

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Muslim Stories in Godly Play: A Process Report

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This article offers a process-oriented account of how Muslim storytelling has been developed within the Christian-rooted educational approach Godly Play. Building on Jerome W. Berryman's call to strengthen interfaith awareness within a globally interconnected world, the project began in interreligious university seminars in which students explored narrative theology in both Christian and Muslim traditions.

Drawing on a hermeneutical understanding of the Qur'an, the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament as communicative and historically situated narratives, the authors describe how wondering, interpretation, and the openness of religious stories formed a fertile ground for interreligious engagement.

From 2021 onward, this work progressed into the systematic development of Muslim stories in the style of Godly Play. Supported by a diverse academic working group of Islamic theologians, educators, and experienced Godly Play practitioners, the team created and tested narrative scripts and materials for Qur'anic stories.

Early classroom experiences indicate strong resonance among school students, enriching both religious learning and personal reflection.

In his book *The Spiritual Guidance of Children*, Jerome W. Berryman writes the following under the heading "The Transition to the Next Generation":

The first theme involves global consciousness. What we eat, wear, worry about, and link to electronically is implicitly if not explicitly involved in a worldwide network, so our spirituality is as well. This means that Christianity needs to be more deeply rooted than ever before and yet open at the same time. The spirit of playful orthodoxy, which is stimulated by the way Christian language is learned, is a primary characteristic of Godly Play. This awareness of how Godly Play is related to interreligious understanding needs to be strengthened in the future.¹

¹ Jerome W. Berryman, *The Spiritual Guidance of Children: Montessori, Godly Play, and the Future* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2013), 179.

Global Consciousness and Interfaith Awareness in Godly Play

Jerome W. Berryman was keenly aware that we as human beings are now part of a global network linked by both our lifestyles and spirituality. Looking ahead to the future development of Godly Play, he clearly saw the need to strengthen its interfaith awareness within the context of global consciousness.

Due to the worldwide spread of Godly Play as a religious educational concept, the Godly Play community has contact with diverse cultures, worldviews, and religions. Godly Play itself has a mature and sensitive awareness of both the different aspects of diversity and the challenges associated with acceptance and tolerance of diversity.²

Even though interreligious learning³ and the study of Islam are not (yet) on the agenda or the list of research questions for Godly Play,⁴ Berryman consistently demonstrated an openness to different traditions and contexts. In the chapter “Spiritual Maturity and Mutual Blessing” in *The Spiritual Guidance of Children*, it is clear that Godly Play’s openness to other traditions is rooted in spirituality and takes different forms.⁵ Berryman stood for interdenominational breadth (e.g., Quakers, Anabaptists, Disciples), a broad view of diverse life situations (e.g., home, school, work, pastoral care, dementia, disabilities), cultural diversity, and interreligious perspectives. He explicitly mentioned in his writings the multireligious program “A Multi-Religion Curriculum for Schools in the United Kingdom” by religious educator John Hull at the University of Birmingham, which was inspired in part by Godly Play.⁶ Under the heading “Jewish Godly Play,” Berryman recounts how he held workshops at Leo Baeck College in London that were simply called “Doing Midrash with Jerome.”⁷ Under the name “Torah Play,” Rabbi Sandy Sasso and Rabbi Michael Shire then did pioneering work in adapting Godly Play for the Jewish world.⁸ This Jewish branch of Godly Play has since developed further and established itself in the wider world of Godly Play.⁹

2 See, for example, “Beloved Me, Beloved We: Initiative of Godly Play Foundation,” 2021, <https://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/beloved-me-beloved-we-initiative>.

3 See Kath Engebretson et al., eds., *International Handbook of Interreligious Education* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010) and Karlo Meyer, *Religion, Interreligious Learning, and Education* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021).

4 See, for example, Rune Øystese and Martin Steinhäuser, eds., *Godly Play: European Perspectives on Practice and Research* (Münster: Waxmann, 2018), 383–384.

5 Berryman, *Spiritual Guidance of Children*, 153–183.

6 Berryman, 159–160.

7 Berryman, 159.

8 Berryman, 159–160.

9 See Michael Shire, “Torah Godly Play: Godly Play for Jewish Education,” *The Circle*, no. 9 (2019): 8–10, https://www.godlyplay.uk/circle_sept_17_3.pdf; and the website of Torah Godly Play: <https://www.torahgodlyplay.com>.

