

# *Godly Play and the CHALLENGE OF CONTEXT*

By THE REV. CANON DR. ANDREW SHELDON

Godly Play has an expanding world-wide presence in many different countries, cultures, and contexts. This is to be celebrated. But there is also a sense in which Godly Play is situated in a particular country, culture, and context. As such, one of the more interesting aspects of the international development of Godly Play is the crucial, careful, and sometimes controversial work of contextualisation. This has many facets. For instance, our friends in the southern hemisphere have had to adapt the language of the story of The Circle of the Church Year to reflect the seasonal patterns that take place down under. In some Godly Play rooms the story of Holy Baptism is accompanied by a small wooden tank in which one of the ‘people of God’ is immersed three times to reflect the practice of their tradition. The garb of the person behind the table of the Good Shepherd is adjusted to reflect local custom. As one Godly Player mentioned to me, the desert, for some, may not be a dangerous place, but instead the place they call home. Indeed this past season of Easter, while telling ‘Knowing Jesus in a New Way,’ I found myself quickly converting miles into kilometres! These are just a few examples of how Godly Play is appropriately rendered to reflect a particular setting or circumstance. There are, I’m sure, many more, and I would be delighted to have you share them with us.



Belgian Storytellers



One of the more important bits of contextualisation is the translation of the Godly Play lexicon into other languages. On a recent trip to Europe I spent much of my time in discussions and negotiations around this very issue. In the Dutch speaking part of Belgium—Flanders—we put the finishing touches on a plan to translate and publish in Dutch for Godly Play storytellers in Flanders, the Netherlands, and potentially anywhere else Dutch is spoken. Our partners in Flanders and The Netherlands are hard at work on this project, and there will be Godly Play publications available in Dutch before the end of this year.

In Geneva we had similar conversations around the French translations and publications. The French translation as well is a collegial piece of work with input from French speaking Canada and is following a timeline that should see publications within the next year. One interesting note is that after much discussion and experimentation, the French translators have decided that the best French translation of the words Godly Play, is Godly Play!

These are just two of the more formal processes taking place at this point in time. Godly Play is already published in one form or another in at least 4 other languages, and stories are told in more than 15 languages with even more on the horizon. Indeed in some parts of the Godly Play world this involves nuancing one form of English into another form of English.

That translation must take place if Godly Play is to advance around the world is a given fact. That the practice of translation is painstaking and sometimes painful is also a fact. On the one hand we have these beautiful stories so carefully and poetically rendered over such a long period of time. Jerome Berryman has produced a body of work that is singular and special, and we are appropriately grateful for this gift. As such, all of us in Godly Play want to honour and respect that work and take great care in ensuring our translations as closely approximate the original as they can. On the other hand we do have the challenges and limitations that are to be found when we take words and phrases written in one language and translate them into another language. Painstaking and sometimes painful indeed.

With this in mind, the Godly Play International Council has developed best practices around the translation of Godly Play stories into different languages. I would encourage you to keep these in mind when informally translating the stories—you can access the Covenant [here](#). If your association is involved in more formal translation processes that may lead to publishing, I would ask that you please contact me at [andrew@godlyplay.ca](mailto:andrew@godlyplay.ca) so that we can follow the procedures appropriate to this work.

As noted above, this work of translation is careful, painstaking, and sometimes painful work. Careful, painstaking, and painful because at the heart of the contextualisation enterprise is a core principle, and that principle is that Godly Play—the method, the language, the way—has an integrity that cannot be compromised. One of the things that brings me great delight is the extent to which our international



Telling a story in Belgium

partners I meet know this. I have sat with those doing the work of translation and can attest that they hold the core principles of Godly Play very close even as they do their work of making Godly Play comprehensible in their context.

Let me add, however, a note of caution. My concern would be that we as Godly Play leaders or associations too rigidly or comprehensively attempt to formally adjust or adapt Godly Play to a particular context or culture.

To do so could show a lack of trust in the method itself, a lack of trust in the story, and a lack of trust in the child, or the child in all of us, to ultimately contextualise the experience. The Godly Play method has proven that it can translate effectively into other contexts, cultures, and languages. The stories, although rooted in a particular place and time, have proven timeless and transcendent. And the child, or the child in all of us, engages in the ultimate act of

contextualisation when she or he wonder where they could be in the story or choose as their work something that only makes sense to them at that particular time in that particular place. In a word I would say that it is important that we hold this context work lightly and with deep trust; a risky but rewarding stance.

And so as Godly Play spreads so too will the need to contextualise. As I note above, this work is crucial, careful, and sometimes controversial. Crucial because as Godly Play enters new countries, cultures, and contexts there is no doubt that, at the least, subtle adaptations will need to be made. Careful because we all want to take great care to honour the legacy we have received while equally honouring the context that received it. And controversial because we are bound to disagree about what represents appropriate and necessary contextualisation. Nonetheless, in the spirit of the circle we will stay close, listen to one another, and dedicate our efforts to what is best. And perhaps above all, let us commit that our work—although crucial, careful, and sometimes controversial—is also deeply prayerful. **C**



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