy Spirit, that seeks to enable us to grow in our spiritual journeys with Christ. Such an approach resonates with contemporary culture, as an authentic way to live and promotes Christianity and Church as having something to say to our current world, where both are commonly considered irrelevant.

5000 Words.

---

<sup>70</sup> Note: See module report page 8.

## Bibliography

- Bauman Z (2001) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Anderson H, Foley E (2001) *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: weaving together the human and the divine*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Berryman J W (2002) *The Complete Guide to Godly Play Volume 1*. Denver: Living the Good News Publishing.
- Berryman J W (2002) *The Complete Guide to Godly Play Volume 3*. Denver: Living the Good News Publishing.
- Berryman J W (1991) *Godly Play, An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*. Minneapolis: Augsburg.
- Cray G (1999) *Theucharist and the post-modern* in Ward P, *Mass Culture*. Oxford: BRF.
- Draper K, Draper B (2000) *Refreshing Worship*. Oxford: BRF.
- Drane J (2000) *The McDonaldization of the Church*. London: DLT.
- Farley E (1996) *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation*. Valley Forge, USA: Trinity Press.
- Green L (1987) *Power to the Powerless*. Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering.
- Hoffman L A (1999) *The Art of Public Prayer*. Woodstock, USA: Skylight Path Publishing
- Lynch G (2002) *After Religion*. London: DLT.
- Kappaport R (1999) *Ritual And Religion*. Cambridge: CUP.
- McCarthy M (2000) *Spirituality in a Postmodern Era* in Woodward J, Pattison S (eds.) *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral And Practical Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 193-205.
- Musty E (1991) *Opening their eyes, Worship and RE with Children with Special Needs*. Ongar: Good News Press Ltd & National Society (Church of England) for the Provision of Religious Education.
- Palmer P J (1981) *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life*. X: Crossroad.
- Rahmer K (1963) *The Church and the Sacraments*. London: Burns & Oates.
- Taylor J V (1975) *The Go Between God*. London: SCM.
- Torevell D (2000) *Loosing the Sacred: Ritual, Modernity and Liturgical Reform*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Webster D H (1989) *Voices from the Sun: Religious Education & the Creative Arts*. Hull: University of Hull.