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Child Theology

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**WELCOME TO
THIS EDITION
OF ANVIL**

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Sally Nash

THE EDITORIAL

“Doing theology with a child in the midst” is at the heart of the Child Theology Movement (CTM www.childtheology.org). We do theology this way in the hope that the theological reflection and engagement that comes from this can inform the mission and ministry of the whole church, not just work with children. This phrase is taken from Matthew 18:2 and reflects the action of Jesus in responding to his disciples’ question about who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven.

CTM evolved from international conferences about children at risk; reports of these conferences can be found on our website and give an understanding of the breadth and scope of the movement. Our key values are:

- to be a global movement, culturally aware and sensitive;
- to include and learn from minorities, the marginalised and the unempowered;
- to follow Jesus in seeking the kingdom of God of which the child is a key sign, thus valuing the spiritual life of children without making them the focus of our activity;
- to hold respectful dialogues with the Scriptures, current Christian theologies and the world; and
- to listen and to respond to others.

This special edition of Anvil includes both articles and case studies that reflect some of these values.

The first article is from Frances Young, Emeritus Professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham, and was the keynote address at a CTM conference on the future of child theology. It is written from the perspective of someone who is more of an outsider than an insider and discusses child theology in relation to other contextual theologies, its biblical foundation and its potential contribution to wider theological thinking in seeing child theology as a critical and visionary endeavour. There are some profound insights in this article offering what for some will be a fresh perspective on some key theological concepts.

The second article is from Keith White, who founded and currently chairs CTM and has been instrumental in ensuring that international material on child theology has been published. He leads Mill Grove, a residential Christian community established by his family in 1899. Keith’s article starts with the approach taken in his book *Entry Point*¹ (co-authored with Haddon Willmer) and discusses this in light of some of the common features of contextual theologies. He then looks at what is distinctive about the sort of theology he and Haddon engaged with in *Entry Point*, concluding that this sort of contextual theology was done from the perspective of having the “Lord ever before them”, and that is vital.

The third article is by DJ Konz, who teaches theology at Alphacrucis

College in Australia. DJ explores the methodology of child theology as it stands, as well as suggesting developments for the future. Drawing on his doctoral studies, he argues for the use of the term “child-attentive” in relation to methodology and he illustrates this with his work on Karl Barth’s theology. He does this with the intention of encouraging further approaches to studying child theology to emerge.

The final article is by Haddon Willmer, Emeritus Professor of Theology at the University of Leeds, and in it he seeks to identify resonances between his and Keith’s book, *Entry Point*, and Frances Young’s *Arthur’s Call*, which is about her severely disabled son. Haddon grapples with the concept of reception and discusses Arthur’s vocation in this light. He also discusses theodicy using some of Frances’s searingly honest writing. This article challenges our disposition.

The first case study is from Ruth Radley, a CMS mission partner, and draws on her work in South Sudan training communities in children’s rights. She talks about the importance of ensuring that leaders and parents understand the importance of both rights and responsibilities and that this is framed in the light of the well-being and flourishing of the children. The next case study is by Stuart Christine and gives an insight into his work as a BMS mission partner in South America, which was the focus of his PhD. He proposes that in deprived communities, the

¹ Haddon Willmer and Keith J White, *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18* (London: WTL Publications, 2013).

doorway to the Kingdom of God has the form of a child. Stuart uses stories of children in Luke's Gospel to reflect theologically on mission in the favelas. The third case study was written by Lucie Hutson, a children, family and contextual ministry specialist tutor at Midlands CYM, who introduces her concept of "Muddy Church". Lucie talks about the connectedness with creation that we find in different parts of the biblical text and the significance of engaging with this intergenerationally. Such an approach can enhance well-being and help people to connect with God and each other in a meaningful way. She draws on play theory and the importance of allowing children to have agency and freedom and participate fully.

The final case study is from Paul Nash, who is the Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care Team Leader at Birmingham Women and Children's Hospital. Paul describes how the concept of putting a child in the midst helped a team of people working on a Christian series of books for sick and dying children and bereaved siblings to identify the key truth that they wanted to communicate. It is a practical example of how previous engagement with CTM changed and shaped his approach to trying to do theology in his challenging context.

It has been a great privilege to edit this edition of Anvil on behalf of the Child Theology Movement and I am grateful for the opportunity for us to be able to disseminate the material in such a useful and accessible format.

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CHILD THEOLOGY A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

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Frances Young

CHILD THEOLOGY – A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

Over many years reflecting on the nature of theology, I have come to accept the view that theology is an exploratory rather than an explanatory discipline, and that its pursuit requires a capacity to adopt “inside” and “outside” perspectives, to balance subjectivity and objectivity, to be critic and visionary.

This article attempts that kind of oscillating balance, coming as it does from one latterly drawn into the discussion but with no long-standing engagement in the Child Theology Movement (CTM). It aims to be creatively critical, and to make a useful contribution towards determining the significance of this project within the spectrum of theological enquiries. It will consider child theology (CT) in respect of

- its parallels with, and differences from, other contextual theologies;
- the biblical foundation on which it claims to rest; and
- its potential as a critical and visionary project, capable of illuminating and reinforcing the deepest theological insights of the Christian tradition.

CHILD THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT

... all our talk of God has to meet the test of the child in the midst. As the poor transformed theology in Liberation Theology, and as women transform it in feminist theologies, so in Child Theology it is the impact of the child that transforms theology.¹

The analogy with contextual theologies is here explicit and, as has sometimes been the case with its precursors, the whole idea of CT may, therefore, provoke anxieties about sectional or single issue theology. It is clear, however, that those involved in the CTM are not narrowly focused on one exclusive aspect of theology, but rather concerned with theology as such, sensitive to it as a discipline to be pursued from many complementary angles, while maintaining that that comprehensiveness needs to include the largely neglected aspect of the child. Thus, CT is a further lens for exploring theology itself. It is not the training you need for children’s ministry, nor a theology of childhood. It arose out of a concern to find

deeper theological roots for the massive activism of Christians engaged with children at risk throughout the world, and is parallel to other contextual theologies in highlighting the impact of the child on theology, as the opening quotation indicates. The child becomes a clue to particular theological insights.

It is worth considering, then, the ways in which espousing this further lens for exploring theology is similar to, and different from, other contextual theologies. Each contextual theology has arisen from a particular social location and has offered a critique of conventional ways of doing theology. Liberation theology began the trend with its “option for the poor”; working in “base communities” it discerned in Scripture God on the side of the poor, thus empowering the oppressed and challenging society, as well as the church, with this particular biblical hermeneutic. But the question from the beginning was how far its starting point was Marxism rather than the Bible. The impact of feminism further radicalised the question about origins with its critique of the patriarchal assumptions of the Bible itself, not to mention ecclesiastical organisations: what was the basic source of these theological enterprises? Had (postmodern) secular movements, arising from the struggle for equal rights around gender, ethnicity, disability, for example, infiltrated theology?

CT also has its base communities, and its social location, not least through its commitment always to involve practitioners – in other words, people actually engaged in working with children. It feels contemporary pressures from the secular humanist values of aid agencies, from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, from the plight of children across the globe – their poverty, exploitation, trafficking, etc. There is clearly a parallel social location. But isn’t there, perhaps, a less sharp critique of so-called traditional theology than that mounted by liberation or feminist theologians? The Bible does after all appear to endorse patriarchy and slavery, and it does tend to regard poverty and disability as God’s punishment. Thus, theology has had to respond to deserved critique of the social consequences of traditions apparently validated by Scripture. So how far does CT have a parallel critical edge? For all the work on ambivalent attitudes to children in Scripture, tradition and history, the biggest issue among participants in the movement seems to be a perceived neglect of the child’s place in theological enquiry, together with an ongoing sense that CT is failing to get a hearing in the theological establishment – in this, there is a certain irony to which we will return.

The use of the word “impact” in that initial quotation

¹ Keith White and Haddon Williams, “Our response,” in *Toddling to the Kingdom: Child Theology at Work in the Church*, ed. John Collier (London: The Child Theology Movement, 2009), 19.

alerts us to another important way in which CT differs: the poor, blacks, women and many with disabling impairments become their own advocates, demanding that society and/or the church change, become more inclusive and recognise their rights. The child is not in the same way its own protagonist. The binary adult/child parallels others, poor/rich, male/female, black/white, etc.; but the project of CT would appear to be an adult undertaking, and thus akin to men doing feminist theology, whites doing black theology, able-bodied people presuming to do theology for those with disabilities: I have heard not only blacks protest at whites trying to do Black Theology for them, but also articulate persons with disabilities protesting at those without impairments projecting their standpoint onto them, not to mention disabling them with their charity. Self-advocacy is important for most contextual theologies, yet how is the voice of the child to be primary without exploitation?

Given this fundamental difference from other contextual theologies, is CT possible at all? Can it avoid projecting all kinds of notions onto the meaning of the child? In the reports of CT conferences, many projections can be identified: of these suggestions “innocence” and “play” appear inevitable, “dependence” and “vulnerability” natural, “trust” and “hope” perhaps less obvious and more significant. Necessarily there is frequent debate about the voice of the child and how it is to be heard. This closely parallels debates in organisations working with persons with learning disabilities: though often thought to be politically correct, it is actually highly problematic and a kind of tokenism to insist on someone with learning disabilities sitting as a member of committees with agendas shaped by the responsibilities of adults for the proper running of helping agencies. So too for a supposedly representative child. CT, then, raises questions similar to those posed by persons with such profound disabilities that they cannot have “impact” except by their existence, their need for protection, their utter dependence. Others have to be their advocate, to interpret their cries, articulate their needs. Those doing CT require appropriate ways of speaking of and for the child, if the child is to have an impact on theology. My sense is that those involved in the movement are sensitive to these issues, and endeavour to pursue their project responsibly.

And significantly this has meant that discussion of the Rights of the Child has taken an interesting turn.

Theologians, including me, have been critical of the discourse of rights on the ground that it conspires with the individualistic and humanist consensus of Western capitalist societies. In the context of child rights, however, what becomes crystal clear is that the legislative frameworks from which the Rights discourse ultimately derives is really about the responsibilities of society to ensure protection. The truth is that that is also the case with respect to race, gender, sexuality and disability. Society accords rights to particular named groups/minorities when it takes responsibility for ensuring they are not harmed, abused, exploited, denied access, disenfranchised, etc., but given dignity and enabled to fulfil their potential. This, I suggest, is an important insight into the fundamentally mutual relationship implied by the discourse of Rights and Responsibilities. The proper location of this language is a community in which everyone recognises that all persons need to participate fully for the common good of all. Ultimately, it is about belonging rather than exclusion; it’s not so much about self-advocacy, or projecting inappropriately onto others, but about becoming advocates for one another in an appropriate way. As the proponents of CT recognise, what is at stake is theological engagement with awareness of the child in the midst, not necessarily with a literal child in an adult world, nor necessarily with a child’s voice amplified to dominate the discourse. As in the case of the person with profound learning disabilities, it takes sensitive interpretation for the discernment of truths neither child nor person with such disabilities could possibly articulate for themselves, insights that emerge from receiving gifts from unlikely givers, recognising their vocation.²

It is perhaps from that kind of discernment that those apparently missing elements of challenge and critique, whether of society, the church or theology, might emerge. For taking a cue from such contexts can offer a reappraisal of what is really valuable in human life, drawing attention to the way in which those with profound disabilities, or indeed desperately vulnerable children, often seem to find the most extraordinary resilience, even smiles, laughter and joy, in the midst of circumstances most of us regard as intolerable – they live the Beatitudes! The literature of the L’Arche Communities and the insights of Jean Vanier demonstrate the importance of simple yet transformative interactions as so-called competent carers discover a recognition of their own vulnerability and deep joy in mutual relationship with those who are

² See the “wise sayings” that emerged from the first theologians’ meeting at L’Arche, listed in *Encounter with Mystery: Reflections on L’Arche and Living with Disability*, ed. Frances Young (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997), xi; and Frances Young, *Arthur’s Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability* (London: SPCK, 2014).

profoundly other.³ As for children, Benigno P. Beltran, in *Faith and Struggle on Smokey Mountain*,⁴ describes his horror and fear as he went to minister to the scavengers on that massive garbage dump in the Philippines and then goes on:

But in the end, I realized that even if I was constantly afraid, I did not have to be dominated by my fear.

The children were something else. They laughed with such heartbreaking sincerity that I forgot my terrors for a moment, their smiles like tender raindrops falling upon a parched earth. I was never afraid of them, even when those with terrifying skin diseases touched my hand to their foreheads. I was expecting that the horrors of living in a garbage dump would be visible in the children, that the squalor would sculpt their faces, chisel their bodies into angles of rage and dread, and paint a morbid sheen of desolation in their eyes. Instead, I was surrounded by smiling faces, their eyes calm pools in which were reflected the depths of a gentleness like a flight of butterflies in the moonlight. These were the same kind of children's faces I saw in the dump sites of Mumbai and Johannesburg; among the poor in Anacostia and Washington, DC; in Roxbury, Boston; in Nairobi, Kenya, and in many other slum areas I visited.

The gentleness of the gaze of these children and their smiles condemn us all.

We may surely add to that that they are a sign for us of what is true worth. For vulnerable adults along with children offer a challenge to the values of our society. Life for the majority is oriented towards success, achievement in business, academia, sport or show business; even the Paralympics conspire with such aspirations. From relationship with those who cannot compete, however, come the true human values that Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). The report from the CT meeting in Quito voiced one very significant shift. Noting how stories from Christian projects were told in terms of the secularised framework of success and progress, it suggested that this contained many dangers: life continues, what about future failure? Now, it said, we are looking for stories of virtue, courage, forgiveness, reconciliation. To do theology with the realities of the vulnerability embodied in child or person with profound disabilities is to offer a critique of the success values that dominate our culture, and inevitably

infiltrate the church. It is this, of course, which makes the movement's desire for acceptance by theological institutions ironic: it betrays its own possible capture by the need for success in achieving influence.

There is one other way in which CT goes further than other contextual theologies: it embodies a call to identify with the child. What that might mean is a recurring subject of discussion, but here we just note that a call to identify with the poor or the marginalised involves a certain artificiality – the prince pretending to be a pauper is a classic folktale motif, but the prince can always escape! With respect to those of another gender, ethnicity, race or religious commitment, the claim to identification might likewise be regarded as bogus, despite our common humanity, the possibility of empathy and the potential of creative imagination. Of course, imagination and empathy can enable people to have some sense of identity with others, not least a compassionate sense of solidarity with those less fortunate themselves, but how much more in the case of children! – for we have all been children and have memories of experiencing childhood. The Gospels themselves suggest that only by changing and becoming like children can anyone enter the kingdom of heaven, where the greatest is the one who humbles himself and becomes like the child placed in the midst by Jesus (Matt. 18). In large measure CT has been an extended meditation on that incident. So let us turn to the second strand of this paper.

THE CHILD IN THE MIDST

The story of Jesus placing a child in the midst runs through the conversation and publications of the CT movement. It is a “theological clue”.⁵ In Matthew's version (18:1–5) the disciples approach Jesus and ask who would be the greater one in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus calls a child, sets him/her in the midst of them and says,

Truly I say to you, if you do not turn and become as children, you certainly will not enter the kingdom. Whoever lowers him/herself as this child, he/she is the greater one in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in my name, receives me.

The incident is reported with slight variations in the three Synoptic Gospels, and it is worth drawing out the similarities and differences found in the three versions. All three Gospels tell the story in response to the disciples' enquiry or dispute about who would be the greater in the kingdom. In Mark (9:33–37) and Luke

³ The L'Arche Communities were founded by Jean Vanier in the 1960s. People commit themselves to living in community with those with learning disabilities. Rooted in the Christian faith, these communities are now worldwide, ecumenical and multifaith. Jean Vanier's writings, too many to list, are regarded as spiritual classics by his readers.

⁴ Benigno P. Beltran, *Faith and Struggle on Smokey Mountain: Hope for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 34.

⁵ Collier (ed.), *Toddling to the Kingdom*, 22.

(9:46–48) what Jesus says focuses on receiving one of such children in his name as a way of receiving him (that is, Jesus himself), and so of receiving the One who sent him. Matthew alone speaks of the need to become like children and to humble oneself, otherwise one cannot enter the kingdom, thus drawing out a more obvious response to the context (that is, the dispute about greatness). Elsewhere, and not in relation to the story of “the child in the midst”, Mark and Luke speak similarly of receiving the kingdom as a child otherwise it is not possible to enter it, and that implies becoming childlike, as suggested by Matthew. The implications of these two themes, “receiving the child” and “becoming like a child”, have dominated the discussions of the CT movement. Many facets and potential meanings have been drawn out, especially in the book *Entry Point* by Haddon Willmer and Keith J White.⁶ Their discussion of the implicit critique of the disciples vying for position in the kingdom is subtle and nuanced, as it faces up to contemporary discomfiture with humility as an ideal, and the false romanticism of the idea that adults can or should return to childhood. The child as a sign, pointing to key aspects of discipleship, as well as the unexpected nature of the kingdom, is associated theologically with both Jesus and the cross. Taking their discussion as read, I will here reinforce a couple of points, and offer a further insight into the significance of this key story.

THE “UPSIDE-DOWN” WORLD OF GOD’S KINGDOM

The sign of the child teases the disciples’ assumptions, points to a reversal of normal values and says something about the “upside-down” world of God’s kingdom. Particularly in the context of the disciples’ desire for status, it upsets usual expectations in pretty much every human society and certainly traditional societies prior to what has been called our child-focused age. Nor is this the only instance in the Gospel material, or indeed in the New Testament writings in general, where hints of an upside-down world are to be found – for the first shall be last and the last first (Matt. 20:16). There is much in the epistles about being humble and preferring others, classically Philippians 2:1–4, while passages in the Gospels speak of becoming a servant of all (Matt. 20:26), and urge the poor, lowly and downtrodden to come up higher (Mark 1:43–44; Luke 14:7–14). The classic text is, of course, the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1–11) where it is the poor and humble, the merciful and mourners, peacemakers and persecuted who are blessed. Whether we emphasise receiving the child or becoming a child, the fundamental point would seem to be about relinquishing

the need for status, being open to those who society generally ignores and puts down, and ensuring that a sense of vocation does not turn into an ego trip. The kingdom of God is a challenge to hierarchies, and the fruits of the Spirit transform social relations with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22).

In my experience, a contemporary sign of the upside-down world of the kingdom is found in the L’Arche Communities, where people commit themselves to living in community with those with learning disabilities, the most disadvantaged and excluded group in most human societies, discovering there that they receive as much as they give – rather than top-down charity, there is profound mutuality. Nor is this sentimentality – it is worked out in the hard reality of physical caring, of washing, dressing, feeding, of dealing with challenging behaviour and facing vulnerability and mortality. Such has been my own experience through 45 years of caring for a son with profound learning disabilities. Blessed are those who mourn; it would be dishonest not to confess the years of deep mourning – not just the initial loss of what my son might have been had the placenta not failed to deliver the required nourishment and oxygen for his normal development in the womb, but the succession of losses consequent upon his failure to learn and develop according to the normal pattern. Yet those years have also been years of abundant blessing. Theological motifs may arise from such experiences that prove parallel to the key insights deriving from CT, though differentiation is important:⁷ arrested development may seem like permanent childhood, but the reality is actually an important warning against simplistic ideas of remaining or returning to a childlike state, as is the second childhood of old age. Yet CT, along with the writings of Jean Vanier and my own exploration of my son’s vocation, significantly discovers the same fundamental features in the Gospel record of Jesus’s teaching: the upside-down world of God’s kingdom.

