

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Serious Thinking About Play: Jerome W. Berryman's Publications in Religious Education

Joyce Ann Mercer, Ph.D., MDiv., MSW, BA¹ 

¹ Yale Divinity School

Keywords: Godly Play, Jerome W. Berryman, Godly Play theory behind, Religious Education journal and Jerome Berryman

<https://doi.org/10.65045/001c.158973>

Journal of Childhood and Religion

Vol. Special Issue, 2026

Jerome W. Berryman published prolifically throughout his ministry as he developed the Godly Play→ method of nurturing children's Christian religious imaginations. Among his many writings, Berryman published six articles in the journal *Religious Education*. Together these writings constitute a distinctive corpus in which Berryman explored and articulated various theoretical perspectives undergirding his other published writings. The articles work out the "background theories" for several important themes that appear in Berryman's writings beyond the *Religious Education* corpus, including meaning-making and children's ways of knowing, the danger of distortions, the power of the creative process in children's lives, and above all, the wonder of joy and play.

Nearly every summer for the past two decades, Jerome Berryman and I spent time together sitting in big rocking chairs on the porch at the YMCA of the Rockies in Estes Park, Colorado. There, we looked out on the grandeur of the surrounding mountains and recounted stories of our favorite hikes in the Rocky Mountain National Park that we both loved. Our conversation inevitably would turn to the topics of children and religious education, also loved by both of us.

One such time we were engaged in a robust discussion of whether developmental stage theories had run their course as an explanatory paradigm. Jerome, who often critiqued developmental theories as reductionistic, was nevertheless in the midst of defending the enduring importance of stage theories for understanding childhood. For my part, I argued for the need to give far greater attention to the power of societal expectations and cultural norms shaping children's capacities at various ages. Just then, one of my children wandered up onto the porch. He stood to the side for several minutes, listening and watching closely before finally saying to Jerome, "I remember you from last year, but you look different. You are more round with a bigger beard. Do you ever pretend to be Santa Claus in the wintertime? You seem like you could be him."

"Ah," said Jerome with a twinkle in his eyes, "to you, I look like Santa? That is a fun idea!" "Well," my son replied, "it would be fun, except I have grown out of that now. I heard that kids used to believe in Santa for a long time, even till they were teenagers!"

"Really!" exclaimed Jerome, taking on a concerned look. "But not anymore? I wonder what happens?" "Well," came the reply, "when kids get older, they start thinking about Christmas in more ways than just about Santa because they can understand Santa as a 'made up' guy. But the idea of Santa still makes even big kids feel joy, so maybe it's all just another way of putting it into a story."

Jerome smiled and said, "Hmm, another way to tell the story of joy." "Yes," my son explained further, "It makes me happy to get presents. Did you know that Jesus is a kind of present? Jesus is like a gift from God, which is why people give presents at Christmas. Sometimes I sort of do *feel* like there's a Santa Claus who brings presents, in my imagination. I still feel excited on Christmas Eve. But no one my age still believes Santa is really the one bringing the presents. If I *did*, though, I think you would make a good Santa. You have a happy body and you like kids."

"Thank you," Jerome said sincerely as my son scampered off. Turning back to our conversation wide-eyed, Jerome began to laugh. "I am 'more round' and I have a 'happy body'! And 'maybe Santa is a different way of telling the story.' That's just wonderful!" Then, taking on a more serious tone, he added, "I'm not sure whether he just gave us a living illustration of my expanded developmental stage theories or of your push toward more attention to the impact of culture and the social—probably both—but isn't it amazing to listen to a child making sense of his world?"

Jerome Berryman was at home in the discursive worlds of children. One might be tempted to imagine from the example above that his way of engaging children was accidental or casual, in the same way he writes for practitioner-educators, the prose sound rather conversational, unburdened by an over-emphasis on academic language signaling scholarly acumen. In reality, however, Berryman brought not only a substantial background of experience working with children but also an attentive curiosity to the interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks on which he relied. These frameworks come from disciplines as diverse as the philosophy of language, hermeneutics, and biblical studies, as well as education and the psychology of child development. Taken as a whole, the theoretical perspectives from which he drew combined with lived experience to shape his way of being with children and his development of Godly Play→.

This essay considers Berryman's contributions to the theory and practice of religious education through his six articles in the journal *Religious Education*. While he also published prolifically elsewhere across his career, Berryman's

articles in *Religious Education* bring his theoretical interests to the foreground. In fact, this small collection of articles functions as the practical-theological equivalent of what math teachers used to require when telling students they must not merely arrive at an answer but also be able to “show their work”! In these writings, Berryman “shows his work,” foregrounding the theoretical frameworks supporting articulations of the method and practice of Godly Play. In what follows, I explore examples of Berryman’s theorization of themes in *Religious Education* articles that prove particularly consequential in his development of Godly Play.