Berryman's deepest conviction was that when Christians encounter people of other faith traditions, it is all the more important to remain deeply rooted in their own Christian faith while at the same time being completely open-minded. Here he shares the conviction of a colleague in religious education whom he greatly respected. Karl Ernst Nipkow (1928–2014), a prominent voice in German religious education from Tübingen, describes this basic attitude as “strong” or “hard pluralism.” This means not ignoring the “otherness of the other” (Lévinas) but rather enduring the tension of differences in one's own convictions while at the same time adopting an appreciative, open attitude. “Soft pluralism,” on the other hand, seeks understanding with the other tradition in terms of commonalities and the alignment of positions.¹⁰ Friedrich Schweitzer, Nipkow's successor as a religious educator at Tübingen, attempts to combine both aspects with this formulation: “Strengthen similarities—do justice to differences.”¹¹

Mustard Seeds in Interfaith Seminars at the University of Tübingen

In this spirit of strong plurality, the theological faculties of the University of Tübingen have been engaged in interfaith cooperation and research for many years. From 2017 to 2025, Fahimah Ulfat served as a professor of Islamic religious education in a “Cooperative Interreligious Research Network for Religious Education,” collaborating with both the Catholic and Protestant faculties.¹² Since 2023 she has also worked in the Jewish-Islamic Research Center (JIF), which she cofounded with the Jewish philosopher and theologian Asher Mattern. As part of these collaborations, beginning in the summer semester of 2020, Ulfat and Protestant theologian Wolfhard Schweiker have been offering joint seminars on storytelling as a basic form of religious communication in both Christian and Muslim traditions.

In these courses, students have explored not only the fundamental significance of storytelling as an “anthropological universal,”¹³ as a method of understanding, and as a principle for organizing human experience, but also reflected on the role of narration within the respective other religion and its relevance for everyday action in contemporary contexts.¹⁴

10 Karl Ernst Nipkow, *Pädagogik und Religionspädagogik zum neuen Jahrhundert*, vol. 2, *Christliche Pädagogik und Interreligiöses Lernen* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005), 259.

11 Friedrich Schweitzer and Albert Biesinger, eds., *Gemeinsamkeiten Stärken – Unterschieden Gerechtfertigt Werden* (Freiburg: Herder, 2002).

12 See, for example, Friedrich Schweitzer and Fahimah Ulfat, *Dialogisch, Kooperativ, Elementarisiert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022).

13 Tilmann Köppe and Tom Kindt, *Erzähltheorie: Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014), 13.

14 Norbert Meuter, *Narrative Identität* (Münster: M und P, Verlag für Wissenschaft und Forschung, 1995).

It became clear in these seminars that the Muslim tradition is strongly influenced by narrative elements. In this context, one can speak of a narrative theology whose forms of expression manifest themselves in both the *qasaṣ* (narratives) and the *tarāğim* (biographies). The narratives of lived tradition serve not only to pass on religious knowledge but also to process and transmit religious experiences. In the everyday practice of Muslim communities, whether in family education, teaching, or religious rituals, narrative forms are used to develop values, norms, and beliefs relevant to everyday life.

However, reducing “Islam” to an abstract system of norms and dogmas disconnected from history and practice fails to recognize this central dimension of religious communication. It leads to a reification of religion as a “pure” belief system that seemingly exists outside of time.

A distinctive feature of the Quran lies in its inclusion of numerous fragmentary narratives that require a certain amount of prior knowledge on the part of its recipients. It draws on preexisting narratives of its time, especially from Jewish and Christian traditions, and reinterprets them within a new theological framework. The Quran itself reflects on this narrative character: “We recount unto thee the most beautiful of stories by Our having revealed unto thee this Quran” (12:3).

The Quran thus presents itself as a primarily rhetorical and dialogical document embedded in the religious and intellectual discourses of its time. It is not a closed, textually fixed composition in the modern sense, but rather an open, communicative textual body that takes shape and unfolds in the process of oral proclamation.¹⁵

In their hermeneutic understanding, the lecturers shared comparable scientific assumptions. The Quran, the Jewish Bible, and the New Testament have a communicative character and are not lifeless dogmas. Even if they are codified as “primordial narratives,” they remain open narratives. Every form of interpretation and wondering is simply another narrative.

It is central to Ulfat and Schweiker that every interpretation and every narrative resulting from it is always historically situated and discursively shaped. Narratives are not objective representations of a timeless truth but expressions of specific contexts, perspectives, and interpretive interests. Problems arise when a single narrative claims to represent the sole, objectively verifiable truth, thus promoting a scientific-objectivistic understanding of truth that fails to do justice to the structure of religious texts and their historical impact.

¹⁵ Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010), 142.