THE SIGN OF THE CHILD AS A PARADIGM FOR THE CHURCH IN MATTHEW

In Matthew’s Gospel the story of “the child in the midst” heads up a chapter (Matt. 18) that figures as the fourth great discourse, or sayings collection, of the five that punctuate this Gospel, the five often being regarded as significant in paralleling the five books of Moses. This particular discourse seems to be a collection of material concerned with the proper ordering of the church

⁶ Haddon Willmer and Keith J. White, *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18* (London: WTL Publications, 2013).

⁷ I appreciate Haddon Willmer’s claiming my writings about Arthur as CT, not least because Arthur is, of course, my child, and will remain so for as long as he or I shall live. But I must also voice this caveat: it is not right to characterise adults with learning disabilities as trapped in lifelong childhood.

community, the word “church” appearing twice in 18:17, uniquely here in the Gospel tradition apart from Matthew 16:18, where Jesus promises to build his church on Simon, renamed Peter, the rock.

The discourse in chapter 18 is introduced with the passage quoted earlier, and then constructed from (i) a group of sayings about not causing offence to, nor despising, one of the least of the believers, with further sayings about the problem of offences (“scandals” or stumbling blocks); (ii) a parable about seeking the one lost sheep and rejoicing over it more than the 99; (iii) a group of statements about dealing with sins and disagreements within the church; and (iv) Peter’s question about forgiveness, the challenge to forgive 70 times seven, backed up with another parable. I suggest that this context is significant for understanding Matthew’s take on the story. It is fundamentally about the church as a society in which relationships are ordered in a way that is profoundly different from most human social groups, and which is grounded in the values embodied in the kingdom of heaven announced by Jesus, the upside-down world of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. Not only does all this imply an attitude of sitting light to one’s own claims or rights, but it suggests a level of mutual regard and of expectant receiving from one another, with openness and respect, not unlike the attitude enjoined by Paul in Philippians 2. It also expands the emphasis on discipleship in *Entry Point* to consideration of communion in community.

THE CHILD AS ESCHATOLOGICAL SIGN

To receive the child is a way of receiving Jesus himself – indeed in Mark and Luke it is a way of receiving “the One who sent me”. Why might this be significant? What I want to suggest is that the action is more of a prophetic sign than has perhaps been realised hitherto.

This Gospel passage is perhaps best understood in relation to Isaiah 11:6–9. Following on from the messianic prediction of a stem from David’s royal line, a sprout from an old tree stump, who will rule with justice and integrity, these verses sketch an extraordinary picture of a new natural order, where wolves and sheep live together in peace, calves and lion cubs feed together, and a little child shall lead them. The lion will eat straw like an ox and a baby can play alongside the den of a poisonous snake.

The child surely represents new creation, and so the sign should be read in the light of material such as the parable of the mustard seed – the tiniest of all seeds but with potential to produce a great tree in which birds can

roost: indeed, the very tree of life in the symbolism of the Ancient Near East. To welcome the child is to discern the signs of new creation beyond anything expected, and it is this vision that puts the disciples’ competitive self-interest into damning perspective.

In other words this key passage has eschatological ramifications, and the sayings that immediately follow in Matthew may signify the potential for the Eden narrative to be replayed without the Fall in the life of each little one, with dire warnings for those who might contribute to that not happening. For the child represents the return to Paradise and the renewal of the whole earth. This reinforces the challenge offered to the ways of the world, and to the assumptions that the disciples have about success and power. But it also suggests something rather different from a focus on the particular child, or the average child, or the special child, or children in general. The child is first and foremost a sign pointing beyond itself.

I suggest that this approach differentiates CT from other contextual theologies, and aligns it with the deep critique of the ways of the world that appears in many different guises in Christian theology, despite the fact that Christian history has rarely embodied that critique. Matthew’s instinct to place the sign at the top of a collection of sayings sketching proper relations in the church tends to obscure the eschatological overtones, but might actually heighten the sense of “now” and “not yet”: the child, the church, the L’Arche Communities are signs pointing to a reality not yet realised. Fundamentally the key narrative for CT is about new creation and the return to Paradise.

THE CHILD IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN⁸

This is borne out, I suggest, by what happens to these traditions in the Gospel of John. In his book *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, Jean Vanier reflects on Peter’s resistance to Jesus washing his feet. He sketches out the way in which “all groups, all societies, are built on the model of a pyramid”, with the rich, powerful and intelligent on top, and immigrants, slaves, servants, unemployed, people with disabilities and illnesses excluded and marginalised. Jesus takes “the place of the person at the bottom”, but for Peter this is impossible. He does not understand that

It is an essential part of his message of love. It is the revelation that in order to enter the kingdom, we have to become like little children; we need to be “born” from on high to discover who God is and who we are called to be.⁹

⁸ For this section I am grateful for a conversation with David Ford.

⁹ Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004), 226–29.

At first sight this might jar as an import from the Synoptics into reflection on John's Gospel, but the implicit cross reference to John 3 might put a different complexion on it. The discussion with Nicodemus is almost a Johannine commentary on the child in the midst: Jesus insists that no one can enter the kingdom without being born again/from on high (the Greek word *anōthen* is ambiguous). It is one of the few places in John's Gospel where the phrase "kingdom of God" is used, and it implies an eschatological rebirth – becoming a child again. It is often noted that what replaces the kingdom in this Gospel is "eternal life" or "the life of the age to come". This eschatological life is both now and not yet, available in anticipation through water and the Spirit (implicitly through baptism), which enables new birth as God's children (John 1:12). The Johannine Gospel reminds the kingdom language, deepening the emphasis on the upside-down world, where the humility of the child (or slave – the Greek word *pais* could mean either) is modelled by Jesus himself, as indeed in the Pauline hymn in Philippians 2, which makes explicit the connection with the cross.

THE POTENTIAL OF CHILD THEOLOGY AS A CRITICAL AND VISIONARY PROJECT

Contextual theologies create binaries: poor/rich, black/white, men/women, able/disabled, etc. So child/adult? The very debates about "receiving" and "becoming" imply a transcending of the binary, and the eschatological associations just unearthed suggest that even more clearly. It is no accident, I suggest, that Jean Vanier's theological reflections on the L'Arche experience have led him not into disability theology, but into theological anthropology. That surely is where CT also leads. It is not just about the child. It is a clue to things that are absolutely fundamental to understanding humankind in Christian theology, namely complementarity, mutuality and solidarity – community and communion.

By exploring the implications of "the child in the midst" for discipleship and the cross, *Entry Point* goes some way towards discerning this. But surely we can go further. For it is this that could provide a deeper critical edge than we have found so far as we have assessed CT in relation to other contextual theologies. The upside-down world revealed by considering "the child in the midst" alongside other material in the Gospels, as well as the rest of the New Testament, not only aligns it with the feminist critique of patriarchy, which suppressed children

and slaves as well as women, but it also invites a critique of the kingdom language itself, something already occurring perhaps in the Gospel of John. The kingdom language, after all, comes from premodern societies, just as does patriarchy, and it jars with contemporary democratic assumptions. It is significant, I suggest, that the Russian Faith and Light movement uses the icon of St Menas as the centre of its simple devotional life;¹⁰ one of the oldest Coptic icons, this depicts Christ and St Menas alongside each other with Christ's arm around the shoulders of the saint, known as Jesus's friend. This, surely, is the obverse of the Christ Pantocrator that dominates Orthodox churches. It embodies the critique potentially offered to the Christendom of the past, not to mention the triumphalism endemic in some Christian circles in the present, by the upside-down world discerned in the Gospels by Jean Vanier and CT. The fact that Paul and John use the kingdom language sparingly may be precisely because it is subverted by the way of the cross, and by the insight that Jesus no longer called his followers disciples but friends (John 15:15), and washed their feet.

Such a critique has similar sharp overtones as liberation theology in that it challenges the very language of much of Scripture itself, not to mention the hierarchical and authoritarian nature of most church traditions – indeed, it calls in question the infantilising of the laity, not just women and children. But as with Jean Vanier, a critique is also offered to contemporary societies, for relationship with a child or with a person with learning disabilities challenges modern claims to individual autonomy. Human beings are fundamentally social animals, and the dependency of both child and vulnerable adult is a sharp reminder of the fundamental need for community and of the potential even for "power relations" to be transformed by mutual giving and receiving. That this is fundamental to the Gospel is an insight potentially reinforced by CT. Paradoxically it could also be applicable to the valuation of the elderly, infirm and senile – another area of concern in our fragmented modern societies. This, like childhood, is a path we all tread, but theologically it is hardly addressed. The kind of comprehensive theological anthropology demanded by CT could surely embrace second childhood as well.

CT also has the potential to challenge widespread assumptions about obedience. One of the characteristics of our postmodern outlook is that each person is free to live life as they see fit, that obedience is enslaving and passé. Quite apart from the dominance of the prime value of personal choice in a culture of individualism, this is in large part a reaction against

¹⁰ Foi et Lumière (Faith and Light) is a parallel organisation to L'Arche, also founded by Jean Vanier, with Marie-Hélène Mathieu, and emerging from a Lourdes pilgrimage in 1971. It is formed of local groups of families and friends that include persons with learning disabilities; groups meet on a regular basis for mutual support and spiritual encouragement; and like L'Arche, Faith and Light has spread around the world. For my contacts with Faith and Light in Russia, see the relevant chapter in *Arthur's Call*.

the authoritarianism embodied in the church and enshrined in Scripture. Dealing with children, however, soon reveals the fact that for their own good, learning obedience remains important – they need structure and boundaries. So does society – anarchy produces chaos, law structures relationships, so that community is made possible. Paradoxically obedience is what permits freedom. For the Epistle to the Hebrews, obedience lies at the heart of Christ’s sacrifice (Heb. 10:5–7 quoting Ps. 40:6–8), and the epistle’s call to progress from immaturity to perfection (Heb. 5:11 – 6:6) implies following in the way of Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. If Jesus “learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8), we too learn and grow through a response to life’s exigencies shaped by the same unself-regarding commitment to the love for others demanded by God’s love. Besides, Matthew’s Gospel enjoins a righteousness greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees. Thus, the New Testament as a whole points to a new covenant in which law and rules, their keeping and breaking, are rendered irrelevant, not because they are enslaving and passé, but because a change of hearts and minds delivers obedience and more. The thrust of CT points to a more balanced view of obedience as constitutive of human community and of communion with God. There is an appropriate submission to “others”, not to mention the One who is the very source of our being. And that might restore to us the value of kingdom language in relation to God.

Finally, CT has the potential to challenge widespread readings of how God relates to the world, and common understanding of the meaning of the cross. It is all too easy to see the death of Jesus as the Father punishing the Son instead of us, sinners. Punitive attitudes to child-rearing have been endemic in many cultures, but punitive behaviour would now be treated as child abuse. This should challenge certain atonement theories, not to mention some traditional “types” of the cross, such as the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Also to be challenged are assumptions about divine omnipotence,

that God is in charge, not to mention neat ways of explaining away suffering, or defending God through the philosophical sophistications of theodicy – for how can God allow the extreme suffering of some of the most vulnerable on earth, innocent children? Such enormous theological questions are implied in CT, as in Christian theology in general, and some standard answers are outlawed by taking the child into account.

An initial response to all this is implicit in *Entry Point*, and in the saying that “whoever receives one of the least of these little ones receives me and the One who sent me”. It is, indeed, the Jesus who took the way of the cross to whom the child points. The move to associate “the child in the midst” with the cross may thus seem straightforward, yet it is paradoxical. It becomes clearer, surely, when taken in association with the many pointers to the upside-down world found elsewhere, especially those provided by Paul. If Philippians 2:1–4 speaks of preferring others and humbling oneself, the following verses ground that in having the mind of Christ Jesus, who did not think equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself, became a servant and was obedient unto death, even death on a cross. 1 Corinthians 1 dares to see in the cross the foolishness of God, insisting God’s wisdom is other than human wisdom. The whole story of Christ embodies the Isaianic words, “My ways are not your ways, neither are my thoughts your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8). Ultimately the only theodicy in the Christian tradition is to be found in the cross, while the only atonement is God’s loving action in Christ to recreate a gone-wrong world and establish a covenant that truly turns much conventional human behaviour on its head. The new creation in Christ is an upside-down world, glimpsed in part by those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, a world into which we will all be led by a little child. Thus, CT may be both critical and visionary.

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CHILD THEOLOGY AS THEOLOGY

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CHILD THEOLOGY AS THEOLOGY

To this point in time the Child Theology Movement (CTM)¹ has not come up with an agreed definition of child theology (CT). In the absence of such a statement, there are several theologies that sometimes go by this name.

This article describes one form of CT, and then explores how it draws from, critiques and contributes to not just contextual theologies, but theology in general.

The main source for describing this understanding of CT is the book *Entry Point (EP)*,² jointly written by the author and Haddon Willmer.³ A distinctive of all varieties of CT is, of course, that a child (childhood) is integral to the whole process. It is not therefore general dogmatic or systematic theology, although we try to work at it systematically, because it will not let go of this actual child or children. For those committed to this, there are different biblical starting points on offer. Some seek to draw out themes and conclusions from a survey of children in the Scriptures as a whole.⁴ Others seek theological validation and blessing for their efforts by, with and for children in the name of Jesus.⁵ The birth narratives of Jesus in Matthew and Luke seem to offer obvious starting points. And there is a case for seeing Incarnation, particularly as referenced in John's Gospel, as a valid base for such theological exploration.

The book *EP*, and this article, derive their primary inspiration from the action and teaching of Jesus, in Matthew 18, when he called a little child and placed her in the middle of a theological argument between his disciples.⁶ In rooting our investigation here, we did not assume that this is the only or even the best starting point. But one must start somewhere, and this is where our 12-year theological conversation began. As we embarked on our theological journey, the phrase "child in the midst" began to gain currency. Before long before it became clear to us that that this would not do. The

phrase trips nicely off the tongue and resonates with the spirit of the age. But the actual child in question is significant in the Gospel narrative because she was called and placed by Jesus, and then the subject of some specific, and very searching teaching.⁷

There is no indication that she was placed in the midst as an object of the disciples' gaze, or as a prompt to them to have compassion on her. Rather Jesus, teaching and living out God's will and Kingdom on earth, was nearing the last stage of his journey to the cross. Despite his best efforts, his followers did not grasp how the suffering of the cross and the glory of the Kingdom of God related to each other. The issue at stake takes us to the very heart of Christian theology: who is Jesus? What difference does Jesus Christ, with the child in the midst, make to how his followers understand what it is to serve him? What is the nature of the Kingdom of God? How do we enter it? How are cross and humility to be understood and lived by followers of Jesus?

Our contention is that the little child (about whom we know nothing) was called and placed by Jesus into the midst of an existing form of theology in order to challenge and change it. Jesus interrupted and challenged the beliefs and lives of any who sought to follow him. The call is not to change the disciples' attitudes to the child (although such attitudes most certainly will change if they get the point). Rather the child is invited into the unfolding story of Jesus as he proclaims, signs and seeks the Kingdom of God. In our view, there is no way the child can be abstracted (decontextualised) from the narrative of Matthew, the person of Jesus, the theological arguing of the disciples, the culture of the time or the nature of the Kingdom of God. The sign of the child in the midst is not self-evident in any time or culture, but rather chosen by God in Christ to challenge our theology and lives. It follows that theology that pays careful attention to the sign of the child can only be authentic when it pays scrupulous attention to the words of Jesus and the specific context of this pericope.⁸

¹ See www.childtheology.org for a history of CTM and material that it has produced and made available worldwide.

² Haddon Willmer and Keith J. White, *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18* (London: WTL Publications, 2013).

³ The whole of this paper reflects, in some measure, the thinking of my friend and colleague Haddon Willmer, because it draws so heavily on *EP*, the book that we wrote together. And I wish readers to know that. However the final section draws substantially from his written response to earlier versions of this paper. This conclusion is, as I see it, the nub of the matter, and I am profoundly grateful to Haddon for helping me to see it.

⁴ Roy B. Zuck, *Precious in His Sight: Childhood and Children in the Bible* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

⁵ The origins of CTM lie in a number of international "Cutting Edge" conferences, convened by Viva, which brought together Christian "child activists" from around the world. Several Christian initiatives focused on children worldwide have asked CTM to be involved (e.g. HCD Global Alliance; the Global Children's Forum; 4/14 Window Movement; WCC/ UNICEF). CT has been seeking to inform and support them, but also to challenge them theologically and prophetically.

⁶ παιδίον (a little child). We do not know whether this little child was a boy or a girl, so the latter is chosen as a reminder of this.

⁷ Chapter one of *EP* (19–46) deals specifically with this issue.

⁸ As indicated below, *EP* seeks to be attentive to context, historical and present, all through.

When the two words “child” and “theology” are placed side by side, as in CT, the intention is that they should be kept together. Now people can and do give a difference emphasis to one or the other, and where the child is the focus of attention and effort, then it might best be termed a “theology of child (hood)”. Where there is an attempt to listen to the presence and voice of the child, then perhaps a commitment to “children’s theology”, or “children’s spirituality”, is in evidence. As a matter of public record, since the inception of CTM, the movement has been alongside and in conversation with those engaged in such related activities and studies. But we are not seeking a deeper and more rounded understanding of child and children,⁹ or ground for making the church and world more child-friendly, though we are committed to both of these endeavours. The primary question for CT, as we understand it, is how this child placed in the midst by Jesus relates to theology, and vice-versa. Somebody needs to work seriously at this interface. And to do so inevitably invites comparison with contextual theologies that place other words (such as “black”, “poor” or “women”) alongside theology.

COMMON FEATURES OF CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIES

Although it is notoriously difficult to articulate what contextual theology is, not least because all Christian theology is properly speaking contextual,¹⁰ there are forms of theology that have been chosen to call themselves, or are labelled by others, contextual or liberative, and we know what they are. Here are some of their common elements:¹¹

Praxis. This is the axiom that action is inseparable from theology. If it is separated, then at best it can only be “part-theology”. The Gospel of Jesus Christ must be lived in the world. There is a constant interplay, dialectic, even conflict between the “text of life” on the one hand, and the biblical text and theological traditions on the other. The text of life (personal and communal experience and context) is seen as logically prior to theology in that life is lived before theological reflection begins to take place.

The text of life. Part of this process involves a reflection on life, with reference to identified forms of oppression and injustice, which results in critiques of the dominant historical and contemporary realities and ideologies that have enslaved, marginalised and silenced the lives

and voices of certain groups of people. The process seeks to raise the consciousness of the subject group in question, to amplify their voices, and to challenge everyone else (who in large or small measure are seen to contribute directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously to the suffering and oppression of the subject group) to listen to what they are saying, to repent and change their ways.

Rereading Scripture. The processes described so far inevitably entail the revisiting of biblical readings and theological dogma in order to draw out some of the radical implications there (for example, the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt). Such revisitation also involves critiquing traditional biblical readings and theology to varying degrees. (Some find much of the biblical text indefensibly compromised by, say, patriarchal ideology.)

Context. Because specific places, cultures and contexts are important, these theologies wrestle with the challenge of how to connect local experiences, insights and action with realities and ideologies in other places and traditions. Is it possible for a white person to speak in a black liberation theology discourse, or a man in a feminist context? Are there universal truths and courses of action that apply in all instances?

Agents of change. Integral to these movements is the mobilisation of the oppressed groups to campaign for genuine and lasting change in social life that is fairer and more just. The overall aim is that they might have life in all its fullness. New forms of ecclesial community are essential for doing such theology, as well as outcomes of it.