Children and the Problem of Distortion

In 1977 Berryman presented a paper to the Religious Education Association’s (REA) affiliate organization, the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education (APRRE) at its annual meeting. Two years later the paper appeared in revised form in *Religious Education* under the title “Being in Parables with Children.” How, he asked, might we present parables to children in a way that avoids “distorting the children, ourselves, or the parables?”¹ By taking the problem of distortion as a three-way possibility, Berryman thereby refused the implicit assumption of children as the problem in situations of textual interpretation. Instead, he situated the possibility of distortion as a problem of communication and interpretation. He could do so because although he found much to appreciate in developmental theories of childhood, he was suspicious of their tendencies to perceive children primarily in terms of what they lack. For example, Berryman critiqued a 1960s developmental paradigm of Ronald Goldman with its suggestions that children are neither capable of engaging mystery nor of understanding parables, based on the application of Piagetian developmental theory to the interpretation of narrative texts.² Such an application led Goldman and the educational institutions drawing upon his work to lay the responsibility for distorted interpretations on children’s developmentally defined lack of cognitive capacities for making sense of sacred narrative. Berryman suggested instead that if anything is lacking in the encounter between children and Scripture it would be the modes of communication with children about religious texts and their meanings.

Berryman traced what happens when Goldman’s deficit view of children drives communication, using as an example educator Ronald Dingwall’s work on communicating parables to them. Dingwall, who was a popular writer on religious education of children in the 1970s, took on Goldman’s view of the limitations of children’s capacities to understand parables. He created a “parable kit” intended to introduce young learners to concepts he viewed as

1 Jerome W. Berryman, “Being in Parables with Children,” *Religious Education* 74, no. 3 (1979): 273, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408790740307>.

2 Ronald Goldman, *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965).

necessary for understanding the parable of the good shepherd. Among these were experiences such as sheep farming and the concept of the sheeps' reliance on the shepherd. The kit included a workbook into which children were told to put their answers to questions about the parable that were indicated on a card. Such an approach, Berryman noted, has the effect of "turning the parable into a research project about sheep and shepherds" by which children may learn about the parable but not enter into it. "If parables operate at the edge of language," Berryman asked, "can they be reduced to concepts?" Berryman suggested instead that "the *only* way to enter them is as a parable-child. Perhaps one must answer them with art or play."³

What did he mean by "being in parables," or by the notion that parables "operate at the edge of language"? In his 1979 article "Being in Parables with Children," Berryman called for turning from rigidly applied developmentalism toward an alternative view of parables grounded in philosophical works of thinkers such as Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. He drew upon the work of New Testament "Parables Seminar" scholars such as Robert Funk, John Crossan, Dan Via, and Norman Perrin, for whom a different understanding of how language operates led into what was then called the "new hermeneutics" movement. Moving away from allegorical approaches of parables as fixed lessons containing singular lessons for all to glean, these scholars stressed the polyvalence of symbols and metaphor, definitively reshaping what it meant to interpret a parable. In this understanding, parables are not simply illustrations toward a single point (or "the right answer," a notion to which Berryman strongly objected). Instead, parables manifest ways of using language "which requires participation in the metaphor to evoke the referent."⁴ In this way, a parable operates at the edge of language. Put simply, parables destabilize fixed assumptions of meaning. They are active and dynamic, inviting the reader/hearer into the world of the parable not as a passive receptacle for predetermined meaning but as a participant in the parable's meaning-making activity.

Berryman and others working out of a new hermeneutics approach contended that a parable discloses meanings about that which is unknown or only slightly known (the "referent" of the parable, such as the kingdom of God), by placing it in relation to something well-known and ordinary (lost coins, helpless herds of sheep, etc.). But, noted Berryman, the referent of New Testament parables is not *the readers'* understanding, but rather *Jesus's understanding* of God: "As we return to the same parable over and over we enter into the experience Jesus had of God. . . . Parables are open to those

³ Berryman, "Being in Parables," 273.