Such a monopoly on truth characterizes fundamentalist interpretations; they absolutize a specific reading and fix it into a static, closed system. The living, dialogical moment of the religious texts is thus neutralized and replaced by an ideology that tolerates neither ambiguity nor historical polyphony.¹⁶

This means that religious narratives are open per se if they are not arbitrarily closed, in line with Jean Jaurès' statement "Tradition does not mean preserving ashes, but keeping a fire burning."¹⁷ Engaging with constructivism and with the concept of theologizing for, with, and by children proved to be an effective exercise in practicing this understanding of 'truths' with the students.¹⁸

As part of the interfaith seminars, Schweiker also has presented the religious educational concept of Godly Play. Unfortunately, the first story, "Creation" (Genesis 1), had to be told online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the presentation met with an astonishingly slow response, especially among the Muslim students. It raised the question of whether such a form of storytelling would also be possible in the Muslim tradition—that is, in the community or in Islamic religious education at public schools (Ulfat 2021).¹⁹ Various points of discussion arose that needed to be reflected upon—for example: Is a figurative representation of prophets permissible? Is wondering as a special form of theologizing in Godly Play perhaps too open and thus too vulnerable to misinterpretation? To what extent do Christian theology, the Bible, and church tradition shape the spatial arrangement, focus shelf, celebrations, story genres, and materials used in Godly Play? Which of these elements are compatible with Muslim traditions and which are not?

These open questions did not lead the students and lecturers to shelve Godly Play. Rather, they became the starting point for a new path together, without knowing in advance whether there would be answers or what they might look like. Even for Schweiker, who has known Godly Play since its beginnings in Germany in 2003 and has also promoted this narrative style as an inclusive concept for people with disabilities,²⁰ this was a new path with an unknown outcome. But first things first: What were the next stages of this journey?

16 Fahimah Ulfat, "Mit der Kraft der Narrationen in den Islamischen Religionsunterricht," in *Islamische Bildungsarbeit in der Schule*, ed. Fahimah Ulfat and Ali Ghandour (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2020), 49–64.

17 Jean Jaurès, quoted in Paul Kiefel, *Tradition als lebendige Überlieferung* (Munich: Kösel, 1980), 145.

18 See Friedrich Schweitzer, *Theologisieren mit Kindern: Einführung in Grundlagen und Praxis* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2018).

19 Recep Ulfat, *Islamischer Religionsunterricht in öffentlicher Verantwortung: Perspektiven und Herausforderungen* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2021).

20 Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2013), 169–170.

Development of Muslim Stories in the Style of Godly Play

Following the first seminar in the summer semester of 2020, the students came together in an online workshop. In this session, Hülya Ekinci, a lecturer in Islamic religious education at the University of Innsbruck in Austria, shared her story of Jonah from a Muslim perspective. She had learned about Godly Play in a storytelling course taught by Martin Steinhäuser and was enthusiastic about it. The students reflected on the story based on their knowledge of Godly Play from the previous seminar. Similarities and differences from the Godly Play storytelling style were noted and evaluated. Ulfat analyzed the story from a theological-exegetical and hermeneutical perspective.

At the end of March 2021, Ulfat and Schweiker presented their findings to date at the “Interreligious Education” round table of the Pedagogical-Theological Center Stuttgart (PTZ). The exchange between Muslim and Christian religious educators provided an initial clarification of the challenges and opportunities of Godly Play—and its German counterpart, *Gott im Spiel*—for interreligious learning. Building on this, Ulfat developed the exegetical foundations of the Quranic story of Jonah in November 2021. In close collaboration with Schweiker, she created a theologically, exegetically, and didactically reflected story. It was presented by Ulfat and discussed as a video at the beginning of December 2021 at the PTZ Stuttgart in an online meeting.

In May 2022, Schweiker introduced Godly Play in an integrated, practical seminar at Ludwigsburg University of Education led by Zehra Isikhan-Vieriu and Gökçen Tamer-Uzun. Students in teacher training for Islamic religious education experienced a full Godly Play session using the video story of Jonah and then practiced telling the story in small groups. In the summer semester of 2022, students in another interreligious seminar led by Ulfat and Schweiker at the University of Tübingen developed different ways to present and discuss the Old Testament and Quranic stories of Jonah in an interreligious setting. The results were impressively creative presentations that not only highlighted theological differences sensitively but also enabled dialogical learning processes. Two students then tested the Jonah story at the Montessori School in Stuttgart-Hausen in early June 2022.

The outcomes of this ongoing development were presented by Ulfat and Schweiker in a workshop at the Godly Play European Conference in September 2022 in Mechelen, Belgium, entitled “Godly Play in the Field of Interreligious Learning: A Christian–Islamic Approach.”²¹ There, it became

²¹ Friedrich Schweitzer, “Godly Play in the Field of Interreligious Learning: A Christian–Islamic Approach,” workshop presentation at the Godly Play European Conference, Mechelen, Belgium, September 2022, 9.

apparent that Muslim children were also often present during Godly Play presentations in other countries. However, stories based on the Quran or Muslim tradition had not yet been developed or told anywhere.