REFLECTIONS ON CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CT AND OTHER THEOLOGICAL ENDEAVOURS

Before seeking to relate CT to five common elements of contextual theologies, there is a historical fact (perhaps accident) that should be borne in mind: child theology has come later than these contextual movements. They developed at least in their modern forms, from the 1960s onwards, in the context of a period of considerable intellectual and political ferment (e.g. civil rights in the USA; independence movements around the world; renewed insights into the power of patriarchy and hegemony), and they are children of their time. CT too is a child of its time, and

⁹ That there must be serious attention to real children in a range of contexts is evidenced in *EP* by the fact that the first chapter is called “Child”. It was worked at for over a decade with reference to real children in real situations, and from a range of different theoretical perspectives, including sociology and psychology.

¹⁰ This is developed below.

¹¹ This is a deliberately indicative list. A CTM booklet that is work in progress has a much fuller summary of several forms of contextual theology.

there are parallels with, say, the study of children as agents, and childhood as a focus of attention in the discipline of sociology.¹²

CT has arisen in world history after the UNCRC (1989)¹³, at a time when child and children have come to exist as subjects and agents rather than being imbedded in other structures and power relations (e.g. family studies; socialisation; education). Some children are playing an active part in this process, but childhood is something experienced by and affecting us all: the whole community and society.

Because CT, perhaps appropriately given its name, arrived a generation later, led by some of those who had experienced the 1960s, it is therefore privileged in being able to reflect upon and learn from the histories, processes and developments of these other movements when seeking to shape its own way of working. It must be alert to ways in which it is being squeezed into a mould simply because it exists in the context of the here and now. It must shine critical theological light on prevailing analysis and ideologies, both within Christian and secular spheres. It pays particular attention to developments in child welfare and concepts of childhood. And its methods are deliberately designed to be bottom-up, locally rooted and yet globally connected.

One of the most obvious discoveries made during the process is the absence hitherto of reference to children in these liberation movements. Theologians have begun to realise this, and in the process find that bringing children into view and action challenges some of the most hallowed assumptions or principles to date.¹⁴ In our view, placing a child in the midst of contextual theologies requires fundamental new thinking, not just an additional chapter or appendix.

On the other hand, it began to dawn on us at a conference in Romania that where feminist/womanist theology had not begun to influence seminaries and churches, it was difficult for CT to make any headway in practice. If women and mothers are marginal or invisible in church or seminary, then it is unlikely that it is safe and ready for CT. Contextual theologies are a call to conversion, and they are cumulative and mutually reinforcing. The call to the Kingdom of God is one in

which all traditions and cultures are challenged in and through Jesus Christ, the Lord.¹⁵

PRAXIS, JESUS AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

We believe that the Kingdom of God with a child in the midst transcends all theologies and perspectives. So, by definition, it is common to all forms of contextual theology. And *EP* has praxis at its very heart. There are two elements to the teaching of Jesus with a child in the midst. The first concerns becoming humble like the little children in order to enter the Kingdom of heaven; the second welcoming a little child in the name of Jesus. It is perhaps original to this book that the latter (that is, welcoming a little child) is seen as a primary way of becoming humble. The road to humility is not by theological or spiritual endeavour, but by stooping to take the action of welcoming a little child. In the book there is an example of how a mother who found that having a child interrupted her Bible reading and spiritual discipline was helped to see the welcoming of her own little child as integral to the process.¹⁶ The cross of Jesus Christ is arguably the central example of praxis in Christian theology, and *EP* aims to bring back cross and Kingdom humility by means of reflection on the action and teaching of Jesus in the context of his own calling, life and mission.¹⁷

THE TEXT OF LIFE

Integral to *EP* is the desire to do some justice to the life of Jesus, the lives of the disciples, and the life of the (anonymous) little child in context. So considerable effort and imagination went into trying to understand all three singly, and in relationship to each other, given the history and culture of their times in order to discover how the disciples needed to change or turn in order to see things, and therefore act, more consistently in line with God's Kingdom. It is for others to judge of course, but as authors we lived for twelve years with an increasing real child, increasingly understandable but misguided disciples, and a whole new understanding of Jesus as a human being seeking to pioneer a new way of living. The text of life undergirds and informs our endeavours. It is our view that CT can only function with

¹² The notion of "caring" for a child as part of her development may disguise the desire to serve the preservation of the status quo in society. "In this sense the development of the child may now instructively be viewed alongside the development of the Afro-American in the USA or the Black South African, or indeed, the development of women's consciousness in Western Europe. Care, in this sense, itself becomes hegemonic, it provides a moral and philosophical context for social relations which claims the assent of large groups of the people for a sustained period." Chris Jenks, *Childhood* (London: Routledge, 1996), 42.

¹³ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989.

¹⁴ For example, a woman's body is her own, and so abortion is a fundamental human right for her. But what of the unborn child? Where does she figure in this, if equal in the sight of God?

¹⁵ I am grateful for this insight to Haddon Willmer, who wrote an unpublished reflection on a CT conference in Romania held in 2014.

¹⁶ Willmer and White, *Entry Point*, 172–73.

¹⁷ *EP* consists of seven chapters, the central one, entitled "Disciple" (105–18), dwelling on the cross.

integrity if it does justice to the realities and challenges of everyday life. By holding child and adult together, rather than seeing them as competing categories we believe we found ourselves closer to Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

EP AND THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Whatever criticisms may be made of CT as exemplified by *EP*, it could hardly be said that the authors did not attempt a serious and sustained engagement with the biblical text: the whole book revolves around just a few verses of one Gospel!¹⁸ It does this by setting the discussion within the biblical and Christian theology, traditional, historical and contemporary. Both writers have been actively engaged with one or more forms of contextual theology.

And the result is a suggested rereading not only of the pericope of Matthew 18, but of the humanity of Jesus (one needing company and support), and of conventional commentaries that do not allow the presence of an actual child to challenge the perceived wisdom of the adults (the disciples). In critiquing the commentaries, the book also throws light on systematic theology for its adult-centric and patriarchal tendencies. This was not attempted in the name of a new contextual theology, but rather to discern the nature of the Kingdom of God and how to realign our lives as followers so that we might be part of its growth.

LOCAL AND UNIVERSAL

EP takes seriously the local context and the dominant ideologies and power structures, and in doing so seeks to work towards an understanding of how the action and teaching of Jesus at that time and place can be interpreted more faithfully in our own time and place.

Although the authors are male, white, middle class and Oxbridge educated, the work was set in the context of consultations and conversations around the world involving men, women, young people, and sometimes children, across the world.¹⁹

The fact that CT and CTM developed after various forms of contextual theology helped us to draw from their insights into and exposures of a range of ideologies. Whether it has done so effectively or appropriately is for history to judge, but there could hardly have been

an environment more conducive to awareness of competing cultures and ideologies.

CHILDREN AS AGENTS

We come finally to what seems to have been for critics the most controversial aspect of CT: whether children have been appropriately listened to, mobilised and their voices amplified as part of the process of change. We do not pretend that the way things have been done is beyond reproach, but we can explain how and why we have gone about our task.

Had we seen CT as another form of contextual or liberative theology with children as its subjects, then we would have joined the movement and organisations devoted to facilitating their well-being and agency. As described above, CT and CTM have been unstintingly supportive of such endeavours. But there were distinctions to be made. For a start, little children are not like adults in every respect, nor should they be.²⁰ They are fully human of course but this does not mean that they are adults or should be encouraged to see themselves as such. They deserve to be allowed the safe space to be children, to play, dream, work as children.

For adults to engage them in rigorous theological discussion therefore is likely to be inappropriate at best, and abusive at worst. Far from marginalising them, the CTM approach refrains from seeing “mature adulthood” as the mainstream of society, and childhood as of inferior status. Rather it conceives of human existence as constituted by relationships as in a village, where there are different roles and modes of being.

In the text of Matthew, the little child is “silent”, and Jesus makes no attempt to encourage the child to speak, or adults to listen. But the child is called and placed precisely as an agent of change by remaining a little child in role. This is not to belittle the child, but rather to give proper attention to the nature of childhood. CT has drawn attention to the marginalisation of children in theology and church, but by being sensitive to the lives and wishes of real boys and girls. We do not envisage the silent child as in any way normative, because we both have first-hand experience of babies and very young children and know that children choose when to engage with adults, and when to dwell in their own world and thoughts. Adults have a responsibility to protect and safeguard children and childhood as such (including how they go

¹⁸ It should be emphasised that we have not seen it as our role or place to critique the biblical text. Rather we were seeking to receive and apply the example and teaching of Jesus as recorded by Matthew.

¹⁹ There are reports of most of these consultations. We considered carefully and continuously whether and if so how to involve children in these conversations. There was direct involvement by children in some, but the wisdom that prevailed worldwide was to engage them by listening to them in our daily lives, and by imagination drawing sometimes though not overmuch on our own childhoods, and knowledge of our children and grandchildren.

²⁰ Back to the παιδίον in Matt. 8 so as not to include teenagers and young adults in the category.

about education and church), and there are proper and inappropriate ways of going about this.

This account risks seeming defensive and reactionary, when CT and CTM are actually committed to fundamental change and radical new forms of living and relating in the name of Jesus. CT has been alongside seminaries helping them to reimagine themselves in the name of Jesus and with a child in the midst, and has been in sustained conversation with those seeking to reimagine church and Christian education in a similar way. Jesus was instrumental in creating a new form of ecclesial community, brotherhood, sisterhood, and it is our conviction that where CT influences Christian theology and practice, it will be supportive of non-hierarchical, divisive, competitive institutions and power structures.

CT AND THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT

It is hopefully obvious that CT has much in common with liberative and contextual theologies, but that the nature of what it is to be a little child, and how CTM has gone about its work, renders it distinctive in some respects, as identified. It draws from and challenges such theological endeavours and praxis. But how much it has in common with these is not a primary consideration. More important is its desire to be faithful to the calling and teaching of Jesus, and the dynamics and nature of the Kingdom of God. It is our contention that this is at the heart of anything that purports to be genuine Christian theology and that the call of Jesus demands radical reformation of heart, mind and social relationships.²¹ And this process of change is from various forms of slavery into a new way of living characterised by freedom. Contextual theologies make a claim for their constituencies that they should have freedom: to be themselves and all that is implied in that. Their common principle is not abstract freedom, but concrete relevant liberation. They are theologies for change, not merely theologies articulating values.

But if this is the principle, can it be limited in its application? Can we argue for freedom for us and not freedom for all? When it is spoken of theologically, so that God is liberator and liberation is to God, God's koinonia and partnership in God's action, then no group has privilege against others, since God is of all and for all.²² When a group looks for liberation with and from God, it finds itself not as a privileged beneficiary, but as a sign of God's will and working life for the liberation of all the children of God (e.g. Rom. 8) and as called to be

partners with God for others. To be freed by God is to be given something to be shared and passed on. It only exists for me and my group if we share it.

The liberation of God is thus highly dynamic, reaching out to the ends of the earth, in a chain reaction of liberations. Wherever the chain starts, whoever we are, we only have it if it reaches out to some other. There is no fixed order here. That is, the liberating action of God in the world does not follow, and is not dependent upon, the order of recent theologies: black, liberation, feminist, Dalit. And the liberating action of God does not come in separate boxes marked out from each other, because they belong to specified constituencies. As Haddon Willmer argues elsewhere in this *Anvil* volume, it may be that theology relating to those with disability (differently enabled) could be a close companion of CT in that it goes beyond calling for human action, towards new forms of companionship that help the enabled to discover themselves in a new light. To see those with disability simply as a constituency is to miss the illumination of all human being and relationships that comes from God in Christ.

EP is deliberately not contextual theology in the sense of being modelled on theologies called contextual, in the contemporary fashion. It is not interested in being a branded theology of a certain type. Theology is "talking about God" as *EP* says, and so is free and varied human activity in explorative response to the presence of God, who is the boundless context and heart of human being.

EP pays attention to context in appropriate ways, as all human discourse must. Words always carry with them hidden and dormant loads of meaning that wake up to surprise us. Poetry works because it draws from wide and deep contexts, not in the analytic ordered way found in contextual theology, but in exposure to the capricious emergence of new shoots from unsuspected seeds in the dark earth. *EP* came out of this way of practising contextuality. It is a friendly way, not organised, engineered or policed, for when friends converse, their talk and attention darts here and there, making connections of various kinds between themselves and "contexts". A theology that is truly personal (i.e. not individualistic let alone solipsistic or narcissistic) will find itself repeatedly taken through the defined person to the world, for a person is not an item in a context but a context-finding and -making and -fleeing agent.

One reason for being wary of "contextual theology" is that the academic labelling dulls, or even precludes,

²¹ Although the whole of this paper represents in some measure the thinking of my friend and colleague Haddon Willmer, because it is dominated by *EP*, the book that we wrote together, this final section draws substantially from his response to earlier versions of this paper. This conclusion is, as I see it, the nub of the matter, and I am profoundly grateful to Haddon for helping me to see it.

²² This assumes of course that Christian theology has not misunderstood the nature of God and his relationship to his creation and creatures.

attention to the inescapable contextuality of human being, a contextuality *lived* before and more richly than any theoretical specifications of context yield.

Reasoned and practical talk, which *EP* aspires to be, will be contextual, in the sense that it will be aware and respectful that all things have contexts (often more than one). Things, and persons, have meaning and value by connection, and connection implies context. Contextual discourse does much more than report what is alongside or around the subject, as though it is merely “there”. It is worthwhile only when there is connection, so that two-way conversation and interaction grows between context and subject, in ways appropriate to the particularities of each side.

Discriminating conversational discourse is to be found in *EP*. Contextuality is practised appropriately rather than schematically.

Chapter one explores the contextuality inherent in the child.²³ The key phrase “the child in the midst” shows the book is not about the abstract “child alone, in herself”, but child in context. The difference between the child in the midst and the child placed by Jesus in the midst is discussed to explore the contemporary context in British culture, where the child is seen and treated mostly in secular terms, thus squeezing out theological understanding and vision. The book *EP* is well aware of its own contextuality. We can thus see that contextuality is not the one-sided determination of theology by the non-theological but is a conversation between the presence and power of the non-theological, both secular and religious, and the vision and intention that is theology. Theology is not an inert and mostly ancient and redundant knowledge but is the articulation of human reception of God in God’s self-showing, and of faith and obedience as human response. Theology generates conversation, even though it feels weak, starting from a disadvantaged position.

EP is essentially a reading of Matthew 18:1–10. It is not a commentary but a reading that brings the text into conversation with our contemporary concern with children. It listens to the text, letting it guide the conversation, rather than being cannibalised to serve our concerns and norms. The text confronts us with what is culturally alien to us, maybe even offensive. This is obvious in chapter five, on humility. Humility was once a basic virtue, the human stance before God and on the earth. In the west it was “dethroned” centuries ago and it is not a “natural characteristic” of human being.²⁴ Yet if God, as God is in Jesus, is respected,

humility, as profoundly signalled by the death of Jesus, is called for. The contextuality of the Word of God as witnessed in Scripture, the contextuality of that Word in God is disturbingly strange to the context provided by our religious and non-religious ways of hearing it.

The call to humility, as discussed in *EP*, comes to its sharpest when the child is put in the midst. Jesus was trying to get the unhumble, ambitious disciples to change, so he put a child in their midst as a sign of the only way into the kingdom of God. The child was available for Jesus for this purpose, because there was common acceptance then that a child was in a socially humble position. We no longer accept that assumption.²⁵ When the child is treated as lower in any way, it is denounced as abuse, cruelty and an infringement of rights. Only a small minority of Christians dissent, in theory and practice, from the prevailing high view of children. Adults now do not aspire to humility and they do not expect their children to do any differently.

Here then is a major contextual question that is recognised and discussed in the text. There is conflict between two major historical cultural contexts of humility, and some decision must be made. Some simply work within the assurance of modernity and dismiss the ancient text as redundant. A few still try to live under the authority of the ancient text, as though they do not live in a different age and culture. *EP* refuses the stark alternative, the choice between two unworkable possibilities, and so goes in quest of a better understanding of humility. It hopes to be able to be true to the text that brings to us the witness and call of Jesus, and to live positively in the present that insofar as it is good is a good gift of God and not to be refused. And so, four kinds of humility are distinguished: come-down, which the proud disciples are called to; put-down, which is often malign humiliation; look-forward, as a child does, who is at the opening of life, as the entry point; and look-up humility, which takes the lower place, not as a put-down but as a child of the Father in heaven (Isa. 57:15).²⁶

The last point brings us to a crux in any theology that claims to be contextual. The relevant context is not only the human situation of the theologian, nor the human context of those of whom, or for whom, he speaks. God is the one in whom “we live and move and have our being”, creator and lord of life, the beginning and the end. God is not in the world as an ancient god was in the city’s temple. The world is in God, as well as by God, for God and with God. That is part of Christian confession

²³ Willmer and White, *Entry Point*, 23ff.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 123, 126.

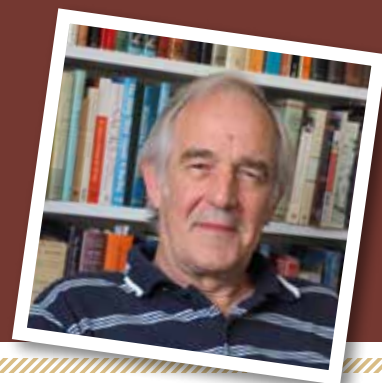
²⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 133–45.

of faith. Consequently, a contextual theology may not leave theology to the systematic theologians and concentrate its attention on human beings and their situation in society. Such contextual theology then easily slides into being the study of religion, or into political and social analysis and action: all valuable and necessary activities, but quite easily done with a methodological or practical atheism.

The truth is that to think and live with God as the ultimate context of the world and our lives is testing, because it is not at all obvious (it calls for hard, imaginative thought), and it is not at all easy to live in the world as it is. Good contextual theology has “the Lord always before me”, not as a background pious feeling, but as what is to be thought, articulated and practised. *EP* is an attempt at that sort of contextual theology.

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CHILD THEOLOGY AND ITS THEOLOGICAL METHOD, PAST AND FUTURE

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CHILD THEOLOGY AND ITS THEOLOGICAL METHOD, PAST AND FUTURE

Since its emergence as a nascent field of enquiry in the early twenty-first century, child theology (CT) has largely been pursued by offering theological reflections on the basis of Matthew 18:1–14 (especially vv 1–5).¹

The most significant work to emerge from the Child Theology Movement (CTM) to date, Haddon Willmer and Keith White's excellent 2013 publication *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18*,² offers an extended consideration of the scriptural episode in which Jesus placed a child amid a theological argument about the nature of the kingdom of God.³ While Willmer and White acknowledge that others have connected theology and children in many and various ways, their own endeavours are framed by the question "What difference does it make to theology if the child is placed in the midst?"⁴ while at the same time continuing to reflect materially on the Matthew 18 text itself. I propose that this approach to CT has regarded Matthew 18 passage not only as *materially informative* for child theology, but also *methodologically formative* for the movement to this point in its history. This methodological grounding in Matthew 18 has set, or at least sought to set, CT apart from other ways of relating theology and children.⁵ For example, while theologies of children tend to focus on understanding children themselves,⁶ CT pursued on the precedent of Jesus placing a child in the midst of theological discussion can produce, Willmer and

White argue, "Theology which, even when it does not mention children, talks of God in a changed way because the child has somehow influenced it."⁷ Matthew 18 has thus remained foundational in material and methodological terms to child theology's particular theological enterprise. Whether continuing to focus reflection or attention on a single passage – albeit it a rich and suggestive one – is sufficient to sustain CT into the future is a question underlying this article. Teasing apart a broader-ranging CT methodology, such that theological reflection can be extended beyond the bounds of Matthew 18, may prove key to the future of CT.