⁴ Berryman, "Being in Parables," 275.

who have learned how to live in parables. Adults, then, ought not to see their role as teaching children about parables but as showing how to live in parables by entering them with children.”⁵

Interestingly, Berryman followed his substantive yet succinct explication of how parables “work” linguistically with a return to psychology’s developmental perspectives—but now through the more expansive work of James W. Fowler’s faith development theory, which moves beyond cognitive development alone to incorporate moral and social aspects as well. At the same time that Berryman utilized and valued Fowler’s work, he critiqued Fowler for overemphasizing the coherence-enhancing function of faith, saying that faith is not only glue that holds a world together but can also be the “‘solvent’ that dissolves such glue to make way for growth,” an emphasis stemming directly from the destabilization idea embedded in the new theories of interpretation from the Parables Seminar scholars.⁶

Nevertheless, Berryman’s interest in Fowler’s work concerned “how people at different stages of faith development can be together in the same parable at the same time.”⁷ Parables undergo distortion when reduced to singular meanings with which everyone, no matter their age or life experience, must concur. If parables are open rather than closed in their meanings, and if one can speak legitimately of faith as present in diverse ways across the lifespan per Fowler’s faith development theory, Berryman reasoned that children and adults alike are interpreters of parables, whatever their developmentally situated capacities, without needing to hold uniform understandings of their meanings.

In searching for a way to communicate parables with children that avoids distortion either of the parable or the people entering it, Berryman turned to both Montessori and Cavalletti, walking readers through the use of a “parable box” to tell the story of the good shepherd to consider how a parable communicates across developmental stages. Distortion happens when “the child’s own experience of reality and power to create theologically is never recognized by significant adults.” Adults put children into a “satanic double bind” when a child must set aside their own experience of engagement with the parable to accept another person’s meanings. In the choice between the child’s meaning-making and that of the adults on whom children depend, “it is the young theologian’s power to create his or her own faith world that is usually capitulated.”⁸ Here Berryman drew implicitly from Maria Montessori’s notion that such capitulation can deform the souls of children.

⁵ Berryman, 276.

⁶ Berryman, 279.

⁷ Berryman, 278.

⁸ Berryman, 283.

“Cross stage static,” or the confusion resulting when interpreters of different stages of faith enter a parable at the same time, is responsible for such capitulations, according to Berryman. When children participate in being curious about the narrative they hear and see, and their perspectives find acknowledgment, they become respected interpreters in their own rights. By wondering together instead of adopting a pedagogy of adults telling children what the parable means, Berryman reasoned, children and adults alike can enter the parable at the same time without distorting parable, child, or adult realities.

It is not difficult to find in Berryman's 1979 article many clues to the methods ensconced in Godly Play, along with the rationales behind any number of practices followed by its teachers. For example, the article's exploration of the turn in hermeneutics from seeing parables as fixed allegorical lessons to understanding them as metaphorical narratives involving active participation underpins the strong thread of resistance throughout Godly Play to the idea that a parable contains a single “take-away” prescribed as the point of the story for all who hear it. The Godly Play method of children “entering the parable” interactively rather than looking to adults to provide the one right answer finds its roots in the theories of language, sign, symbol, and metaphor Berryman outlined in his 1979 *Religious Education* article.

A more concrete example of the article's relationship to Berryman's pedagogical commitments concerns the interactions between teachers and students in Godly Play classrooms. One would not ordinarily hear a teacher praising a child for their comments or their artwork. In a Godly Play classroom a child's response to the story, such as “I like it that the sheep are safe,” would *not* be met with a teacher exclaiming, “That's good” or “That's right.” Nor would a child's drawing in response to the parable elicit an enthusiastic “Good job!” from the adults in the room. Instead a child's statement might be reinforced by a teacher looking at and touching the sheep figures positioned within a fence on the green felt base, simultaneously underscoring what the child said, perhaps by simply reiterating, “The sheep are safe.” The intent is to keep the focus on the parable and the child's interaction with the story, thus acknowledging and valuing what the child-as-interpreter finds significant, rather than encouraging the child to seek responses that garner adult approval. Berryman's concern about “cross stage static” that can create distortions lies at the heart of such practices, which seek to communicate deep respect for a child as a “young theologian,” to use Berryman's words, as well as for the integrity of the parable itself, and for the adults in the room who have their own meaning-making going on but are not imposing it on the children.

Berryman's hermeneutical turn was apropos of the times in which he worked and not unique to him. At the same time, however, he and those developing Godly Play with him stood apart in their determination to bring the complex theoretical frameworks of the new hermeneutics movement and the Parables Seminar to bear on religious education with children.

Children's Ways of Knowing

A second thematic emphasis concerns epistemology and the importance of the creative process as a way of knowing and of learning. Berryman's 1990 article "Teaching as Presence and the Existential Curriculum" bears some thematic similarities to the 1979 publication, as it is first and foremost the further development of his argument against limiting knowing to its cognitive-rational forms alone, which thereby treats children as deficient for not accessing adult forms of logic. Berryman foregrounds the presence of what he calls existential and relational knowledge of the Divine. Such knowledge, he contends, is certainly present in children and is evidence that they know and apprehend God. Why, then, Berryman wondered, "can't religious education teach children (and adults) how to pierce the conventions of language to experience the Creator directly?"⁹ The problem is not that children are somehow deficient in their logic and therefore unable to know God, mystery, and spirituality in their life-worlds. It is, rather, the adult assumption that children do not experience existential questions.