A Glimpse into the Yusuf (Joseph) Story Development Workshop

On the joint journey toward interreligious storytelling in the tradition of Godly Play, the first destination would need to be entered into the navigation device could be formulated as follows: to develop stories from the Quran that meet both the scientific criteria of Islamic theology and religious education and the “good-enough” criteria of Godly Play. To achieve this goal, the authors had to assemble an academic working group. From the German Gott im Spiel community, they were able to include the renowned story developer and storyteller Christiane Zimmermann-Fröb, along with several experts from Islamic theology including Botaina Azouaghe (research assistant, University of Münster), Amina Boumaaiz (doctoral candidate in Islamic theology), Dina El Omari (University of Münster), Jörg Imran Schröter (teacher of Islamic religious education) and Stephanie Turki (primary school principal and teacher of Islamic religious education).

In May 2023, this working group began its work by taking an introductory course on Godly Play and learning the three-staged story development process of Godly Play deutsch e.V.²² The group agreed that the stories should be tested with children during the development process and that adaptations and independent developments in the context of Muslim tradition would also be necessary.

After reviewing biblical and Quranic stories included in the curricula of Christian and Muslim denominational religious education, the group decided to begin with Quranic stories that have biblical counterparts, starting with the story of Joseph/Yusuf (12:1–111). Their reasoning was that the story is not only described as the “most beautiful story” (12:3) but also constitutes the longest continuous narrative in the Quran. The group used these steps in their process:

1. Before the working groups met, a theological-exegetical analysis was done.
2. Two translation variants were created.
3. During the meetings, a narrative text was created verse by verse based on the Arabic text.

²² Godly Play deutsch e. V. is the name of the non-profit that manages Godly Play in Germany.

4. Drawing on the experience of the Godly Play trainers, this narrative text was then transformed into a playful story with specific materials.
5. These were then tested in practice.

The work and discussions were so intensive that only three verses could be covered in the two-hour meetings, which took place every other month. In each session, the participants (especially the Christian ones) gained new and enriching insights into the Quran and its style of language as well as occasions of revelation and variations in the interpretation. Together the group tried to remain close to the Arabic text and, as far as possible, to retain the ambiguity of the verses and the openness of interpretation of the Quran within the narrative form.

Three story segments currently exist in both text and performance versions: the well scene (12:1–19), the temptation scene with Potiphar's wife (12:20–34), and Joseph in prison (12:35–57).

The initial trials were very encouraging, as shown by the following feedback from a Muslim colleague, which vividly illustrates the impact of the narrative form: "The students engaged intensively with the story and related much of it to their own lives. Overall, it was a very successful experience that was not only academically enriching but also very impressive. The Godly Play storytelling workshop I attended the previous week was also extremely helpful. Experiencing the story of Joseph told in this way was a lasting and profoundly moving experience for me."²³

Perspectives for Further Development

This process report has provided brief insights into the initial stages of development. As the keywords mentioned above (space, focus shelf, etc.) make clear, we still have a long way to go together. The question of a name for Muslim stories, as in the Jewish tradition, and how close a cooperation with *Godly Play Deutsch e.V.* is needed will only become clear at the end. Our group remains in an ongoing development process and also keeps the interreligious perspective in mind. With the biblical and Quranic stories, it is possible, for example, to present side-by-side stories told one after the other. However, it is also possible to present other stories jointly, highlighting the interreligious commonalities and differences. In joint storytelling circles of Muslims and Christians, the focus shelf should also include elements and symbols from both participating religions. This expresses the equality of religions at a visual level, as well as tolerance for the religious diversity already present in society.

²³ Minutes of the Muslim-Christian Godly Play Working Group meeting, January 15, 2025 (unpublished manuscript).

Even though many important topics must remain undiscussed in the context of this report, it is clear that interreligious storytelling holds great potential for the development of individuals and collective faith. Much about the Godly Play concept already prepares it for encounters with Muslim stories. On the one hand, there are many similarities due to the Abrahamic religious heritage. For example, more than forty narratives and characters from the Bible also appear in the Quran. On the other hand, Godly Play offers a safe space with two adults, a carpeted floor where participants take off their shoes, a circle of seats at eye level, and an open door. These are, at least for now, promising preconditions for encounters in both contexts.

We wonder how we can learn from each other, strengthen our religious similarities, and do justice to our differences. How can different views and religions enrich the storytelling circle and strengthen everyone's faith in God? And, in the spirit of Jerome W. Berryman, we also wonder how future interreligious understanding can be strengthened and deepened through shared stories in ways that the Abrahamic religions might contribute effectively to peaceful coexistence in our world and society.

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