In view of the central role that Matthew 18 has played for the CTM to date, this article asks:⁸ are there new methodological bases from which CT might be pursued while still exploring how the child might inform our understanding of God and all things in relation to God,⁹ not just our conversations about children? A corollary of such questions is the lingering issue of the relationship between CT and theologies of children (ToC): should the two continue to be regarded as distinct (if at times overlapping) fields, moving forward, and if so how is this relationship to be parsed such that CT doesn't dissolve into ToC? Are there other constructive ways of relating the child to theology (C + T)? To help address such questions, the discussion below will begin by describing the methodological juncture at which CT presently appears to be on the road from its past to its future, before noting some potential ways forward for the field. Finally, the article will offer a brief description of a method applied in my own research, which may be one example of how a CT method might be applied to other bodies of theological material beyond Matthew 18 itself.¹⁰

¹ Keith J. White and Haddon Willmer, *An Introduction to Child Theology* (London: Child Theology Movement, 2006), 5–6.

² Haddon Willmer and Keith J. White, *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18* (London: WTL Publications, 2013).

³ Matt. 18:1–9.

⁴ Willmer and White, *Entry Point*, 14. Here, Willmer and White are speaking somewhat metaphorically; that is, they do not suggest placing an actual child physically into spaces where theological discourse takes place, but rather bringing the child into view when undertaking theological reflection.

⁵ Marcia J. Bunge, "What child theology is and is not," in *Toddling to the Kingdom: Child Theology at Work in the Church*, ed. John Collier (London: The Child Theology Movement, 2009), 32–34.

⁶ See, as examples, Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2005); Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2005).

⁷ Willmer and White, *Entry Point*, 14.

⁸ A version of this paper, entitled "Whither Child Theology? Some observations and questions on method," was originally presented at the Child Theology Futures consultation in Melbourne, Australia, 10 November 2016.

⁹ I take this simple but helpful definition of theology from John Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological?," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3 (May 2015), 17.

¹⁰ D. J. Konz, "The Child in Relation to God: With Reference to the Theology of Karl Barth" (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 2017).

CHILD THEOLOGY'S METHODOLOGICAL JOURNEY

The term CT is first known to have been used at and after a conference on children and holistic mission, in Penang, Malaysia, in 2001.¹¹ Although the original context of the concept was broad, encompassing reflexive practice in the diverse and often challenging arena of global mission and ministry with children, as well as those working in more academic environments, the term came to refer to a particular “process” of relating the child and theology together,¹² which centred around the key text of Matthew 18:1ff.¹³ Central to this process was taking Jesus’ act of placing a child amid the disciples to challenge their misunderstanding of the kingdom of God, as a basis for reflection. The key proponents of this approach, Haddon Willmer and Keith White, have long acknowledged that drawing on Matthew 18 in this manner was merely “one way of doing child theology”,¹⁴ but the approach became methodologically dominant for at least two reasons: firstly, the key energy in the nascent field was provided by White and Willmer; secondly, the Matthean text brought with it not only what I suggest here is a *method* for doing child theology, but also significant *material themes* on which to explore in a number of fruitful ways. As expounded in *Entry Point*, such themes include kingdom of God, humility, reception, temptation, discipleship, Jesus as a doer of theology with his disciples, and so forth.¹⁵ I would argue that this combination of method and substantive material proposals has offered a rich vein of helpful reflection, accordingly.

While others may yet discover more treasures by drilling deeper down this particular scriptural mineshaft, it may be that what has been a great strength to date may prove a limitation moving forward. Willmer, for one, has indicated that he feels that this particular trajectory of thought has extended about as far as he, at least, can take it.¹⁶ CT appears, therefore, to stand at a critical material and

methodological point in its history. At this juncture, several possibilities seem available to CT:

- 1 proponents continue to reflect on Matthew 18 (and parallels), looking for new insights, and developing further those already proposed;
- 2 proponents try to generalise the Matthew 18 method by treating the pericope, and more specifically the “child placed by Jesus in the midst”, as a wider hermeneutic, applying the idea to broader biblical or theological discourse. In this regard, the child might be conceived as informing our consideration of
 - other scriptural passages or biblical themes
 - various theological loci; indeed, the CTM has attempted this in a number of its global consultations.¹⁷

One of the various risks of this second option – to adopt the “child placed by Jesus” as a general hermeneutical principle – is the creation of a canon within a canon, which, unless it can be otherwise defended, may represent a tenuous prioritisation of one passage over other parts of Scripture. A third option is, of course:

- 3 to abandon any distinctive approach or methodology on the part of CT, and allow the term “child theology” to become an umbrella term for everything that materially and/or methodologically brings child + theology (C + T) together. To a large degree this option is happening in practice already,¹⁸ in part because the ambiguity of the term CT has mitigated against a lucid and cogent consensus on what CT *is*. Among the risks attending this option are the following:
 - that CT dissolves into ToC, and subsequently that a concern for how the child informs our theology of God and all

¹¹ Keith J. White and Haddon Willmer, “Preface,” in *An Introduction to Child Theology* (London: The Child Theology Movement, 2006), 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ Collier, ed., *Toddling to the Kingdom*.

¹⁴ Haddon Willmer, *Experimenting Together: One Way of Doing Child Theology* (London: The Child Theology Movement, 2007).

¹⁵ See, particularly, Willmer and White, *Entry Point*, for the exploration of these themes.

¹⁶ In papers presented and discussions at the Child Theology Futures consultations in High Leigh, England, and Melbourne, Australia in July and November 2016.

¹⁷ See, for example the following CT consultation reports: John Collier (ed.), *Cape Town Consultation on Child Theology* (London: The Child Theology Movement, 2004), available at http://www.childtheology.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Cape_Town_Report_full.pdf (accessed 31 January 2019); John Collier (ed.), *Australasian Consultation on Child Theology: A New Look at Creation* (London: The Child Theology Movement, 2008).

¹⁸ For example, see the 35 different definitions of child theology, and the editorial comment, in John Collier (ed.), *Third Africa Consultation on Child Theology* (London: The Child Theology Movement, 2014), 78–79, available at <https://www.moortownbaptistchurch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CT/Addis%20202013%20Report%20full.pdf> (accessed 31 January 2019).

things in relation to God is reduced into theological discussion around children, or even into mere activism for children;¹⁹

- to paraphrase Stephen Neill on mission, “If everything is child theology, nothing is child theology.”²⁰ The danger here is that something valuable might be lost or at least diluted, like precious perfume diffused into the ocean.

A further option, which is somewhat obvious at this point, may nevertheless be needed to maintain a viable future for CT: that is, that those interested in the unique contribution child theology can make to theology should continue to explore new methods, or starting points, for doing CT. This means finding new and yet rigorous ways of holding child + theology together.

Posed as a question, this proposal might be framed as:

What are new methodological possibilities for CT as an endeavour that is recognisably distinct from other lines of enquiry (such as ToC), which allow the child to provide valuable and constructive insights in relation to God and all things that would not otherwise arise in theological discourse?

ASSOCIATED QUESTIONS

Finding new methodological approaches to the task of CT raises, in my mind, at least two associated questions:

- is there a core, or “nub”, of child theology, consonant with but not necessarily identical to the approach, process or methodology derived from Matthew 18, that distinguishes CT from other theological enterprises concerned with children?
- how might new forms of CT remain related to that core even while moving along different methodological pathways?

I do not intend to spend much time in this article on the first question, although I do think it important for the future of CT that such questions of definition and diversity continue to be asked. One way of answering the question might be to reiterate the idea that CT is distinct from theologies of childhood in that CT *orders its theological objects differently to*

ToC. Whereas theologies of children and childhood may well tend to place the child at the “centre” of its theological enquiries, asking, primarily, what can be said theologically concerning the child, CT by contrast i) fundamentally seeks to say something about *God*; and then ii) secondarily and derivatively seeks to say something about all other things as related to God, informed by the presence of the child.

Here, CT and ToC may necessarily intersect, for, as Karl Barth argued in *The Humanity of God*, if God was in Jesus Christ, and Christ was fully human, you cannot say something of God without saying something also of humanity (and vice versa).²¹ Properly and specifically, the humanity that is spoken of when speaking of God is the humanity of Jesus Christ. But the humanity of Jesus Christ is determinative for all humanity; that is, Jesus Christ is human *for us*, as the True Human, and so others of us participate in *his* humanity,²² and accordingly, when we speak of God in Jesus Christ, though Jesus is also distinct from us,²³ we speak of other human beings (including, of course, children).

Willmer and White provide an example of this in their work *Entry Point*. This book is not a theology of the child, but it nevertheless offers some highly astute theological observations about children and childhood.²⁴ However, it achieves these insights precisely because it does not prematurely centre itself around the child, as its key theological object, but rather because it begins with wanting to say something of God and God’s kingdom, and in light of what is seen in this domain, is then able to say something about the child that is a *sign* of God’s kingdom, as well as other things beyond the child itself.

A “CHILD-ATTENTIVE” METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL

As noted above, extending the field of CT in the future may require further methodological developments or proposals. What I offer below is an outline of one such proposal, applied in my own doctoral research, in which I came to the theology of Karl Barth with child + (Barth’s) theology in view. I describe it here with the hope that it might provoke other, perhaps better, methodological ideas, as well as further thought, comment and critique.

¹⁹ Cf. Willmer and White, *Entry Point*, 36–38.

²⁰ Cf. “If everything is mission, nothing is mission,” Stephen Neill, *Creative Tension* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1959), 81.

²¹ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. John Newton Thomas and Thomas Wieser (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1960), 11, 25ff.

²² Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/2, The Doctrine of Creation: Part 2*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Harold Knight et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 132ff.

²³ *Ibid.*, 47–54.

²⁴ See Willmer and White, *Entry Point*, 24–30, and elsewhere in the book.

In the research I pursue what I refer to as a “child-attentive” reading of the theology of Karl Barth.²⁵ As I applied it, a child-attentive approach to Barth’s theology meant bearing the child in mind as a silent interlocutor as I engaged Barth’s corpus.²⁶ Paying attention to the child alerted me to what resources Barth might offer to theological understandings of children, but also how such a child-attentive reading might critique the richness and adequacy of Barth’s, and my own, understanding of God in Jesus Christ. In more concrete terms, this method meant:

- an extensive examination of Barth’s theology for what he had to say directly about children;²⁷
- reading Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* in particular with the child in mind, drawing inferences for theological understandings of the child even where Barth is not speaking directly of children. Or in other words, the approach meant considering the extent to which Barth’s wider theology adequately and richly accounts for or accommodates the child;
- being alert to those facets of Barth’s theology, or theology more broadly, that may not be seen as *clearly without* paying attention to the child. To pose this aspect as a question, the methodology asks: what fresh insights into God, God’s creatures and God’s work in the economy are discovered in Barth’s theology by approaching his writing with the child in mind?

The latter aspect of the approach is potentially that which came closest to CT *per se*, while the former elements were more likely something akin to ToC; in this sense my project was probably a blend of both, or maybe something else entirely. However, the child-attentive approach led me to discover the following:

- looking through Barth’s corpus, including his unpublished and untranslated materials, with the child in mind, led me to discover and expound a series of previously untranslated sermons on Matthew 18 in which Barth considers the child as a “parable” of entering the kingdom of God.²⁸ These sermons, along with an implicit revisitation of similar ideas late in his career,²⁹ have considerable resonances with the CTM’s work almost a century later. Reading these sermons with the child in mind also threw new light on how Barth appears to have understood parables to function, at least early in his academic career (about the time of the publication of *Der Romberbrief*.) Examining Barth’s work in a child-attentive manner thus led me to look closely at this material in a way it appears others have not, at least not in the same manner of detail. Expounding Barth’s own material on Matthew 18 is also probably where I come closest, materially, to CT as it has been pursued to date.
- reading Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* in a child-attentive manner enabled me to offer a doctrinally extensive and generally coherent treatment of the child, which I believe extends theological understandings of children in relation to God in a more systematic manner than has otherwise been attempted.
- reading Barth’s work with the child in mind also showed up gaps and weaknesses in Barth’s theology, particularly in his doctrines of revelation, faith and knowledge of God. As our concern here is largely methodology, I will not detail those here. However, the enterprise also brought a new perspective on some of Barth’s strengths: for example, the Christological objectivism with which Barth conceives the doctrines of election, creation

²⁵ Particularly, Barth’s magnum opus, *Church Dogmatics*: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–1977).

²⁶ I prefer “child-attentive” to some of the methodological adjectives used in biblical studies (including “childist”, “child-centred and child centric” readings of Scripture) because the term doesn’t centre the child in the same way, and in doing so risk displacing God as the primary object of theology.

²⁷ Something of this same approach was taken in Marcia J. Bunge’s edited volume, *The Child in Christian Thought*. In particular, in relation to Barth, see William Werpehowski’s helpful essay, “Reading Karl Barth on Children,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 386–405. My approach went further by considering inferences from Barth’s theology even where the child was not in view.

²⁸ Karl Barth, “12. Oktober: Matthäus 18,1–4,” in *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe: Predigten 1919*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, vol. GA I.39 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2003), 351–58; Karl Barth, “19. Oktober: Matthäus 18,5–9,” in *Ibid.*, 359–67; Karl Barth, “10. Juli: Matthäus 18,3,” in *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe: Predigten 1921*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, vol. GA I.44 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2007), 147–52. The first two of these bear some resemblance to the sermon “Der Neue Anfang,” published in the name of Barth’s close friend and co-author, Eduard Thurneysen: Eduard Thurneysen, *Die Kraft der Geringen: Drei Predigten* (Theologische Existenz heute, 1934). English translation: “The new beginning,” in Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *God’s Search for Man: Sermons*, trans. George W. Richards et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1935). Manuscripts in the Karl Barth-Archiv, however, suggest Barth was the likely the first to propose the idea of the child as “parable”.

²⁹ Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV, 4: Lecture Fragments*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981).

(especially his theological anthropology) and reconciliation mean that the child, too, can be regarded as included objectively (and to an extent subjectively, through the subjectivity of Jesus Christ) in the election, humanity and reconciliation of Jesus Christ, regardless of the child's own cognitive development or subjective capacities. While, in my research, I related these aspects of Barth's theology to the child, it might be argued that a child-attentive reading has "tested" Barth's theological ideas from a new angle, finding some wanting for reasons not seen as clearly before, but others helpful, rich and inclusive in their scope and Christological emphases.³⁰

CHILD-ATTENTIVE METHODOLOGY IN (SLIGHTLY MORE) DETAIL

The brief description of my "child-attentive" reading given above may give the impression that I was working with an abstract and universal "child". In practice, however, my "child-attentive theological reading" of Barth's theology meant continually asking, "How well does this part of Barth's theology *work* for children?" Specifically, the children I kept in mind while reading Barth were my own two daughters, Bethany (now 11 years old), who lives with a form of cerebral palsy and a significant cognitive impairment, and also my younger daughter, Emelyn (now seven years old, but who was a young toddler when I commenced the research). Having these two children in mind would cause me to ask questions such as, "Does Barth's theological anthropology adequately and richly account for the diversity of human life? Can it be inclusive of children like Bethany or Emmy, even if implicitly, in its claims?" Or, alternatively, "Does Barth's doctrine of revelation hold together when considered in relation to a child like Bethany, or an infant like Emmy?" In summary, this methodological approach led me to discover:

- interesting material in Barth's corpus concerning the child;
- a wider series of theological claims that could be

inferred as applying to the child;

- strengths and shortcomings in Barth's theology, bringing new light and perhaps clearer, deeper discussion of aspects of both;
- some confirmations of and potential correctives to Barth's theology, so that our talk of, with and to God may correspond more closely to who God is.

POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

Several observations can be made about this "child-attentive" method and its possibilities and limitations for CT. Firstly, the extent to which this approach is legitimately CT is open to further discussion. Secondly, while the approach did enable something properly theological to be said – that is, something about God and all things in relation to God – it is not clear how much of this might have been achieved by another good theological method, not necessarily by applying *child* theological method.³¹ My suspicion is, however, that another methodological starting point may not alone have turned up precisely the same material, observations or conclusions.

In terms of wider possibilities, something akin to the approach I applied to Barth's theology could potentially be applied to the theology of others, if the method is deemed to have merit. Interesting things might be brought to light in the theologies of other historical or contemporary figures with a substantial body of dogmatic or constructive theological material.³²

Some of the limitations of the approach I took, however, are:

- it may foster eisegetical readings of others' theology, and the holding of theologians to account for something they themselves did not set out to achieve (i.e. a detailed consideration of the child);
- the approach seems more suited for expounding the work of others than as a method for truly constructive CT *per se*. Perhaps more constructively, however, the approach might

³⁰ For one example of findings in this area, see D. J. Konz, "Karl Barth's theological anthropology and the re-subjectification of the child," in *Conversion and Transformation: Children and Youth in Mission Contexts*, ed. Valentin Kozhuharov and Johannes J. Knoetze (Wellington, South Africa: Christian Literature Fund, 2017), 136–50.

³¹ See, again, Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological?," 17–28. Cf. John Webster, "Theological Theology," in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 11–32. For Webster, theological theology gives account of its primary object – God – first and foremost, and derivatively all other things in relation to God; it does so according to its unique cognitive ground, which is God's own knowledge communicated to regenerate human beings in the church, for the purpose of proper knowledge, contemplation and practical life before God.

³² Haddon Willmer's reflections on *Arthur's Call* by the eminent historical theologian Frances Young might constitute something like this. Frances Young, *Arthur's Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability* (London: SPCK, 2014). Reading Frances's excellent personal reflections on her journey of faith and darkness with her severely cognitively impaired son Arthur with CT in mind arguably enabled Haddon to see the work as a piece of child theology, with truths to be learned about God, theodicy, vocation, personhood and more.

be applied to various doctrines rather than the dogmatists themselves;

in this approach the boundaries between CT and ToC may remain blurred. More consideration of the interplay between these two ways of holding child + theology together, so that CT is not dissolved into ToC, may be needed. If there is a fruitful dance between child + theology to be explored, as Keith White has suggested,³³ perhaps there is also a dance between CT + ToC; I saw something of this dance, albeit it with likely missteps, in my own doctoral project.

CONCLUSION

Whither child theology? This particular article has merely sketched, through a glass darkly, some contours of the methodological juncture at which CT appears to sit. Moving an endeavour that is still very much in its infancy forward does not necessarily mean leaving the “childhood” of CT behind; rather, to borrow from Karl Rahner, proponents will do well to carry that childhood forward into the future.³⁴ Hence reflecting on Matthew 18, and the learnings and lessons that have come from it, might remain fruitfully alive as part of recent heritage of child theology. However, new approaches may be needed. This paper has outlined one such approach: the child-attentive methodology applied in my own research. Others interested in pursuing CT may also propose new ways for child + theology to dance together, such that neither child nor theology is dominated by the other. The answer to the question of the future of CT may thus depend, to some extent, on our willingness to explore the dance not only at the material level, but also by following methodological intuitions into the future, watching with wonder as to what this young endeavour called CT might grow.³⁵

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³³ White characterised the relation between child and theology as a “dance” on day 1 of the Child Theology Futures consultation in Melbourne, 8–10 November 2016.

³⁴ Karl Rahner, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” in *Theological Investigations, VIII*, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), 33–50.

³⁵ Cf. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, corrected ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962); Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, reissue (London: The University Of Chicago Press, 2009).