Berryman's work with sick and dying children at the Texas Medical Center in Houston informed the relationally and existentially grounded epistemology he developed. Berryman asserted that children, especially sick children, know a lot about existential realities such as death and vulnerability. He maintained that too often adults fail to acknowledge these phenomena among children out of their own discomfort with existential limit-conditions such as finitude, aloneness, freedom, and meaninglessness. "Religious education misses the mark until teachers are comfortable with the ultimate realities and the presence of God," Berryman opined.¹⁰

In the hospital, staff engaged children in medical play with dolls and models of surgical suites to help them with their fears about surgery. Seeking a way to reimagine the communication of sacred texts as a help to hospitalized children's existential anxieties, Berryman wrote, "What about the fear of one's own death? Theological play with religious language was developed to help the child cope with what remains a mystery, even for adults." He wrote with absolute certainty that children can and do face such questions and that they encounter mystery though they may not have language to express it.

⁹ Jerome W. Berryman, "Teaching as Presence and the Existential Curriculum," *Religious Education* 85, no. 4 (1990): 510, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408900850402>.

¹⁰ Berryman, "Teaching as Presence," 518.

Playing with parables, he contended, provides a means for sick children to “acknowledge and express their existential issues in a concrete language and deal with them in a sensorial way.”¹¹ It requires teachers who can be present to such issues and the children experiencing them.

“Teaching as presence” refers, first, to a teacher’s attentiveness to and acknowledgment of children, manifested in respect for them. Second, it concerns teachers’ capacities for living into existential questions and limits, engaging what Berryman named as the boundaries and the edge of human existence for themselves and with children. Toward this concern, Berryman detailed the theoretical backbone of “Teaching as Presence” through the work of existentialist philosophers and psychologists such as Buber, Maslow, Fromm, Camus, Rank, and Yalom. Berryman underscored the limit situations described by these thinkers, noting that limits “are raised to consciousness by existential anxiety.”¹² But with other existentialists such as Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Heidegger, Berryman also asserted the positive value of recognizing and addressing the limit-situations, especially those of human finitude, meaninglessness, freedom, and aloneness, which together constitute what he claimed should be the content of the curriculum of religious education.¹³ One sees in this article’s extensive survey of a wide range of philosophical and psychological sources Berryman’s effort to work out how religious education ought to address the cost of denial of existential limits, leading to the conclusion that

teaching as presence helps drain away the toxicity of our ultimate concerns so that our boundaries can become a matter of deep identity rather than threat. When children or adults can bring the boundaries of life into their own wholeness, then the existential questions lose their threat.¹⁴

Children, Berryman contended, may not have access to the kinds of cognition and language that would allow them to talk about such boundary situations philosophically. But because religious language “flows out of the religious experience itself” and children do have access to religious experience, they are very much aware of what existentialist theologian Paul Tillich referred to as the threat of nonbeing, and of God as the “ground of all being.”¹⁵ Berryman provided a theological statement in which he grounded his insistence that children can make meaning religiously:

¹¹ Berryman, “Teaching as Presence,” 514.

¹² Berryman, 516–517.

¹³ Berryman, 518.

¹⁴ Berryman, 527.

¹⁵ Berryman, 529; Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 235–236.

To know the Holy One is to know that God is fundamentally unknowable apart from our encounter with God's presence. There is no place to stand outside of God's presence to observe the relationship with God. We know God by being in the relationship rather than by studying about it from an objective distance.¹⁶

To engage existential limit-situations with children requires a shift in epistemologies to knowing experientially and relationally. Toward that end, he saw himself as one who affirmed Montessori's pedagogy specifically for religious education, a facet of her work underestimated or even completely ignored by many Montessorians:

As [Montessori] learned from the child about adult religion, the child learned about his or her species from the adult. The "reciprocal influence" was mutually beneficial, and opened the way to know secrets about children and adults unknown to a science influenced by the assumptions of Descartes and Comte.¹⁷

Berryman underscored what he called the intuitive attachment of the Christian symbol system and the creative process made by Montessori in her writings on religion. The creative process in Montessori allows a child to follow their own interests within the freedom of a prepared environment structured to provide opportunities for individual learning. Imagination is part of the intellect and needs to be developed together with it, according to Montessori. It should be connected with reality as opposed to fantasy; thus it must be grounded in the sensorial. The creative process may be imagined in relation to religious experience as a means of finding order out of what is ineffable, perhaps even chaotic, as the source of religious knowledge; thus the creative process is especially necessary for *religious* education. Berryman interpreted Montessori to mean that religious sentiment already exists within children and is awakened through the creative process when implicit nonverbal forms of knowing eventually find language: "If it is true that we know God most adequately in the creative process, then the Christian symbol system must be attached to that for it to work."¹⁸

What did Berryman do with these ideas in his own pedagogy? The prepared space of the Godly Play classroom is one of movement, play, silence, ritual, and encounters with story and symbol, along with creativity as primary modes of learning and expression for children. Godly Play capitalizes on this

¹⁶ Berryman, 530.

¹⁷ Jerome W. Berryman, "Montessori and Religious Education," *Religious Education* 75, no. 3 (1980): 306, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408800750308>.

¹⁸ Berryman, "Montessori and Religious Education," 307.

epistemological insight as it creates a symbolically rich learning environment in which children have freedom to engage in activities that interest them. In Godly Play there are pedagogical connections between Christian structuring of time, space, narrative, and action, though these are not explained to child participants, who are simply invited to enter into them. Christian biblical narratives along with other symbolic and metaphorical elements of Christian tradition, such as the structuring of time into liturgical seasons or the ritual of a shared feast, thus become forms of ordering within which children have freedom to play. As such, the creative process is not limited to the time children spend crafting a response to the biblical story in drawing, painting, clay sculpting, or other artistic modes. It begins at the threshold to the space, with the child's response to the doorkeeper's query, "Are you ready?" This is a question that not only calls on the child to assess their state of preparedness to shift into the world of religious education. It intentionally invites the child to begin imagining what awaits and what will happen once inside the classroom.

Such an opening of imagination that is key to the creative process continues with their participation in the story and goes all the way through to the "feast" or ritual sharing of juice and crackers together, and to children's departures from the classroom made intentional through acknowledgment of each child by name. The structured use of time and space, meanwhile, recreates some features of existential limit-situations. Aloneness, for instance, appears implicitly in a child's act of leaving the family outside the door to negotiate the new social system of the classroom, while finitude comes into play in a minor but real way in the act of leave-taking. In this design, then, Berryman links Christian story and symbols to the creative process as a key aspect of children's religious education, because children learn to utilize the symbols and stories of the faith to deal with difficult existential realities. Again, such a method embodies the epistemological turn in religious education with children away from an overemphasis on cognitive and declarative forms of knowing to an epistemology centered on experienced existential realities addressed through creative, imaginative, relational, narrative, and embodied practices.

Joy and Play, Laughter and Silence

It would be nearly another decade after his article on Montessori and religious learning before Berryman published again in *Religious Education*. In 1998 his article "Laughter, Power, and Motivation in Religious Education" appeared, followed a year later by "Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Teaching Silence and the Future of Humankind." While the two addressed different topics, together they offered theoretical supports for two kinds of ineffability experienced by children. The 1998 article stressed trusting in the power of play and joy expressed through laughter to bring intrinsic motivation to children (and others) as learners, as Berryman gave both a historical and a

psychological overview of laughter. The 1999 article addressed silence as a form of communication and a way of knowing that are necessary elements of meaning making.

Berryman began his 1998 article with the audacious claim that “teachers of religious education need to become connoisseurs of laughter to guide their teaching,” as he asked about the relationship between power, laughter, and intrinsic motivation in children’s religious education.¹⁹ In his now-recognizable pattern, he launched this query with a brief history, in this case of laughter, for which Mikhail Bakhtin was the primary guide.²⁰ Through Bakhtin, Berryman identified the important role of laughter as parody in medieval Christianity, providing both a playfulness and an accepted outlet for critique of ecclesiastical authority and power. Bemoaning the gradual narrowing and even demonization of laughter by the church, Berryman wrote that “European culture began to lose its ability to play.”²¹ But in the figure of Francois Rabelais, Berryman (via Bakhtin) found one whose recovery of carnival traditions made its way into print in the sixteenth century, thereby achieving legitimation for what had become a marginal tradition within religious life as Rabelais recovered classical sources (Hippocrates, Aristotle, and Lucian) touting the importance of laughter and play. Further dismantling of laughter’s value was to continue, however, with the rise of Puritanism and with Voltaire’s notion of laughter as mockery. Berryman concluded his historical survey of laughter vis-à-vis Bakhtin by lifting up Rabelais’s attention to the “comic aspect of the whole world”:

Such laughter was generated from the people’s optimism that existed despite their deep awareness that all our hopes and disappointments arise from the limited potential in any age. There is always a struggle between great and small, exalted and lowly, fantastic and real, physical and spiritual, rising and falling, flowering and growing old, and life and death. Bakhtin’s history showed how the primal awareness of joy can transcend the transient, because in the long run there is the hope that plenitude will prevail over finitude.²²

19 Jerome W. Berryman, “Laughter, Power, and Motivation in Religious Education,” *Religious Education* 93, no. 3 (1998): 358, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408980930308>.