RESONANCES BETWEEN ARTHUR'S CALL AND ENTRY POINT

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Haddon Willmer

RESONANCES BETWEEN ARTHUR'S CALL AND ENTRY POINT¹

I read the first book Frances Young wrote about her life with Arthur (*Face to Face*, 1985) long before child theology (CT) was invented, and I was deeply moved and instructed by it.

By the time *Arthur's Call* appeared in 2014, 10 years' work on *Entry Point* had filled my mind with child theology. I was by then equipped to see CT when it was coming at me in disguise. I value the resonance I pick up between *Arthur's Call* and *Entry Point*. It is enriching, stimulating and encouraging. Resonance does not imply close similarity, and certainly not identity or perfect agreement. Resonance opens up new thinking rather than thickens opinion into ideology.

Entry Point is intentionally an essay "towards child theology". Frances Young had no engagement with child theology, as it had grown up from 2001 and as it came to be presented in *Entry Point* and the Child Theology Movement (CTM) generally. Her book is about "a journey of faith in the face of severe learning difficulty". Yet I could not read it without seeing that, through telling how she has lived as a thoughtful Christian theologian with her son Arthur, significant aspects of CT are expressed without that label. Her work helps CT because it deploys the learning, sensitivity and vision of a major theological scholar. It unintentionally brings to the CTM something it has always desired and found too little: the engagement of good academic theology.

More than that, it does not speak in terms of the generic "child", which always runs the risk of being abstract, but rather in narrative and reflective ways of Arthur, one living person in significant relationships. It can therefore be read, if one has the eyes and desire, as an essay of lived child theology. All that CT can say, when it is faced with this book, is that it finds itself rooted and growing *in life*. It is not voiced as a theory, but comes out through the story. Unless theology lives in that way, unless its thinking is salt in the sea of action, it is dead and deadly.

Arthur is Frances's first child, born in 1967. He was profoundly disabled from birth, cannot talk or do

anything for himself. Frances and her husband, Bob, cared for Arthur themselves until he was 45, and his parents were in their seventies. Since then, he has been in nearby residential care.

Here I find the first resonance with CT. Jesus said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me."² In *Entry Point*, chapter six explores the meaning of reception. Arthur is a massive example of reception. Receiving a person cannot be time-limited. All babies need to be received if they are to survive and thrive: some may go on needing the kind of reception babies get when they are much older; Arthur will never get beyond it. A parent is a person who becomes committed to a life of receiving particular others for as long as it is needed. What the receiver does will change over time. Reception needs to be age-appropriate, but into old age it is necessary to life. Reception often becomes reciprocal and mutual, between parents and older children. With Arthur, that change to interpersonal reciprocity was not possible.

Reception exposes us to depths of challenge and vulnerability. Here we find a second resonance with CT as presented in *Entry Point*.

Frances writes:

Loving my baby, I thought I'd accepted him. But at a deeper level acceptance was hampered by the fact that I simply couldn't understand what had happened. It wasn't just Arthur. He focused my perception of the much bigger problem. If this world was created by the loving purposes of God, how could this sort of thing happen at all? If God intended people to grow to maturity in faith and love, how about those incapable of doing so?

It was one thing to accept Arthur; it was another to come to terms with the great iceberg of suffering and tragedy he represented. This seemed to resist all attempts at justification. The problem of believing in a good God in the face of the tragedy and evil of the world was posed in a sharper way than before.

Frances, in consequence, spent several years in the wilderness, as she calls it. Through it all she cared faithfully for Arthur. So she can say,

The tragedy was not so much Arthur as my sense of abandonment, my inability to accept the existence and love of God at those deeper levels where it makes a real difference to one's life.... my experience

¹ Frances M. Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990); Frances Young, *Arthur's Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability* (London: SPCK, 2014); Haddon Willmer and Keith J. White, *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18* (London: WTL Publications, 2013).

² Matt. 18:5 and Mark 9:37 (ESV).

was of an internal blank where God should've been. I had no hope for the future. Despair was lodged deep down inside...³

It took years before she began to climb out of her black hole with the help of friends and theological experiences of various kinds. *Face to Face* was written at the time when the light was only just beginning to shine for her. It is not surprising that it is subtitled *A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering*.

Her story thus began with desolation and the problem of theodicy. That topic too is important for *Entry Point*, but it appears in the final chapter. That is partly because the book is shaped by the text of Matthew 18, and the tragedy of evil appears in vv

6–10. We concentrated on v 10:

“Do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you their angels always behold the face of my Father in heaven.” We are confronted with the despising of little ones, which is not just the abuse of children, or the scorn of superior people for the underclasses. Human beings, we suggest, are despised through their vulnerability to the impersonal world we exist in, by its indifference to the value and fate of persons. The breadth and depth of despising is symbolised in actuality by death, which operates unfairly, wastefully, universally.

Under the pressure of this despising, we look for hope and salvation. If God is, it should not be like this. Since God is, why is it not different?

The text says, we should not despise, or give way to despising, because the representatives of the despised ones always see the face of the Father. God does not despise: God is for them. That is offered as comfort, but the question nags at us: what good is it that, while we are treated like rubbish on earth, our angels see the face of the Father? We need action now, not a referral higher up the ladder of irresponsibility, which is often all that the despised get from earthly rule.

Here we are confronted by more than the intellectual weakness of theodicy. We are confronted by the problem of the distance and inaction of God and by the challenge of letting God deal with it in his own way. It is not surprising that some people are impatient with God and choose to do without God. It is painful to live with God, to wait for God.

What alternative is there? Frances says, “The only answer, the only thing that makes it possible to believe in God at all, is the cross.”⁴ In the end, Jesus didn't waft away the darkness of the world, all its sin and suffering and hurt and evil, with a magic wand. He entered right into it, took it upon himself, bore it, and in the process turned it into glory, transformed it.

Entry Point points in the same direction.⁵ There is no way forward except through sharing in the sufferings of God at the hands of the world.⁶ I hear a third resonance between the two books. Frances reflects on her “lifetime experience” and says, “It's now possible to describe the fundamental change in my life as a move from struggling with the ‘why?’ questions to grasping that I've had privileged access to the deepest truths of Christianity.”⁷

On its side, CT, as it is developed in *Entry Point*, sees the child placed in the midst of the disciples discussing a theological question, in order to help them to be on the way to enter the Kingdom of God. So the child placed by Jesus and received in the name of Jesus gives access to the deepest truths of Christianity.

“CT... sees the child placed in the midst of the disciples discussing a theological question, in order to help them to be on the way to enter the Kingdom of God. So the child placed by Jesus and received in the name of Jesus gives access to the deepest truths of Christianity.”

In her book, Frances shows how living with Arthur has done that for her. Arthur did more than force her to go through the wilderness and only find rescue from it in the way of the cross which is transformed in glory. He did more than commit her to a lifetime of caring, observing, speaking and acting for him. She did indeed speak for him, as he needed, but she was also listening to him. What was to be heard through listening to Arthur? If there was anything to be heard here, how is it spoken and what is being asked of the

³ Young, *Arthur's Call*, 26–28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵ Willmer and White, *Entry Point*, 198–99.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1956), letters of 16, 18 and 21 July 1944.

⁷ Young, *Arthur's Call*, xvi.

hearer, if he would truly hear? Arthur can say nothing audible or intelligible, yet he is “telling the glory of God” as do the heavens. That telling is without speech or language, yet with a voice to be heard through all the earth.⁸ If Arthur has a message, it presents itself to us in a strange, alien, tongue. It is not heard if it is left alone, in itself. It calls for and depends on interpretation.⁹ Arthur has his interpreter in Frances, and only so has he an understandable word for us. He speaks because he is given voice by another and can do so out of her listening and learning.

An interpreter in this sort of situation does not displace the Strange Speaker. An interpreter is not an expert who distils what is essential in the original raw material to pass on the useful intelligible bits. And even more, he is not one who corrects and improves on the original. It does not get lost in or superseded by the translation. Rather, the original is encountered in its irreplaceable integrity, in its solitary peculiarity. The interpreter serves to place us in the presence of God in the reality of the mysteriousness, not to spare us fear and trembling.¹⁰

One aspect of *Arthur's Call*, simply as a literary achievement, is that it does not use Arthur to write another mother's story, although the mother's living is indispensable to it. The interpreter is not to get in the way of what is there, calling out for interpretation, but to serve it. So long as we keep it in proportion, it is right to read this book looking to learn something about the ministry of the interpreter as well as learning to hear what Arthur, in his own way, is saying. When Jesus placed a child in the midst of the disciples, he pushed them out of the central place of “greatness” they were seeking and rather required them to become apprentice interpreters of a sign that was not obviously intelligible. The child in the Gospel story did not speak for herself – as *Entry Point* says, she is not the model twenty-first-century western child. Rather she is a reminder that we all, as human beings, are always dependent on and vulnerable to interpretation. We are interpreted by parents and educators, experts and exploiters, friends and enemies, sensitive and insensitive, constructive and malicious people. We are located in social and cultural situations (the “powers”) that prescribe interpretations, fit us into stereotypes and make us want to flee into the desert, paying drastic costs simply to be ourselves. And finally, fundamentally, we human beings are created, judged and recreated

by God, whose judgement is more than inquisitorial assessment of good and evil deeds. Rather it is God's decision and action about what and who we are and shall be, a judgement *for us* already declared in Jesus Christ and to be fully revealed at the last.

So the book has the title *Arthur's Call*. It affirms and argues that Arthur has a vocation, which is akin to the one given to Frances as both a Christian minister and a theologian. But he carries out his ministry in his own way. What then does he say that we can hear? What is the “privileged access to the deepest truths of Christianity” that Arthur enables?

“Arthur's vocation” is summed up in the final chapter. Too much is lost in any summary: it needs to be read, in the light of Arthur's story. I will report the headings, but only as a pressing invitation to read and ponder the chapter.

Receive Arthur as a prophetic sign, pointing beyond himself. Each of his five fingers point to “various aspects of human existence and its meaning”:

- Pointing to “truly human values”, away from competent independence, towards mutuality in needing and asking for help;
- pointing the way to the desert for us, because we meet the desert in his being: there we meet God, in truth and solitude; there inner demons can be cast out as they are exposed;
- indicating the presence of Christ and the imaging of God: “there are aspects of the Body of Christ which can only be properly represented if persons with profound disabilities are incorporated into the Church's life”;
- pointing to the Beyond: “a life with sound but no word” reminds us that worship goes beyond words;
- pointing to the mystery of grace: that Arthur receives grace is not only to be believed but can be seen in his participation in church and in life. But how it is received and what it is for him is beyond us to know. The mystery of it is essential truth for all of us: we “can invest too much in what we are conscious of”. “Arthur reminds us that often we may well receive grace without being fully aware of the fact, and there is much more to receive than we can know.”¹¹

⁸ Cf. Ps. 19:3–4 (NRSV).

⁹ I Cor 14:5, 13, 27–29.

¹⁰ I could not have written this paragraph without Dorothee Sölle, *Christ the Representative* (London: SCM Press, 1967) and Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

¹¹ *Arthur's Call*, 142–158.

“More to receive”: here is a final resonance, for Jesus said, there is the Kingdom of God to be entered, beyond all the greatness we can imagine or grasp, but only when we humble ourselves and turn into the way signed by the receiving of a child. “Just to be is to respond to the One who made us, redeems us, loves us. Arthur calls us to that humbling awareness. Thanks be to God.”¹²

Professor Haddon Willmer taught theology at the University of Leeds for over 30 years. After retiring, he supervised doctoral students at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, was a trustee of Pace (Parents Against Child Sexual Exploitation) and of the Child Theology Movement, wrote *Entry Point* with Keith White, and started painting again. He has special interests in politics and forgiveness, and in Barth and Bonhoeffer and other theologians who think from the heart of the gospel to the realities of the world and vice versa. He admires and loves Hilary, who has been a creative social activist in Leeds for decades, and together they have three children and eight grandchildren.



¹² *Ibid.*, 158.



CASE STUDY

TEACHING CHILD RIGHTS

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Ruth Radley

TEACHING CHILD RIGHTS

INTRODUCTION

My experience of teaching child rights is within the context of South Sudan, the newest country in the world, which ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)¹ in January 2015 but had already incorporated the importance of the UNCRC in its comprehensive Child Act of 2008. The country had suffered many years of war as a united nation with what is now the Republic of the Sudan, which finally ended in 2005 with a comprehensive peace agreement. This led to a referendum in which the people of the south overwhelmingly voted to secede and create a new country. Sadly, in 2013 war broke out again in the newly established nation, once again putting vulnerable children and others in great danger.

CONTEXT OF THE CASE STUDY

Due to the wars, we heard time and time again how the rich fabric of society had been stripped away and many of the positive cultural aspects of bringing up children lost. In the area in which we worked Christianity was the most prominent faith, with many in villages attending church each week and ascribing to the faith. Having seen how child rights were being taught by many non-governmental organisations, we realised that faith and rights could not be separated, they had to be explored together, while also keeping the culture central. It was concerning that so often child rights seemed to be introduced as something really quite separate. Communities seemed to be, more often than not, “informed of” the rights, rather than having them shared in a way that encourages discussion, wrestling and exploration of the cultural setting, noting how each right could fit within that setting, which things may be causing harm and may need to be modified, and what needed to be celebrated and honoured.

Further concern was that as rights were shared, there was no discussion about the responsibility children themselves held (or adults to ensure that these rights could be upheld), and indeed, one of the concerns of the adults was that children were beginning to expect things and give nothing back. One way of educating about child rights was via the radio – a brilliant way of passing a message to many people, but a medium that allows no guided discussion or wrestling with concepts. It can be heard in different ways by different people – there is no opportunity to rephrase things to help understanding. It also appeared to leave some adults confused about

their authority, and unsure how to respond to a child who is demanding things – even knowing if what is being demanded is actually a right at all.

BEGINNING TO ADDRESS THE BALANCE

Samuel, my South Sudanese co-worker, and I worked together on developing training sessions to address these gaps as we understood them to be. We worked with both adults and children in the communities, helping children in schools to understand their rights and how they link with their responsibilities, as well as sensitising the adults to their roles within this, and how they can ensure that they are upholding the children’s rights while guiding children to understand what their rights are. During this, there were times when the children and adults came together to discuss issues that the children felt were problematic, raising discussions and agreeing action to make improvements. However, due to the constraints of this case study, this will not be discussed further. We were aware that the communities had probably heard about child rights already through the radio, but we were not aware that any previous NGOs had offered trainings in the communities we worked in.

We commenced our work in the communities with Bible studies on the four categories of rights, asking the question “What does the Bible lead us to believe God’s heart is for children in the area of protection, participation, survival and development?”, looking at the stories of Moses, Hagar and Ishmael, and the John 6 version of the feeding of the 5,000, among others. These proved to be important foundations for the communities, who expressed appreciation that they were also learning more from the Bible in general as they studied together. Once the Bible studies had all been completed a three-day training was held, exploring many of the different rights. Participants were asked what their thoughts were about child rights. We were blessed with honest answers – one pastor said that he did not like them. He said that before these were shared over the radio, children were well behaved, but since they had heard about their rights, they were becoming disobedient, dressing inappropriately and not listening to their elders. Others in the group agreed with him. The training included exploring which categories some of the individual rights fitted into (to help people understand what the rights actually are), the difference between a need (right) and a want, the purpose of child rights (to help a child survive, develop and reach their full potential) and responsibilities linked to rights.

At the end of the three days, participants evaluated the course. The same pastor who had been so against child

¹ See <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights> (accessed 18 January 2019).

rights said, “We are encouraged with this explanation of rights; we want our children to survive, develop and reach their full potential. If this is how you understand them, why have you not been to train us earlier?”

MOVING FORWARD

We were also invited to write and teach a module to student teachers in the third year of their studies. These students were likely to be the head teachers of schools once they graduated with their diplomas, so our opportunity was an amazing one: to be able to influence those in schools that, through Parent Teacher Associations for example, would also have the ability to disseminate a healthier view of rights and responsibilities.

For the last five years (bar 2016 as security was too bad to reach the college) a two-week module has been taught in a deeper way to the communities, with students of many different tribes, often with different cultures within those groups, discussing, disagreeing with each other, agreeing things that need change, recognising things that need to be celebrated and getting passionate about the children in their villages, schools and land. Each year, without fail, these students have discussed – and argued about – the same issue: clothes. The students, in small groups, make lists of everything they think children need and want to survive, develop and reach their full potential – then they put them into the corresponding piles for each group, before sharing with the larger group, and agreeing corporately which pile each should go in. Without fail, each year, “clothes” has initially gone into the need pile, before one brave student plucks up the courage to challenge this. The first student to do so was the one who made the greatest impact on me.

Tanabor is from the Republic of the Sudan, and indeed is from a community who would consider some nakedness normal. He gained my attention and then said, “Clothes are a want, not a need. I studied to P2 [primary year two] totally as naked as the day I was born and it did me no harm.” Drawing a deep breath, I inwardly told myself repeatedly not to let my own culture get in the way of this discussion before saying slowly, “Well, in my culture they

are a need. In the winter you would die very quickly with no clothes; for us, they are a need.”

“Ahhhh, for us it is hot – for us, clothes are a want.” A discussion continued after this with students giving their different opinions, but every year group has finally concluded that clothes may be a need OR a want, depending on the cultural situation and assuming that nakedness does not lead to abuse in that community.

CONCLUSION

Child rights, ratified within UN countries, aim to safeguard children, allowing them to survive, develop and reach their full potential. Allowing discussion and time to grapple, and even disagree with, different concepts gives people the chance to challenge their own beliefs and opinions, giving room for change. Local culture must also always be considered; the right may be the same the world over, but the way it is worked out may look a little different depending on the cultural setting. While working with the children in a community, helping them to advocate for their rights, adults must also be given time to discuss, disagree, wrestle and express opinions, exploring how child rights might fit in with their culture. Misunderstandings between the children and adults in any one community would hopefully then be avoided.

Ruth Radley is a Church Mission Society mission partner. She lived in South Sudan for eight years, during which time she worked with Across, a Christian NGO where she worked with a great South Sudanese team, training churches and communities on children’s holistic needs. Though currently living in the UK, she travels each year to work with Emmanuel Christian College, facilitating a module for student teachers on child rights, responsibilities, protection and participation within a biblical framework. She is currently seconded to Birmingham Children’s Hospital as an honorary chaplain.





CASE STUDY

THE DOORWAY TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS THE FORM OF A CHILD

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Stuart Christine

THE DOORWAY TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS THE FORM OF A CHILD¹

The Valley of Virtues: The favela had inherited a name that parodied its present reality. In a matter of months, the once fresh green landscape bordering the meandering stream had spawned a rash of ill-constructed, insanitary lean-tos that had choked the life from the running water and daily threatened to do the same to its people.

Two older ladies, members of the small Baptist church at the head of the gully, were rapping on a section of wooden advertising hoarding that hung across the only opening to the otherwise barrier-like façade. Sounds of a TV reality show, an unseen dog barking, a distant argument, but no response from within the shack. No one to ask if there might be preschool-aged children inside who might enjoy the PEPE preschool that the church was going to open.² Looking at one another, they touched the flaking paint with their knuckles in a last attempt. A narrow gap appeared, less than half a face in shadow, and words that barely made it beyond the penumbra: "... What do you want?"

Attempting to breathe life into the moment... "We're from the church... you know, the one at the head of the gully." The half-face looked as if she didn't know. "We wondered if you had any little ones who might enjoy coming along to the pre-school... it's free and they'll love it!"