20 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968).

21 Berryman, “Laughter, Power, and Motivation,” 361.

22 Berryman, “Laughter, Power, and Motivation,” 364.

Laughter is not an escape from reality, wrote Berryman. It is “grounded in realism” and therefore “gives one the freedom to deal with whatever comes and to question all who take life or themselves too seriously.”²³ In tracing the role and history of laughter, he again brought to center stage his contention that existential issues should be the content of religious education.

Berryman then turned to John Morreall's models of the psychological causes of laughter as a resource for making sense of the work laughter does for individual well-being.²⁴ Quickly brushing off the “superiority model” of laughter as derision and the “incongruity model” of laughter as generated by experiences of incongruity, Berryman briefly considered the “relief model,” which addresses laughter as a psychological relief of tension before also discarding it as inadequate. He landed with Morreall on the “pleasant psychological shift model” as the most comprehensive explanation of what he called “serious laughter that one is experiencing a playful, meditative, and creative sense of life.”²⁵

From there, Berryman made a quick leap into chaos theory's notion of how chaos and order relate over time. His main interest involved the idea of complexity in systems, arguing that complexity comprises the necessary mediation between utter chaos (when everything falls apart) and rigid order (when everything becomes stuck and immobile): “Our teaching and learning, therefore, needs to be in the service of complexity, rather than reduction and control, especially in religious education, which takes for its ‘subject’ the Creator.”²⁶ This line of thought led Berryman to the idea of intrinsic motivation, especially as expressed in Csikszentmihalyi's notion of “flow,” as kindred to descriptions of both contemplation and play.²⁷ All three involve experience of pleasure, are voluntary, and overlap integratively with one another. This interplay of three experiences is what complexity feels like, concluded Berryman. And laughter “of a particular kind is a behavioral manifestation that complexity is present.”²⁸

The article's short conclusion at last takes up the question of power again, in the form of considering how teachers might manage behavioral difficulties in education. Writing against typical methods of classroom discipline that stem from extrinsic motivators in which the basis for assessment of a product and its creator is external to the child, Berryman argued for intrinsic motivation in learning that included evaluation from within. Motivation from within

²³ Berryman, 364.

²⁴ John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983).

²⁵ Berryman, 368.

²⁶ Berryman, 370.

²⁷ Berryman, 374.

²⁸ Berryman, 370.

guides children “to discover the way to find the deep channel of complexity in their relationship with God, the deep self, others, and nature.” This practice necessitates “serious laughter [as] the lovely sound of a living system that is free from the endless chaos of madness and the death of closed rigidity.”²⁹ Berryman viewed the negotiation of positions lying between totally unbounded openness and totally closed rigidity as a key element of religious education’s mission in the lives of children.

Silence and Contemplation in Children’s Spirituality

In the year following his publication on laughter, Berryman deepened his explorations of meaning making previously tied to story and language use by turning more directly toward the role of silence. “Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Teaching Silence and the Future of Humankind” begins with an assertion that in postmodernity silence is suppressed and indeed is at risk of disappearing. At the same time, however, silence is necessary for meaning creation and is a crucial part of imagination; if it disappears, humankind is in grave danger.

Silence gives space for the meanings held by language. “The silence of non-verbal communication provides the context and ground for what we have to say,” Berryman claimed.³⁰ Whereas his earlier writing on symbols, metaphor, and meaning making focused on the workings of symbols and language, here Berryman extended his perspective to assert that speech needs silence for its symbolic referencing system to make sense. To make this argument, he relied again upon philosophy, this time by means of the American pragmatist philosopher Charles S. Peirce’s semiotics as mediated through the work of Terrence Deacon (1997), to describe the presence of three referencing systems, which Peirce named iconic, indexical, and symbolic.³¹ Berryman’s interest in these systems for religious education with children concerned the ways in which the nonverbal communications of iconic and indexical referencing systems constitute building blocks for symbolic-linguistic meaning making and therefore are not optional aspects of teaching.

Iconic referencing systems involve preverbal visual recognition, communicating by means of a tacit association of similarity between a visual image and what it represents. In iconic referencing, nonverbal communication happens through a resemblance between the image and that to which it points. An image of a sheep resembles its meaning. It points to that which it resembles.