A pause, the gap widened, the shadow retreated, and an explanation emerged. "I didn't come to the door because when you knocked, I was kneeling on the floor with my two children, with our heads in the gas oven. I was just going to turn on the gas... My husband left me six months ago, there is no food in the house and as far as I know, there is no one who cares if we live or die". And then three words: "God sent you."

In chapter seven of his Gospel, Luke narrates that Jesus had impossibly reached out across the frontiers of

marginality, expressed by the coffin of a boy already in the grip of death and by a destitute widow's tears of desolation, and in response, the cry had gone up, "God has come to help his people" (7:16). In that darkest moment of suffering, threatened by the death of an only son, the community perceived God's intervention – they are not abandoned; God has not given up on them: he has sent them a saviour.³

Had those contemporary disciples of Jesus witnessed anything less dramatic that morning in that Brazilian "valley of the shadow of death", the Valley of Virtues? They had emulated Jesus' enactment of the missionary purposes of the one who sent him when they went down into the Valley of Virtues to receive children "in his name". "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me" (Luke 9:48). Was not that young mother's recognition that those two local disciples had been sent by God an authentic re-echoing of the faith perception of the community of Nain? Was it not a prophetic reaffirmation that the God who sent Jesus continues to intervene, making himself present to be experienced and recognised in those who act to receive "this child" in Jesus' name?

Teresinha loved going to PEPE. In her words, it was "all I ever dreamed of!" One day when talking to her teacher, Jane, Teresinha mentioned an older sister. "Which school does she go to?" Jane asked. An embarrassed silence followed. "Oh, Anna doesn't go to school..."

Jane went to visit. Mum was evasive... "Anna? ... Yes... School? ... No, she's not really able to go and the school doesn't want her..." "Can I say hello?" Anna was curled up on a pallet bed in a corner of the tiny dark room. It took some persuading; Mum was ashamed of the way her daughter could hardly talk and walked all hunched over... Some said it was a curse, a spirit – and perhaps she believed it.

"Let her come along with Teresinha." Jane encouraged and cajoled and finally Mum nodded her OK. It was slow, but like the opening of a flower bud, it was amazing. The staring and muttering of neighbours gradually gave way to little hand waves and smiles as Anna began to blossom, responding to the acceptance and encouragement of the PEPE. Enjoying the simple

¹ This case study is based on research completed as part of Stuart B. Christine, "Receiving the Child' in the Favelas of São Paulo and the Gospel of Luke: A Missiological Dialogue" (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2018).

² PEPE: *Programa de Educação Pré-Escolar* is a missional pre-school educational programme run by local churches in deprived communities. It was founded by Georgie Christine in 1992, in a favela in São Paulo, Brazil. PEPE currently operates across Brazil, throughout Latin America and in many African countries. See www.pepe-network.org. For a review of the development of the missional and educational philosophy of the PEPE programme, see Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona and Paul Stockley, eds., *Understanding God's Heart for Children: Toward a Biblical Framework* (Colorado Springs/London: Authentic Media, 2007), 36–42.

³ Luke sets Jesus' interventions on behalf of "only" children and their families (7:11–17; 8:40–56 and 9:37–45) at the heart of three cycles of teaching and activity that present his mission in Judea and exemplify his messianic "manifesto" commitment (4:18–19) to bring transformation to the poor, the lowly and the little ones.

activities, her hands and shoulders began to uncurve, and small words forced their way out like long-shuttered windows letting light into a dark prison world. Anna was reborn as a loved daughter and accepted member of the community, and everyone witnessed the transformation “in the name of Jesus”.

After the first eight years of seeing the missional impact of “receiving the child” through the PEPE programme in the favelas of São Paulo, I began to express this experience in the phrase: “In deprived communities, the doorway to the kingdom of God has the form of a child.” However, given the inherent dependency of children, there are “doorkeepers” in the lives of children with whom any church wanting to emulate the welcoming receiving love and acceptance of Jesus must engage. The weeping widow (Luke 7:13), Jairus (8:41) and the distraught father (9:38) positively accepted Jesus’ intervention, but wariness or suspicion, prejudice or occasionally outright antagonism can, not-infrequently, challenge the best-intentioned desire to help. In Philippi, Paul, together with Luke and the missionary group, encountered just such opposition from the owners of a demon-dominated slave-girl (Acts 16:16–18).⁴ As Luke recalls and records the incident and its outcomes (16:19–40), there are many relevant lessons for those who want to emulate the example of Jesus by “receiving” or “welcoming” the socially or spiritually deprived child.

I also find it significant that it is this child-focused incident that catalyses the missional events that follow – an incident in which the oppressive doorkeepers of the child’s spiritual and social condition are confronted in the name of Jesus, resulting in challenges and opportunities that set the tone and dynamic for the ongoing missional journey.

In her excellent reflection upon many years of working with children in deprived settings, Pamela Couture argues for the efficacy of missional approaches focusing on children.⁵ She encourages churches to recognise their potential to positively influence all levels of the social ecosystem of a child’s development: the *micro* (the child’s personal relationship contexts), the *meso* (the local community context), the *exo* (the wider legislative context) and the *macro* (the cultural/societal values context).⁶

In deprived communities, the doorway to the kingdom of God has the form of a child. The children whose names I never learnt in the Valley of Virtue, along with Teresinha and her sister Anna, suffered in the shadow of a world view and social dynamic deeply contrary to the messianic vision presented by Jesus in Luke’s Gospel. Following the example, and empowered by the promise, of Jesus who drew “the little child” to his side, a doorway to the kingdom was perceived in each small life. And as each was lovingly received, welcomed and affirmed in the name of Jesus, that doorway had opened.

Dr Stuart Christine is a missional leader and researcher focusing on deprived urban communities internationally. Together with his wife, Georgie, he has served 30 years with BMS World Mission in Brazil and has recently completed a PhD at the University of Manchester entitled “*Receiving the Child*” in the *Favelas of São Paulo and the Gospel of Luke: A Missiological Dialogue*. Having previously taught New Testament and Missions at Spurgeon’s College, London, he is currently an associate at the Northern Baptist College and serves on the board of the UK-based Child Theology Movement.



⁴ “Owners”: literally, “lords”. The girl suffers spiritual, physical, social and economic exploitation.

⁵ Pamela Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 46ff.

⁶ She suggests missional actions ranging from a valuing of direct child–family–school contact programmes such as “congregationally sponsored pre-schools, Sunday schools and youth programs [that] are part of the microsystem of young children”, which also strengthen the local mesosystem in which the congregation’s children live, through to advocacy on national issues that indirectly affect children’s well-being, such as those currently experienced by churches in the form of increasingly regulatory child safeguarding legislation. Importantly, she also recognises the role played by the church locally and nationally “in creating symbol and belief systems... that contribute to the theological and civil religious macrosystem that regards or disregards children”. *Ibid.*, 46.



CASE STUDY

MUDDY CHURCH

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Lucie Hutson

MUDDY CHURCH

Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola give us the image of God “playing in the dirt, making mud pies”,¹ the Creator’s hands shaping and forming the greatest cathedral that could be imagined – stones building mountainsides, windows through the canopy of leaves, echoes and whispers as nature moved, galloped, slithered and grew.

The creation narrative in Genesis offers us an insight into the fullness of creation but the whole of the Bible continues with God on and in the earth. We can connect to the wilderness even if we have never been to a desert, we can see the starlit sky as we read Abraham’s promise (Gen. 15:4), we understand the peace of the still waters and know our need for them in the valley (Ps. 23). But it is not only the Old Testament; Jesus used mustard seeds, fish, spitting in the mud and drawing in the dirt, and we comprehend the enormity of Paul’s calling through the shipwrecks (Acts 27). These constant connectors to creation are not only because of locations but because, going back to the Genesis narrative, we came from the earth, created, breathed into and will return to it. The reminder that we come from the dust is not to make us feel like dirt but a reflection of how wonderful and complex we are and that within us is the immensity we find in nature’s glory.

Hectic lifestyles threaten our connection to creation; adults unable to explore outdoors fail to offer the outdoor opportunity of time and space to children. Research by Unilever found a third of children spend less than 30 minutes outside each day;² this is in comparison with the United Nations guidelines, which state that prisoners require at least one hour of suitable exercise in the open air daily.³ We are removing opportunities from this generation of the rights we give to prisoners. The son of a friend was a good student, well behaved and with no problems in the classroom, but his walk home was manic – jumping, shouting, running, screaming. It was as though he had spent all day conforming and being good and needed this space to be his real self – like releasing the fizz from a drinks bottle! He isn’t the only one; outdoor activity is linked to improved mental health, healthy living and learning ability, and for many children it allows them

a release from the pressures of environments where they feel the need to conform.

A side effect of schools adopting healthy lifestyle agendas has been the increased opportunities for outdoor play, activity and learning that offers space, air and exploration. Pupils and teachers reported outdoor learning as leaving them happier and healthier – 72 per cent of teachers identified it having a positive impact on their job satisfaction.⁴ This is not just limited to school learning, though; David Hay and Rebecca Nye talk about spiritual development as becoming “more deeply aware both of ourselves and of our intimate relationship with everything that is not ourselves”,⁵ which includes the earth, the world and other people. Formation of our faith is strengthened by people, but also the earth and the world – which often isn’t recognised in formal church settings as something we can all offer.

Outside space looks different to each of us – buildings, bricks, stone, trees, windows, daylight or night, it isn’t particularly about what the outside looks like but the opportunity to connect with it. Moving into a small town in Nottinghamshire, there seemed to me little of value – fast food, charity shops and empty buildings filled the centre. Around the edges soulless new-build estates were developing that have no parks, shops or centres but are built close to major road routes – encouraging commuting, not community. Believing in Asset-Based Community Development,⁶ where opportunities and strengths are looked for within an area, we realised there was a treasure, our own Eden.

At the edge of town was an area known as “the quarries”, where generations of children have played among the woodland. Over recent years the natural habitat with streams and lakes has been developed into a small nature reserve with a visitor centre and a café. It was a popular place for dog walkers and people seeking nature away from the somewhat depressing town centre and estates. This was where Muddy Church began – as a place that offered access to God’s creation, where people of any faith or none could gather together: all ages, wheelchairs, pushchairs, sticks, legs – two and four.

The name “Muddy Church” offered a sense of formal and informal together, expressing openness and belonging. It was important to address that using the name “church” wasn’t just notional, but we were considering this being a place where relationships with God, one another and

¹ Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus: A Theography* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 41.

² Edelman, *Dirt is Good – Free the Kids* (2016), quoted in <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/prisoners-spend-time-outside-todays-children-claims-persil-campaign/1388344>. See also <https://www.edelman.co.uk/work/dirt-is-good/> (accessed 16 May 2018).

³ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/treatmentofprisoners.aspx> (accessed 18 January 2019).

⁴ Natural Connection Development Project, 2016. “Outdoor Learning Project – Press Release”, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/englands-largest-outdoor-learning-project-reveals-children-more-motivated-to-learn-when-outside> (accessed 5 October 2018).

⁵ David Hay with Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, revised ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006), 21.

⁶ See <https://www.scdc.org.uk/what/assets-scotland> for an explanation of this approach (accessed 17 January 2019).

the world were formed. The idea was of a church that was open and equal – children could lead, no separate teaching times, accessible routes, free activities, talk or be silent, questions with no one suggesting they were the only person with the right answer. For some the lack of structure takes getting used to; when someone suggested we gather together to start, that I should pray and then lead the way, I pointed to the children already on the pathway running ahead and picking up flowers.

Muddy encapsulates the idea this is messy – we meet no matter what the weather; there is no sanitising that we cannot possibly get wet or dirty, as these things sometimes remind us we are alive: the cold wind that chills our cheeks, or being reminded by a child of the pure joy of jumping in a muddy puddle. This is a place of informal adventuring, which may take you off the pathway in search of a stick or spying a bird but focuses on the element of being with. Equally, in the wondering together it can get muddy – different opinions are free to be shared, heard and mused over as we walk and share.

Muddy Church does not come with a programme or guidebook but is a place in which each church is encouraged to look to their community and to find spaces and opportunities outside of a building for people to connect. Around the country there are various expressions with other names, such as Mossy Church and Forest Church, that have found their expression. Some are more formal with liturgy, some take place in adopted orchards, others in the church garden. Our Muddy Church conveniently ends in a space to feast at the little community café where we can support local business and warm up with a coffee and cake. One church met and made bread on sticks and toasted marshmallows in a fire, another had an apple festival and another utilised the smallholding of a member of their congregation, which included feeding sheep and llamas. The way Eugene H. Peterson expressed John 1:14 as the Word moving “into the neighbourhood”⁷ resonates with the values of Muddy Church: incarnational dwelling in the midst of our family, friends and neighbours in ways that connect with our community.

Diana Davis and Autumn Wall pointed out that when thinking of mission we see the importance of relationship, and that the only thing “not good” in creation was “for man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18).⁸ Zechariah shares an image of the elderly sitting, “cane in hand”, where the “streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there” (Zech. 8:4–5). Muddy Church offers generational engagement – the joy of the enthusiastic four-year-old chatting away to the 80-year-old grandfather, who points out the apples growing on the tree; together they wander and talk, explore and enjoy. The Muddy Church “congregation” is from a variety of different backgrounds – single parents, grieving families, lonely third agers, home schoolers, eco-warriors and mums with a giant pack of wipes and antibacterial gel. The opportunity to walk beside and share, to offer a God who accompanies us and walks with us in the garden, brings a freedom that has not been restricted by walls or what people will think.

I turned from talking to a friend to see the pink rain suit of my two-year-old following the older children up an almost sheer mudbank. The children found roots to help pull them up to a point where they could slide down the steep mud slope to the bottom; some struggled, shouted, others giggled. Images of my little one’s pigtails rolling through that mud, smashing into stones and colliding with trees flashed before me, then I saw her face – unafraid and accomplished. Delight filled her little frame that she was here, and in that she was learning risk and resilience – because life has challenges, joys and sorrows and here she saw people to follow to achieve for herself, to try, to struggle and to succeed. Muddy Church is about people discovering through that connection with one another something about themselves and of God, to come into a space in creation where they can journey with others in a place that all feel accepted and equal and leave transformed. C. S. Lewis said, “we need to be reminded more than instructed,”⁹ and Muddy Church offers time and space to remember again our place in the world, the joy of adventure and the delight in journeying – even through the mud.

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⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002).

⁸ Diana Davis and Autumn Wall, *Across the Street and Around the World* (Birmingham, Alabama: New Hope Publishers, 2016).

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 82.



CASE STUDY

PLACING A SICK CHILD IN OUR MIDST

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Paul Nash

PLACING A SICK CHILD IN OUR MIDST

Several years ago, I was given the opportunity to develop a series of four children's books. The aim was to engage and support Christian children at Key Stage 1 while they visited hospital, stayed in hospital, learned they had a life limiting illness and became a bereaved sibling. We found a publisher who was interested, Christian Education,¹ who had a wonderful editor, Victoria Beech, who was passionate about the project.

We worked on the books with members of the Paediatric Chaplaincy Network and a talented illustrator. The editor and illustrator spent many hours shadowing the chaplaincy teams, spending time with patients and their families to get an insight into the world, views and feelings of children in hospital and bereavement. Small groups worked on each book, with the full spectrum of enjoyment, insight, frustration and writer's and design block. We struggled with how we could communicate with young children aged three to seven about the potential worries and concerns they might have over their illness or bereavement. We consulted with children and other experts in the field as we sought to take equally seriously their age, developmental issues, medical conditions, grief, loss and faith. We worked hard to get the spread of gender, condition, treatments and time of year so as to appeal to as wide a spread of children as possible. We struggled and debated with what aspects of the Christian faith were essential to communicate with and to the children in these difficult, sad situations.

As the project moved along, we found we had achieved all we wanted and more in each book. Each book picked up an aspect of our Christian faith that engaged and encouraged the children: Jesus is always with us in hospital, there is a place prepared for us in heaven, Jesus still loves Jo when he is angry and lonely after his sister has died, for example. The publishers then realised we needed a series title for the books. If we thought we had done all the hard work, we now received a shock – we could not find anything we liked. It was not that we as individuals had suggestions that others disagreed with; we just had nothing. Time was running out as

we approached our printing deadline for our launch date. Where is God and God's word when children are sick, dying and bereaved? We prayed, threw silly ideas around, discussed objectives and values, but nothing stuck.

No methodology was working. What was the theological truth that would reflect our series? What is the Christian message to sick children if "theology is thinking and talking (*logos*) about, from, towards and with God (*theos*)"?² Helped by the story in Matthew 18, I began to realise the significance of putting a child in the middle of a theological argument. This concept has been developed in to a book, *Entry Point*,³ which has continued to inspire my thinking as a chaplain at a children's hospital.

It was suggested that all of us should meet together, so the publishers, writer, advisors and illustrator all met in a small room in the Emergency Department of Birmingham Children's Hospital to try and resolve the issue. I thought and prayed about how we might find and discover a title that would explain the Christian message that covered all the different and varied conditions, expectations and voices of these children. I had been reflecting upon child theology (CT) and its values and objectives and had a growing confidence this would help us move forward. I arranged for the tables to be put in a square with a space in the middle. As we met and prayed, I suggested we imagined a poorly, dying, bereaved child in the middle of our space. We asked ourselves two questions:

- what would, might the child want to say to us? and
- what would we want to say to the child about God and our faith that would always be true for these children?

I cannot say that initially the voice of the child was heard clearly, but we became more confident that by placing children from our hospital in our presence, in the middle of us, that we would hear the voice of the child. As we visualised this, we sought to imagine what these children would want to say to us, what we can always know, want to know, feel and trust in this? What would God always do for all these children in all these circumstances? The very ill, dying, petrified child; those whose development had been affected by their condition; the suddenly and long-term ill; those with certain and unknown diagnoses.

¹ See <https://shop.christianeducation.org.uk/find/held+in+hope/1> for details of the booklets discussed. They are also available as a free video at <http://www.paediatric-chaplaincy-network.org/media/online-videos/> narrated by Bear Grylls.

² Haddon Willmer, cited in John Collier (ed.), *Cape Town Consultation on Child Theology* (London: The Child Theology Movement, 2004), 7, available at http://www.childtheology.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Cape_Town_Report_full.pdf.

³ Haddon Willmer and Keith J. White, *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18* (London: WTL Publications, 2013).

We were not able to bring a real child into the room due to pragmatic health and safety and safeguarding issues, but as the CT Movement Cape Town consultation says in these circumstances, “we brought the children with us in our hearts and minds and made them present in our shared imagination”.⁴ As we threw around potential universal words of comfort, support for all children, promises of salvation, peace and of God never leaving us, we reflected on biblical truths that we had used in the individual books.

What was it the children would say they needed from Jesus, from God’s people, while they were vulnerable, susceptible to discouragement, fear, loneliness, stigma? Where are the words and actions of love, peace, hope, compassion, comfort, assurance, truth, liberation, blessing?

We heard words and phrases like carried, supported, never alone, always loved. None of these seemed the right voice with the truest message for all the contexts of all four books, from visiting hospital to losing your sister, brother or friend. We became more confident that our methodology was honouring to the children and God, but finding the common voice was still a little unclear.

The words we heard the clearest from both perspectives were that we will always be “Held in Hope”. This is the title we chose to use for the series. This voice, desire, need of the child, promise of Jesus, resonated around the room.