29 Berryman, 377.

30 Jerome W. Berryman, “Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Teaching Silence and the Future of Humankind,” *Religious Education* 94, no. 3 (1999): 261, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408990940302>.

31 Terrence W. Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

Indexical referencing systems portray a causal relationship or evidence for the existence of what it references. The picture of an umbrella on a weather report, for example, is associated with the expectation of stormy weather. There is no necessary physical similarity between an umbrella and a storm. Instead, the umbrella picture functions indexically to reference stormy weather conditions.

Peirce's third type of referencing, the symbolic referencing system, depends on arbitrary, culturally constructed associations between a sign or symbol and its meanings. These meanings and their connections to the symbols must be learned. The contemporary association between rainbow-colored flags and diverse sexualities, or the attribution of a word such as *mirror* to reference the household object in which one sees one's reflection, are arbitrary and adopted by convention within their cultural and social context.

Berryman explores the terrain of semiotics to underscore the significant work performed by nonverbal forms of reference in both communication and meaning making: "The silence of non-verbal communication provides the context and ground for what we have to say. Without non-verbal communication words *lose experiential richness and depth*."³² The moment of discovery, when learners recognize implicit patterns within indexical associations, is an event in the creative process that moves the person from one form of referencing to another, a moment "when non-verbal and often-unconscious scanning forms an insight that can then be put into words."³³ In other words, Berryman argued for the importance of silence via preverbal forms of meaning making as crucial in children's experiences of God: "God is known first and most directly in the silence of the iconic and indexical referencing."³⁴ These referencing systems *to which children have access even when they do not yet have language to express all that they experience* comprise different forms of communication, not its absence, and therefore necessitate adult attention and learning to listen to the nonverbal ways children communicate deep existential issues and their encounters with God.

For Berryman, silence is also tied to imagination, as "much of the work of imagination takes place in silence," and the lack of silence therefore erodes imagination.³⁵ He observed that the creative process and silent knowing both are grounded in earliest embodied, relational forms of knowing. Silence therefore must be taught relationally, because "when it comes to teaching

³² Berryman, "Silence Is Stranger," 261; italics in original.

³³ Berryman, 261.

³⁴ Berryman, 271.

³⁵ Berryman, 267.

silence, who is communicating is more important than what is said. This is because much of the verbal meaning of silence is carried by nonverbal connotation read parallel to the symbolic referencing.”³⁶

Silence is best taught by showing it, wrote Berryman, in part because there is so much ambiguity in the words used to communicate about silence. And since “silence is necessary for human beings to communicate and create existential meaning,” religious education must be “deeply concerned about what it shows about silence.”³⁷ Toward this end, he evoked the “second naivete” concept engaged by both Paul Ricoeur and James Fowler as the point at which adults “regain sensitivity to the kinds of knowing we had before language.”³⁸ If the first naivete references a time in human development prior to the censored knowing of critical reasoning, a time when “we have a natural ability to dwell in symbols and to believe in them,” the second naivete is an adult experience of recovering the credibility of iconic and indexical referencing, and of valuing relational and bodily knowing.³⁹ The article ends by applying the claims of the importance of silence to the role of the storyteller in religious education, who needs to tell the sacred stories of their tradition “soaked in silence”: “Those who enter the Christian story pass through religious language into the nonverbal. It is only in the silence of presence beyond language that one can build an interpretation of adequate depth and usefulness for one’s life and death.”⁴⁰

In the two articles from the late 1990s, then, Berryman offered (1) a semiotic rationale for the use of tangible objects for storytelling involving children in iconic and indexical referencing systems of meaning making and (2) a historical and psychological rationale for play as an intrinsic motivation for learning. Both articles underscored the centrality of the relationships between adult and child learners, and the importance of respect for children. And both asserted the value of meaning that lies beyond speech—found in laughter and silence—for addressing hard questions of existence raised by children and adults alike.

Whose Children?

Berryman’s final article in *Religious Education*, “Wondering About Whose Children They Are?” appeared in the preconference forum section of the journal. The preconference forum section solicits short pieces that are often more personal in form and content than the conventions attached to the usual research article allow and that are intended to whet the appetites and

³⁶ Berryman, 264.

³⁷ Berryman, 269.

³⁸ Berryman, 264.

³⁹ Berryman, 265.