This seemed to capture what is always true. Healing in the most obvious physical sense may not always happen. Yet God always holds us. Feeling better, the pain going away is certainly not the experience or something that can be promised to a child with certain diseases or conditions. Yet we can hope for spiritual, physical and mental relief now and in the future. I can look any poorly child in the eye, heart and spirit and say they are always held tightly in and with hope. Children may be offered comfort and love, but may not always feel it, yet we assure them that God loves them, cares that they are in pain and wants to be with them in it. God holds them close, feels their pain and does not abandon them. This is why I frequently read the “Footprints” poem to many adults; it was then that God carried us. Some of these children will not get better,

some will die, but surely there is a word from God to sustain us in the midst of all kinds of suffering? A child in the midst helps us with pain and suffering in the midst.

Reading and rereading the international reports from the CT Movement reminded me that all the contexts were ones where children were most obviously suffering by way of oppression, being ignored, exploited, misunderstood, abused, stigmatised, marginalised, victimised, abandoned, were stricken with poverty, lacked opportunity and were being prejudiced against. Perhaps being held in hope is a theological insight, considering Jesus and a child in the midst that is universally relevant. Perhaps this is the test, this is what children in these circumstances would say – the same as the poorly children in our hospital: we are always “Held in Hope”. We need this and further robust practical theology to ensure that we are liberators of children’s spirits, not oppressors.

CT was and continues to be helpful and directive in the thinking and practice of pastoral care with sick and differently abled children. As the chaplaincy and spiritual care lead for the children’s hospital in a city where the majority of children and young people are from a non-white minority ethnic background (over 60 per cent

in 2011), it has become essential for us to engage with illness in children theologically and culturally. Too often children have picked up implicit and explicit messages that illness and death are their fault, that they have done something wrong and it is a punishment.

When we think about God’s promises for children in trouble while engaging with parents, the idea of a protective personal angel for their child gets mentioned. I have thought for a long time now there has not been enough exegesis, writing and reflection on Matthew 18:10: “their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven”. Are the angels as well as God and God’s people holding the children in hope?

I do not think we would have come up with such a profound theological, pastoral, spiritual and psychological truth if we had not invited and placed a child and Jesus dialoguing with us in our midst. In continuous reflection what else might I hear from these children in our midst? Perhaps it is most

“What was it the children would say they needed from Jesus, from God’s people, while they were vulnerable, susceptible to discouragement, fear, loneliness, stigma?”

4 Collier, ed., *Cape Town Consultation*, 3.

appropriate that I conclude with an encounter with a child in hospital. We have developed a discipline of Spiritual Play to facilitate the children and young people engaging in their spiritual needs, resources, pain, suffering and distress. These activities are very participative and help with assessment. One of the activities uses Russian dolls for the children to name, decorate, etc. One child in our hospital was offered and accepted this activity. She pulled them all apart and put them back together again. She then held two of them up and asked the chaplain, “So which one of them is God like – the small one that lives inside of me or the big one that surrounds me?” The chaplain, understandably, was stumped at the time; on reflection, we would want to ask her what does she think and gently suggest both.

The Revd Paul Nash has worked at Birmingham Children’s Hospital since 2002 and since 2018 has been the chaplaincy and spiritual care team leader at Birmingham Women’s and Children’s Hospital. He manages a multifaith team with specialisms in spiritual care with children, bereavement care and staff support. Paul is the co-founder of the Paediatric Chaplaincy Network for Great Britain and Ireland (<http://www.paediatric-chaplaincy-network.org>) and launched the Centre for Paediatric Spiritual Care (<https://bwc.nhs.uk/centre-for-paediatric-spiritual-care>), a hub for research, resources and study. He is a board member of the UK Board for Healthcare Chaplaincy and a lecturer for the Midlands Institute for Children, Youth and Mission.





ANVIL
BOOK REVIEWS

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1. BIBLICAL STUDIES

Edmon L. Gallagher & John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017)

As its title suggests, this book focuses on canon lists from early Christianity. Thus it sets out and analyses how a range of people in positions of influence or authority understood which books were or were not (or should or should not be) included in the Christian Bible. One chapter discusses Jewish lists; others consider lists from Greek, Latin and Syriac Christian sources. All lists are presented in their original language, with a facing English translation, and followed by an illuminating critical discussion, which makes the volume a very useful reference tool.

But the book offers much more than that. One appendix discusses a selection of Greek, Syriac, Latin and Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible, so readers are able to consider a range of examples of what scribes actually included in manuscripts of the Bible, and how those contents do or do not match what other authors said about what books that the Bible should contain. Another appendix discusses a range of disputed texts (“Antilegomena”), which did or did not become recognised as part of the Christian Bible. Among the former are Ecclesiastes, Esther and Hebrews. Among the latter are the *Letter of Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Apocalypse of Peter* and other writings now found in collections such as the “Apostolic Fathers” or “Early Christian Apocrypha”.

The volume also includes a very useful introduction, which provides a good, accessible and scholarly introduction to the study of the history of the formation of the Christian Bible, and covers more ground than simply the lists that are the focus of the book.

Their primary objective, note the authors, was “to seek understanding into the history of the Bible by returning to the ancient sources that comment on it”. They have certainly succeeded, and have produced a book that will be a useful resource for readers who wish to engage academically with how the Christian Bible came to take the forms in which it is found today. The book is not cheap, but is much less expensive than might be expected of an academic book of this size that includes original languages as well as English translations. It is therefore encouraging that a major university press must think that there is still a large market for quality works of this kind.

Andrew Gregory, University College, Oxford

2. DOCTRINE AND PHILOSOPHY

Asle Eikrem, *God as Sacrificial Love: A Systematic Exploration of a Controversial Notion* (London: T&T Clark, 2018)

God as sacrificial love, a common but controversial theme in contemporary theology, is explored in some depth by Eikrem in this monograph. Chapter one introduces the theme and chapters two and three give a detailed historical overview of Christian theologies of sacrifice and the critiques of these theologies. His overview takes us from the patristic period with theologians such as Origen and Gregory Nazianus, through the medieval period, taking in the very different theologies of Anselm and Peter Abelard, through the Reformers, particularly Luther, onto the Modern period from Schleiermacher onwards. Alongside his exposition of various Christian theologies of sacrifice, Eikrem considers various feminist postmodern and liberationist theologians and philosophers who challenge atonement theology. The amount of ground covered in this section is impressive.

In chapters four to six Eikrem examines the issues that lie at the heart of the disputes about sacrificial theology: violence and bloodshed and death, which he approaches from various angles. He argues that we must look at Jesus’ sacrifice from the perspective of the whole of his life and not just his death. He cites with approval those thinkers who define sacrifice as self-limitation rather than self-destruction or self-victimisation, and those who understand sacrifice as the gift of self for others. In the final chapters Eikrem explores the idea of worship, particularly the Eucharist, as sacrifice. He rejects this and instead argues that communion is not sacrificial but is rather an expression of the self-giving love that characterises the relations within the Trinity. He further argues that sacrifice has a place in inter-human relationships as we engage as finite beings in moral struggle in a sinful world.

God as Sacrificial Love is a demanding book, requiring a commitment of time and concentration from the reader. It is also a very rewarding book – I learned a great deal from it – but at times was so taken with the details of the history of the theology of sacrifice that I lost sight of the larger questions that Eikrem was exploring. Eikrem has given me cause to look again at some of the theologians whose work has most influenced me, notably Barth and Girard. More than that, his work has made me ask exactly what I mean if and when I speak of the death of Jesus as sacrificial, or speak of worship as a “sacrifice of praise”.

For those prepared to engage at a deep level with the theology of sacrifice and who are prepared to have cherished theories of atonement put under the spotlight, this book will repay the time and effort demanded.

Tim Gill, Sheffield

Stephen Spencer, ed., *Theology Reforming Society: Revisiting Anglican Social Theology* (London: SCM, 2017)

In recent years, many Anglican churches – especially evangelical ones – have been developing their so-called “social mission”, through food banks, night shelters, debt-advice centres and other initiatives. Most of these projects begin from local pastoral concerns, but frequently lead those involved to ask bigger questions, like: “Why are we needing to do this in a rich country like ours?” and “How can we change our society so we don’t need to keep doing this?” Some traditions of Anglican Christianity are far more used to asking these kinds of questions than others. As this essay collection narrates, it is Liberal and Catholic Anglicans who have generated a tradition of theological reflection on the nature of society and how to change it. But as Malcolm Brown notes, this tradition “is largely a closed book to much of the church” – especially Evangelicals (p. 130). This book seeks, in effect, to open that book, to enable this past tradition to enrich a new generation of Anglican social mission.

The book is comprised of four longer essays, which were the Henry Scott Holland Lectures given at Mirfield in early 2017, set among shorter papers read in response. In early chapters, Jeremy Morris, Alison Milbank, Diane Ryan and Paul Avis each explore facets of the “Christian Socialist” tradition, including F. D. Maurice, the housing reformer, Octavia Hill, and the late-Victorian and Edwardian theologians B. F. Westcott, Henry Scott Holland and Charles Gore. Emerging from these early essays is the consistent expectation that a better society reflecting God’s Kingdom involves “mediating institutions” – pre-eminently the church – but also the family, local associations and the nation, not necessarily the political state.

The pivotal chapter of the book is on William Temple, the wartime archbishop and high-profile advocate for a “welfare state”. Stephen Spencer argues that a high view of the church and God’s purposes in history remained central to Temple’s social principles, defending Temple from John Milbank’s charge of trying “to hand over the incarnational mission of the Church to the state” (p. 91). For Temple, God’s intention for human freedom would be realised, not through a bureaucratic state, but through a “community of communities... a rich ecology of immediate groupings” that Christians live and serve within (p. 97).

The remaining essays, by Susan Lucas, Malcolm Brown, Matthew Bullimore and Peter Manley Scott, each reflect on Anglican Social Theology from contemporary perspectives. Evangelical readers will likely have had some preconceptions about “Christian Socialism” and its assumed association with the state dissolved by this point, but Bullimore’s essay on whether Anglican Social Theology is “public theology” or “ecclesial theology” is especially recommended for their reflection. This is because Evangelicals tend to avoid both these kinds of theology – preferring to believe social change comes more through individual transformation than public policy, and not liking to over-idealise the institutional church. Nevertheless, Anglican Evangelicals will want ultimately to ensure that their social mission has a theological rationale in *who* they are – the body of Christ. As Bullimore shows, Anglican Social Theology can help with this. Furthermore, Anglican Evangelicals noticing that their social mission is expanding to fill voids left by a withdrawing state will want to develop a more nuanced and engaged understanding of the state, as both “a temporal, provisional phenomenon under judgement” and “a present good” more capable of achieving fairness than most alternatives (p. 160). Anglican Social Theology can help here too. For this reason, this book has much to offer readers across the church – whether they are “revisiting” this tradition of social theology or meeting it for the first time.

Philip Lockley, Oxford

3. ETHICS AND PASTORAL MINISTRY

Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved* (London: SPCK, 2018)

It’s difficult to talk about death, it’s difficult to talk about dying, but into this arena Kate Bowler strides confidently. Her book is an honest, funny, and heartbreaking account of her own experience of stage-four cancer. At the age of 35, and having recently become a mother, she learns of her diagnosis. Her book *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved* charts her path, her struggle and her faith.

This short and accessible read has quickly become a bestseller, with endorsement from the likes of Bill Gates and others. The book’s wide appeal is in part due to her excellent writing, grounded in her experience. It is raw and beautiful. But the book is much more than a gritty and heartwarming tale. Professor Bowler is one of the leading theologians writing about the influence of prosperity gospel theology in the church in America. She writes of her struggle in coming to accept her illness and discusses the unhelpfulness of faith stories

that overpromise and offer a cure for tragedy. The book is accessible to those with no formal theological education, but equally is not simplistic in its theological engagement. It could be read by those supporting others professionally, or those facing the loss of a loved one, or their own illness and death.

With an uncomfortable honesty, she writes about the loneliness of dying but also the gift of death; that the inevitability of death can open us to a brightness and beauty lost on us in normal life. Charted in her very personal experience, Bowler critiques modern Pentecostal and charismatic theology in their denial of death and draws on Aquinas and Augustine to discuss the oddness of this beauty she is finding in facing death. While it is clear that her writing is underpinned by theological rigour, it is always her personal journey that is shared. In this way, the book feels both heavy and light, easy to read but cuts deeply into the soul.

In sharing her journey towards death, and without covering over the heartbreaking reality, Bowler opens up the possibility that in the tragedy of death we can be drawn further into God, and further into love. Written firmly within the discipline of practical theology, Bowler moves from experience to reflect on God's presence with us in birth, life and death. In birth and death, we are inextricably wrapped up together in God, for we come from God and to God we shall return. There is so much in between that distracts, so much that pulls us from our connectedness to God and stretches the bonds of love. But, somehow love persists, somehow God is present.

The book makes no attempt to explain away the horror of tragedy, or minimise the pain of grief, but holds onto a love that persists, love that braves the horror of bodies broken and left undone. Bowler suggests that this is the work of God; that somehow the world can become more beautiful when life is at its most bleak. This is God: God with us, present in our dying, present in our living.

Beth Keith, Sheffield

Alister McGrath, *The Landscape of Faith: An explorer's guide to the Christian Creeds* (London: SPCK, 2018)

This book is vintage McGrath: clear, accessible, engaging, informed, authoritative and applied. It provides an introduction to the two principal Christian creeds, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, which McGrath treats as maps to the landscape of faith, to which he is a sympathetic guide. Its clear structure makes it easy for readers to dip in and out, and it is suitable for private reading or as a basis for group discussion, and could be used for adult catechesis.

The book is in four parts, with a brief conclusion. Parts two to four focus on what McGrath describes as the three articles of the creed – one on God the Father, one on Jesus Christ, Lord and Saviour, and one on the Holy Spirit and the Christian life.

Throughout these 14 chapters McGrath offers a broad exposition of the central tenets of Christian faith, beginning with the question of what it means to believe or to have faith in God, and noting that it is about much more than intellectual assent to a set of propositional statements. "Yes," he writes, "Christianity is about certain ideas, which we believe, but it is more fundamentally about a God whom we discover to be trustworthy, and invite to become the foundation and lodestar of our lives." Thus, he notes, the creeds begin with an assertion of the need for faith in order to lead a meaningful life: "For the Christian, faith is both trusting that there is a 'big picture' of life, and a decision and commitment to step inside this way of seeing ourselves and our world, and live it out." To have faith in God is a matter of personal commitment, so the creeds sketch the outline of a Christian pattern of life and thought, which McGrath helps fill out in his discussion of what it means to believe in God, in Jesus, and in the Holy Spirit and the life of the church both now and in the future.

Whereas parts two to four focus on the nature and content of Christian belief, part one focuses on the nature of the creeds. Here McGrath argues that they are best approached not as dull catalogues of ideas, but as triggers for the recollection of the rich deposit of Christian faith, summary descriptions that involve further exploration.

He also offers four analogies of how the creeds may be approached. First, as one of several overlapping maps that help Christians to find and understand their way in the world, as they travel through the landscape of faith. Second, as a light, an aid with which to see, and a reminder of our partial vision, which we may seek always to improve. Third, as a lens, through which we may see the world in new ways, and that can help bring things into focus. Fourth, as threads of a tapestry, woven together to reveal a pattern that could not be seen if any one thread were viewed in isolation. Thus, he suggests, the creeds are both resources that guide believers as they develop their own understanding of faith, and also public statements of communal faith, that emerged after much deliberation, and that individuals are not free simply to change.

Andrew Gregory, University College, Oxford

Muthuraj Swamy, *Reconciliation: The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book 2019* (London: SPCK, 2018)

This book was written to be used for either personal or group study during Lent. It contains a series of 40 short Biblical reflections on the theme of reconciliation, subdivided into six main sections, which could form the overarching theme of a six-week long Lent course. Each reflection ends with three or four questions or statements for further reflection. The author, Muthuraj Swamy, is director of the Cambridge Centre for Christianity Worldwide and is currently in the process of editing three volumes for the Lambeth Conference, on the themes of Evangelism and Witness, Reconciliation and Prayer.

The opening section offers a brief overview of the ministry of reconciliation from a Christian perspective. Swamy argues, on the basis of 2 Cor. 5:17–20 and Col. 1:19–22, that there are three components of reconciliation. First, that God is reconciled to us through Jesus Christ. Second, through this we are invited to reconcile with each other. Third, Christians have both a responsibility and a vocation to reconciliation in the world. He further suggests that reconciliation is both a particular, specific act and also a process in life, and defines the process of reconciliation as “building and strengthening relationships with radical openness to the other” (p. 7).

The first main section examines God's reconciliation with us as the foundations of reconciliation. There are five studies. First, relationships and reconciliation as the heart of the Christian life, based on the discussion of the greatest commandment in Matthew 22. Second, God, the creator of relationships, utilising Genesis 1 and 2. The third has no specific text, but reflects on Jesus Christ who reconciles us with God and one another, utilising the themes of the Word becoming flesh, Emmanuel, God becoming slave and Jesus the mediator. Fourth, the Holy Spirit, the reconciler, which again utilises themes, of the Holy Spirit reconciling us with God, helping us cross boundaries in mission and as unity and bond of the Christian community. The fifth, final section examines the church, tackling the church as fellowship, as an inclusive community, the need to be self-critical and the church's ministry of reconciliation, although there are no specific sections on each of these topics. This first main section has the potential to be five weeks of studies in and of itself, and it is a shame they are all dealt with so swiftly.

The second main section takes impediments to reconciliation as its theme. The seven studies in this section do all take a specific passage, and examine the Fall in Genesis 3; prejudice and stereotyping (John 1:45–

51); wealth, greed and conflict (Gen. 13); being silent when we have to speak and act (Luke 14:1–6); rushing to judge (Luke 18:9–14); revenge after reconciliation (David and Shimei, 2 Sam. 16:5–14, 19:18–23; 1 Kings 2:8–9); and when someone says sorry (Jonah 3–4).

The third section turns to risks to the self that are entailed by reconciliation. Here the seven studies take in “let your servant remain a slave” (Gen. 44:18–34); “blot me out of the book that you have written” (Exod. 32); if he owes you anything, charge that to my account (Philem.); the courageous little girl (2 Kings 5); “if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4); a friend who risked himself for his friend (1 Sam. 19–20); and “not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:41–42). I struggled to see how some of these passages are primarily about reconciliation: Moses' willingness to be blotted from the book of life as a consequence of the Israelite's sin (Exod. 32) is more about a leader admitting failure and accepting the punishment that comes with that failure as it is about reconciliation. It is also a bit tenuous to suggest that the servant girl who recommends that Naaman, the husband of her mistress, goes to Elisha to receive healing is engaged in reconciliation, whether between individuals or countries. At least Swamy recognises that Esther 4 is not about “overt reconciliation”, but even his suggestion that there must be reconciliation between the king and the Jews if they are to be saved is not entirely true. The king has the power to save them entirely of his own free will. Finally, Jesus' submission to his Father's will in Gethsemane was necessary for our salvation, but using this text to argue that Christians must be humble in order to engage in reconciliation is not entirely convincing. These are certainly Bible studies about those taking personal risks, but presuming that those risks are necessarily about reconciliation stretches the definition of reconciliation beyond useful parameters.

Section four discusses humility and self-criticism. The seven studies are learning self-criticism from the antagonists (John 8:1–11); Am I God? A study in contrast (Gen. 30:1–2, 50:15–21; 2 Kings 5:5–8); who is my neighbour? (Luke 10:25–37); “she is more in the right than I” (Gen. 38); the king who humbled himself (2 Chron. 33); be a servant (Matt. 20:20–28); and the problem with those who claim they see (John 9). As with section three, these are good studies on humility and self-criticism but whether they are all about reconciliation is a moot point. Taking just one example: who is the reconciliation between in the story of the man born blind in John 9?