⁴⁰ Berryman, 270, 271.

imaginings of readers for the coming annual meeting. Anticipating the annual meeting theme of “Whose Children Are They? Responsibilities for Religious Formation of a New Generation,” Berryman’s 2023 article drew on two of Godly Play’s familiar tropes—storytelling and asking “wondering questions”—to gently make his points that a conference focused on religious education and children ought to be playful and filled with the sharing of good stories. Berryman’s wondering questions from this essay included the following:

I wonder if this conference will be playful. . . . I wonder if the stories we most need to tell are about the beautiful moments we have experienced teaching with children. . . . Let’s wonder why children get marginalized in theological seminaries and churches. . . . I wonder if we retreat from [ontological anxiety] to protect ourselves from the threat of Nonbeing. . . . Finally I invite our wondering about the theological interplay of children and adults as a “spiritual practice.”⁴¹

Critics might scoff at this summation of thoughts rendered through the device of wondering questions. In looking back on the entire corpus of articles in *Religious Education*, other critiques surface. For instance, scholars would be within their rights to claim that Berryman rarely engaged certain crucial matters that have become foci of attention *de rigueur* among contemporary scholars of religious education, such as global and decolonial approaches, for example, or a sustained focus on racial justice in religious education. Furthermore, a fair amount of his research has a derivative quality to it, as Berryman often seemed to rely on secondary sources to interpret major thinkers on whose ideas his framework rests—for instance, engaging Terrance Deacon’s mediation of Peirce’s semiotics rather than working with Peirce’s writings directly. Berryman also could be faulted for accusing other educational modalities of imposing an interpretive lens onto children, while seeming to exempt Godly Play scripts from similar assessment as an interpretation among other interpretations given by adults—albeit adults who were extremely thoughtful about inviting children to also offer their own interpretations as well. In other words, Berryman’s work is not without its detractors and, as he knew, I share some of these critiques amid much appreciation of his contributions.

Readers familiar with Berryman’s previous articles in *Religious Education* might hasten to note that there is not much new in the 2023 forum essay, except perhaps the contents of the particular stories told to convey his thoughts. It is true. He was not at pains to explore new avenues about children and religious education in this forum piece. But attentive readers

⁴¹ Jerome W. Berryman, “Wondering about Whose Children They Are?” *Religious Education*, 118, no. 2 (2023): 94–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2023.2184022>.

will also note the genius of these three short pages, in which Berryman manages to reference most of the major themes he explored at length across the corpus of his work in the REA's journal and across his career elsewhere. Wrapped in stories and wondering questions, this little essay summed up his serious thinking about play. Having "shown his work" elsewhere, Berryman laid out here key elements that remain as expressions of his deep desires for children and the church, and his contribution to the work of religious education: valuing and respecting children and their ways of knowing; the reciprocal learning that takes place between adults and children; the centrality of existential concerns for religious education; the key role of storytelling; and always the joy of play. It is with profound gratitude for Jerome Berryman's contributions and friendship that I write about his work. And I smile when, in my memory, I can still hear his laughter upon the encounter with my son from a porch overlooking the Rocky Mountains, as he quipped, "Isn't it amazing to listen to a child making sense of his world?"

Joyce Ann Mercer is the Horace Bushnell Professor of Practical Theology at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, CT, where she also serves as academic dean. She edits the journal *Religious Education*. Joyce is the author of *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (Chalice Press, 2005) along with other books and numerous articles concerning the spiritual and religious lives of children.

Submitted: December 29, 2025 EDT. Accepted: February 26, 2026 EDT. Published: May 01, 2026 EDT.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. MIT Press, 1968.
- Berryman, Jerome W. "Being in Parables with Children." *Religious Education* 74, no. 3 (1979): 271–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408790740307>.
- Berryman, Jerome W. "Laughter, Power, and Motivation in Religious Education." *Religious Education* 93, no. 3 (1998): 358–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408980930308>.
- Berryman, Jerome W. "Montessori and Religious Education." *Religious Education* 75, no. 3 (1980): 294–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408800750308>.
- Berryman, Jerome W. "Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Teaching Silence and the Future of Humankind." *Religious Education* 94, no. 3 (1999): 256–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408990940302>.
- Berryman, Jerome W. "Teaching as Presence and the Existential Curriculum." *Religious Education* 85, no. 4 (1990): 509–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408900850402>.
- Berryman, Jerome W. "Wondering about Whose Children They Are?" *Religious Education* 118, no. 2 (2023): 94–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2023.2184022>.
- Deacon, Terrence W. *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain*. W. W. Norton, 1997.
- Fiorenza, Francis Schüssler. "Systematic Theology: Task and Methods." In *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, 2nd ed., edited by John P. Galvin and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza. Fortress Press, 2011.
- Goldman, Ronald. *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965.
- Morreall, John. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. State University of New York Press, 1983.
- Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology*. University of Chicago Press, 1967.