Section five explores radical openness to the other. Here the studies are initiating reconciliation in hostile contexts (John 4, 21); a lesson in radical openness (Matt. 20:1–16); Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10); the lost son who distanced himself from his own (Luke 15); Ruth “your people are my people” (Ruth 1); becoming friends: Jesus' way (Luke 9:49–50); and learning to see God from the other side (Luke 4:25–30), that is seeing

God at work among the Gentiles. Again, good studies on radical openness, but whether reconciliation is the focus is not always clear.

Section six focuses on reconciliation as peace with justice. Here the topics are peace with God, justice to fellow humans (Isa. 1:11–17, 58:1–14; Mic. 6:6–8; Amos 5:18–27); peace expects justice (Mark 7:24–30); when justice is not done (2 Sam. 13–14); restoration and reconciliation (Luke 19:1–10); fear, magnanimity and justice (Gen. 32–33); to forgive is to do justice (Matt. 18:23–35); and reconciliation only with God? (Ps. 51; 2 Sam. 12–13). Here the focus is much more clearly on reconciliation and the studies feed more directly into this theme.

I can see how this book could provide useful stimulus for six Lent study group meetings; the six main themes provide plenty of food for discussion. Indeed, there is arguably too much material to cover in a one- to two-hour small group session. I wonder if individual readers will struggle with the shift from reading a single verse to two or more chapters of the Bible in each single study. Finally, there is a sense of Swamy having to find 40 studies on reconciliation and, at times, forcing the theme on the passage rather than exegesis from the text. A worthwhile book for Lent, albeit with that slight reservation.

Tom Wilson, St Philip's Centre, Leicester

4. MISSION

Michael W. Goheen, ed., *Reading the Bible Missionally* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016)

This volume of essays divided into 15 chapters and five main sections deals with the nature of a missional hermeneutic of scripture (up to p. 103) and how, when it is applied, this can shed light on the Old Testament (pp. 107–71), the New Testament (pp. 175–237), Scripture and preaching (pp. 241–81) and Scripture and theological education (pp. 285–329). Nearly a third of the book's content explores a definition, justification and criteria of a missional hermeneutic. The beginnings of this compilation of chapters emerged from a conference, "A Missional Reading of Scripture", hosted by Calvin Theological College. The keynote addresses and ensuing discussions have been edited into this helpful volume. It is not therefore a comprehensive or even a wide-ranging discussion but does reflect the theological persuasions of the 14 male authors, who are mainly from the USA with British contributions from Richard Bauckham, Christopher J. H. Wright and N. T. Wright – three whom I have always found worth reading, along with Michael Goheen.

I found some of the first 100 pages repetitive and wondered whether I would get through the book to

review it but there were always sufficient biblical analysis to understand even if I wished the first section to be more succinct. George R. Hunsberger's four characteristics of a missionary hermeneutic are helpfully laid out: the missional direction of Scripture, a missional purpose, the need to recognise the mission-locatedness of the people and the received tradition in a new context. Mark Glanville offers a fifth one: the prophetic challenge to every society.

I would have liked more on intercultural hermeneutics in that section of the book but that may have to wait for another such conference. Most of the authors have an impressive grasp of breadth and depth of the biblical narrative and they demonstrate in their many different works.

Each of the following four sections have valuable and stimulating contributions to read and the majority are very worthwhile reading as discrete condensed articles on summary of mission in the Old and New Testaments and missional readings of Deuteronomy, Psalm 67 and Psalm 96, James and Colossians.

The implication of a missional reading has a bearing on the public communication of the Bible and how it also should be used in theological education for Christian discipleship and training. The Scriptures are not merely meant to be read and understood but communicated, and proclaimed in the world. The need to retell the foundational story in contextual ways is still vital as is the need to equip God's people to use it to generate new followers. There is perhaps too little recognition though of how mission societies and agencies have been engaged in this very task, although it is acknowledged strongly that there is a real need "to set aside the long-standing division between theology proper and practical theology". Goheen quotes David Bosch when he advocates "a missiological agenda for theology rather than just a theological agenda for mission" and that "Third World theologies are missionary theologies" that could become a force for renewal in the West (p. 305).

Not merely is curriculum development along the lines advocated in the book but there is a reality that there still has to be a spiritual disposition for people to hear God speak through his Scriptures, and I also would add that those who teach need be mission practitioners.

The bibliography is a useful collection, but very few women are referenced or given as examples in the book, which only partially could have compensated for the lack of female authors. There could also have been more reference and examples from the world church. Given these limitations, the book is still very helpful in working out what it means to "Reading the Bible Missionally", but I look forward to a further volume that takes the discussion and practice much further.

Paul Thaxter, CMS

John Kaltner & Younus Y. Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018)

This is a very useful book that provides an overview of the way in which many figures found in the Jewish and Christian Bibles are portrayed in the Qur'an and (where applicable) also in later Islamic sources known as "The Stories of the Prophets". Its introduction includes a brief orientation to the Qur'an and to "The Stories of the Prophets" and the authors note that readers who are familiar with the Bible may find the Qur'an confusing, so they offer factual information to help them understand the structure of the Qur'an. They also advise that non-Muslims do not use the Bible or any other text as a yardstick by which to evaluate the Qur'an, and they include a short list of further reading to help readers to understand the Qur'an on its own terms.

The bulk of the book consists of introductions to characters found in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Scripture. Most vary in length from one page (e.g. Elisha) to six (e.g. Abraham, Joseph [son of Jacob] and Mary). The entry for God is also six pages in length, but the longest entry is for Jesus, at eight pages. Most entries are for named individuals, but there is also an entry for groups (e.g. angels, Christians, Jews, jinn, messengers, prophets and unbelievers). References are given for where each character or group is found in the Qur'an, and there follows a useful discussion of each, which begins with their portrayal in the Qur'an (and, when applicable, in "The Story of the Prophets") before comparing it to Jewish and Christian accounts. Each entry finishes with references for further reading, and with questions for discussion.

The book is a useful tool for non-Muslims wishing to learn more about Islamic scripture and belief, but could also serve as a resource for people engaged in Scriptural Reasoning or in text-based forms of interfaith dialogue. Thus we may note some words from its introduction that may encapsulate what its authors hope that their readers might take away from this book:

The Qur'an relates the stories about these figures in ways that allow them to serve as models for Muslims about how to accept the message of Islam and submit oneself to the will of God. Therefore, rather than viewing the Bible and the Qur'an as competing with one another, the stories about Abraham, Moses, Jesus and others within them should be seen as shared traditions that speak to different communities in diverse ways in order to address each one's unique concerns and contexts (p. 4).

Not all Christian readers may wish to finish there. But it is certainly a good stage to reach in the search for mutual understanding between people of different faiths.

Andrew Gregory, University College, Oxford

Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)

In this book, Lois Lee offers a nuanced account of how secular society sits in relation to religion. Rather than seeing all those without religion as part of one category of secular, she distinguishes between the insubstantial secular, which is a "relative disengagement from religious culture and authority", and the substantial secular, which is "a potentially powerful but dissenting form of engagement with religion" (p. 21). While non-religion as a term often is used more generally for people rejecting or being detached from religion, Lois Lee's use is particular to refer to "a set of social and cultural forms and experiences that are alternative to religion and framed as such" (p. 13). As she helpfully illustrates, non-religion is related to religion in the way that non-violence is related to violence (p. 32). Things are not simply non-religious in the absence of religion, but because of being meaningfully differentiated from religion (in the same way things are only described as non-violent when seeking to differentiate from violent alternatives). It is this sense of non-religion (which she sets in a discussion of studies of secularity) with which the book is concerned, and she develops the concept drawing on ethnographic fieldwork from south-east England.

The book is well written and carefully argued. The first two chapters particularly are helpful in defining the vocabulary used in discussing religion and secularity (including: anti-religion, areligion, indifference, post-religion, irreligion, anti- and non-theism, as well as a discussion of secularity and secularisation) and in exploring how these terms convey ideas of antagonism, indifference, opposition, rejection, absence to/of religion (and, usefully, the vocabulary is summarised in a glossary of 17 distinct terms for phenomena used in relation to religion). Attention to these pages will assist us, when we come across these terms in our reading and conversations, to ask questions about how they are being used, the assumptions undergirding them and the impact on the particular point being made.

In the rest of the book, Lois Lee develops and illustrates her concept of the non-religious, reflecting on the nature of the task of identifying the non-religious – that which is formed in relation to the religious other. While intellectual positions are not neglected, she explores visual, spatial, material and embodied forms of non-religiosity, the existential cultures and social relations

they produce, and the meanings they hold for people, arguing against “the tendency to transpose mind/body dualisms on to secular/religious ones” (p. 103). She discusses the more public forms of New Atheism, but is careful to show the range of non-religiosity and how it constitutes the everyday, and also that because non-religiosity is focused on difference and not simply rejection, non-religious individuals and institutions may “feel different from but positively disposed towards the religion of others” (p. 33).

The book contributes to the vocabulary, theory and methodology of studying and understanding religion and secularity and will be of interest to anyone versed in these sociological debates (with appendices of empirical research interview schedules and demographic information). However, there is value too for non-specialists; for anyone interested in engaging with society around them, it expands how we might think about people’s relation to religion. In particular, in contrast to the more public and polarised debates, the book attunes us to ordinary everyday occurrences of non-religion that feature in a society formed in relation to a religious other.

Fran Porter, The Queen’s Foundation, Birmingham

Philip Lewis & Sadek Hamid, *British Muslims: New Direction in Islamic Thought, Creativity and Activism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018)

This is an engaging read, a joint effort from two academics specialising in the study of lived British Islam, and of particular value to anyone wanting to understand the current situation in the United Kingdom. They state in the preface that their aim in writing is to produce a short and accessible book aimed primarily at professionals such as teachers, social workers, journalists and politicians who work among and with Muslim communities but who are often confronted with confusing and contradictory accounts of what exactly is going on (p. vii). They certainly succeeded in producing a work that is short; it is fairly accessible, although their tendency to list lots of different figures and groups is, at times, a bit daunting; and, as with any book, it primarily presents the views of the authors, some of which others (including this reviewer) would dispute.

One commendable aspect of *British Muslims* is the fact that it gives a lot of time and attention to the place of Muslim women, often the unheard voices and unseen actors within Britain’s diverse Muslim communities. A second strong point is the recognition of diversity within British Islam and a third the fact that they do not

shy away from the challenges and complex issues facing British Muslims today.

There are five main chapters. First, an overview of the British Muslim population, definitely Philip Lewis’s stock-in-trade. It not only gives the main facts and figures but also delves into some of the more complex issues, such as the fact that not all Muslim communities follow the standard three generations trajectory of migration, as there are many areas where, primarily because of marriage practices, every generation includes first generation migrants. Particular strengths of this chapter are the discussion of homelessness and the Muslim prison population, especially the experience of Muslim women in prison. Based heavily on the Muslim Council of Britain’s “British Muslims in numbers” publication, it is a good overview of modern British Islam.

Chapter two examines Islamic seminaries. The subtitle, “between crisis and renewal” aptly captures the subject discussed. The nature of the crisis is spelt out clearly, and there is a solid introduction to the key figures and institutions within Islamic education. They discuss the experience of Islamic seminary students and hold out Cambridge Muslim College as a good example of an Islamic seminary undergoing renewal and offering promise for the future. The third chapter tackles Muslim engagement with democracy and renewal, with another solid introduction to the main figures and key events, and a useful discussion of the role women have played, including in mainstream politics.

I found chapter four the most problematic. The focus is on radicals, extremists and terrorists, and at times it unfortunately falls into being no more than a typical example of the Muslim narrative of victimhood. The chapter begins well, with a robust discussion of the issues, including a clear explanation of *takfiri* (excommunication), Salafist jihad and an explanation of the key figures who have attempted to radicalise British Muslim youth. Their emphasis on British foreign policy as a key driver of grievances among British Muslims is important, but they do not address the issue of why, say, there were no violent Christian responses even though millions of Christians shared many of those same concerns. Moreover, sadly the criticism of the Prevent strategy lacks the academic robustness of the rest of the book. To give one example, the authors uncritically assume that between 2008 and 2011 the Prevent strategy had a budget of £186,710 million (that is £185 billion). In fairness, the mistake is in an article they cite, whose authors were no better at maths. (The actual figure is £186 million. To put this in context, the total counter-terrorism budget for 2017/2018 was around £15 billion). Their criticism of the figures associated with Channel is equally unresearched, and they make no effort to engage with the reality that much Prevent work focuses on the far-right nor with the stories of those who have been successfully diverted from violent

extremist activity. The organisation I work for employs several staff working in Prevent, and this type of ill-informed criticism is all too common within the Muslim community, so in that sense this section is a useful introduction to the reality on the ground. I had hoped that such qualified academics would have been more careful though.

This final chapter is an excellent introduction to “creating Muslim cool”. Focusing initially on music, the discussion also takes in comedy, Muslim television, authors, artists, poets, photographers, fashion, consumerism and “Generation M.” This is arguably the strongest chapter of the book, providing information on the diverse cultural life of British Muslims in a format that is accessible and engaging, and it is the chapter I would most strongly encourage the professionals whom Lewis and Hamid are targeting to read.

Overall, Lewis and Hamid do succeed in their main aim. This is a well-researched, accessible book, providing a comprehensive overview of British Muslims today. There is a danger that those coming completely new to the issues will be overwhelmed by the detail and data, but most readers will have at least a passing familiarity and will find much of value here. Anyone whose work involves engagement with Muslim communities in Britain would benefit from reading this book.

Tom Wilson, St Philip’s Centre, Leicester

Adam J. Silverstein, Guy G. Stroumsa, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

In their introduction, Silverstein and Stroumsa stress that the purpose of comparative study of the Abrahamic religions is not to emphasise commonalities, but to “illuminate our understanding of *each* individual religion by situating it appropriately in its spiritual, social, and historical context(s)” (p. xv). The intention is to ensure that all three sides of the triangle are present, as it were, that each faith is understood in the light of its relationship with the other two. The handbook is divided into six parts. I will give a brief overview of each before making some comments that evaluate the book as a whole.

Part one tackles the concept of Abrahamic religions. Reuven Firestone discusses how Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity and Islam all appropriated and recast Abraham as the ideal figure of their belief system. Gil Anidjar also examines the different Abrahams, but from a philosophical, rather than a textual perspective. Adam Silverstein then makes the case for Abraham as a figure of unity, a common denominator that allows

Judaism, Christianity and Islam to dialogue and compare and contrast with each other. Guy Stroumsa sets out the history of the study of Abraham in the context of nineteenth and twentieth century comparative religion, while Mark Silk discusses usage of the terms “Judaean-Christian” and “Abrahamic” in the same period. Finally, Rémi Brague expands on the problems of terms such as “the three monotheisms” or the “three religions of the book”.

Part two focuses on communities. Richard Bulliet defends his term “Islam-Christian civilization”, arguing the two faiths emerged from the philosophical, institutional and cultural milieu of Hellenism; that they have much in common in their understandings of scripture, salvation, spirituality, seeking conversion, sanctioning violence, the presence of clergy and emphasis on education and mission. David Abulafia suggests the shores of the Mediterranean are the focal point for historical interaction between the three faiths. Uriel Simonsohn examines the legal institutions of Jewish and Christian communities under Islamic rule and John Tolan the place of Jews and Muslims under Christian law. Dorothea Weltecke ends the section with a discussion of the balance between exclusivist and more inclusivist interactions between the three faiths.

Part three focuses on scripture and hermeneutics. Nicolai Sinai explores the historical-critical method as applied to both the Bible and the Quran. Carol Bakhos introduces key figures in the history of Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptural interpretation. David Powers focuses on prophecy, especially the Islamic understanding of Muhammad as the final prophet and the implications for how other prophets are understood. Finally Lutz Greisiger discusses apocalypticism, millenarianism and messianism, finding points of connection and separation across the three faiths.

Part four examines religious thought. Peter Pormann discusses how philosophers and theologians of the Abrahamic faiths engaged with Greco-Roman culture and philosophy. Sidney Griffith explores how the concept of the oneness of God was developed in ninth-century Baghdad among philosophers of all three faiths. Carlos Fraenkel sets out the case that Christian, Muslim and Jewish thinkers of the 11th and 12th centuries argued that the God of Abraham and the God of the philosophers were one and the same. William Carroll discusses how medieval understandings of science engaged with doctrines of creation in the Middle Ages. Moshe Idel explores mysticism in the Abrahamic religions, while Anthony Black focuses on political thought and Yuri Stoyanov discusses dualist.

Part five examines rituals and ethics. Clemens Leonhard and Martin Lüstraeten compare and contrast prayer; discussing posture, texts, communal and solitary prayer and issues of space and time. Moshe Blidstein focuses on purity and defilement and David Freidenreich tackles

dietary laws. Harvey Goldberg examines life-cycle rites of passage both contemporary and historically while Yousef Meri considers the cult of saints and pilgrimage, primarily in medieval Syria. In the penultimate chapter David Nirenberg and Leonardo Capezone discuss the Abrahamic traditions as religions of love, examining love of God, fellow humans and the self, and the love of God for humans. In the final chapter Malise Ruthven explores historical and contemporary examples of fundamentalism in all three faiths.

Part six consists of three epilogues which take a broader view on Abrahamic studies. Peter Ochs provides the Jewish perspective, David Ford the Christian and Tariq Ramadan the Islamic view.

The Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Religions is a valuable resource for any library whose readers wish to engage in serious study of the relationship between the three faiths. Oxford University Press are to be thanked for their decision to release the 2018 paperback edition of the 2015 original hardback as this will make it more affordable and accessible to a wider audience. In the main the essays would be useful to those with some general knowledge of the field, although some do require a degree of specialist knowledge. Part five is probably the most open to the general reader and Richard Bulliet's essay perhaps the most controversial. A useful reference work for libraries and the dedicated (and well financed) individual student of religions.

Tom Wilson, St Philip's Centre, Leicester

writings from a period of 47 years a greater degree of corporate identity. Moving in time from Origen to the 1910 Edinburgh conference provides a sense of continuity and development, but such a lengthy time-frame is likely to be problematic in terms of the interests of Walls' readership; with such a wide-ranging collection of writings individual readers will inevitably find some of them of much greater interest than others.

Focusing specifically on Africa gives the second section a greater sense of unity than elsewhere in the book and, perhaps because he himself once worked in Africa, Walls demonstrates here an ability to empathise with the missioned as well as with the missioning, an important factor in contemporary mission studies.

But for this reviewer the article on "Missions and the English Novel" proved the most stimulating. Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot and Charles Dickens are the more well-known among a number of novelists whose works are examined for evidence of mission references and themes. Here Walls demonstrates (a) how fictional sources can effectively supplement factual ones and often cover areas that have not been officially recorded and (b) how missions and missionaries came to have an increasingly important place in 19th century popular culture, a very different situation to that of the 21st century.

John Darch, Ellesmere

Andrew F. Walls, *Crossing Cultural Frontiers: Studies in the History of World Christianity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2017)

In 1996 Andrew Walls collected a number of his shorter writings in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*. That work has a regular place on many mission history bibliographies. A second volume, *Cross-Cultural Processes in Christian History*, followed in 2002 and after a further 15 years the present volume completes Walls's trilogy.

As a compilation of articles and papers, each one standing alone, this is a book to dip into rather than to read from cover to cover. Not a book for the general reader, but a mine of wisdom and information for those familiar with the field of study. Essentially each chapter stands alone – which is both a strength and weakness. Nevertheless, a degree of continuity is achieved by the book being divided into three sections: the transmission of the Christian faith, Africa in Christian thought and history, and the missionary movement and the West. Grouping them thus gives this collection of disparate

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