

## **The Child in Christian Thought – Introduction – Marcia J. Bunge**

### Claims and Contributions of This Volume

Three general claims and three significant contributions

1. uncovers a range of attitudes and behaviors towards children that indicate that childhood has not always been a marginal theme in Christian theology.
2. reveals varied perspectives among theologians on the nature of children, especially in regard to the child being sinful;
3. several theologians emphasize the role of parents and obligations of church and state.

The study also offers several theological grounds for child advocacy and prompts us to re-evaluate our own convictions and discover obstacles that prevent us from treating children with more care and compassion.

#### **1. Contributions:**

Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote as much or more about children than relationships between men and women. Judith Gundry-Volf addresses the various notions about children found in the Scripture: some speak of children as gifts of God, others as ignorant, capricious, in need of education and strict discipline. In the Gospels children are depicted in radical ways: at a time when they occupied a low position in society, Jesus receives, blesses, touches and heals them. Also, He depicts them as models for adults of entering the reign of God, vehicles of divine revelation. Theologians either incorporate or ignore the biblical messages determine their particular perspectives on children and our obligations to them. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century there was serious reflection on child rearing, education and moral and spiritual formation. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Luther and Calvin wrote catechisms for in home use and encouraged fathers to take responsibility for the moral and spiritual formation of their children. 19<sup>th</sup> century theologians as Horace Bushnell and Friedrich Scheiermacher considered teaching children a crucial aspect of their ministry and theological reflection. This is not generally the case with 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians, their attention to children is minimal. Philip Aries is an important scholar in the history of conceptions of childhood, he showed that “childhood has a history”, “that over time and in different cultures, both ideas about childhood and the experience of being a child had changed”. He argues that prior to the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Europeans treated children with indifference. Come historians (Cristina Traina, Barbara Pitkin, Jane Strohl, Keith Gaber Miller) contest this by showing that notions of childhood did exist in medieval thought.

#### **2. Perspectives on the Nature of Children**

##### **Original Sin and Punishment**

Augustine and Calvin view children as affected by original sin but do not recommend physically punishing them. Augustine claims infants are born sinful yet physically unable to sin, therefore in a state of “non-innocence” and he stands against physically punishing them. Cathrine Brekus states that Edwards preaches about infant damnation and childhood depravity yet he also believes that children have rich spiritual lives and potential for grace, claiming that Christ loves even the poorest, humblest child. At the same time, there are many cases in which original sin supports the harsh or even brutal treatment of children. This is clear in Clarissa Atkinson’s study on the work of then French Jesuits among the Huron Indians in Canada. Missionaries among Indians doubted their full humanity because of differences in dress, habit and language and a sign of the Indians being Christians would be their beginning to physically punish their children. August Hermann Francke, an important German Pietist believed that children are born with a fallen nature and his understanding that their “self-will” must be “broken” lead him to treat

children with respect and kindness and pay attention to the needs of poor children. He showed a concern for orphans and children of the poor and built a complex of charitable and educational institutions.

When set within a rich theological context, original sin can provide a positive, egalitarian framework of thought for responding creatively and effectively to the needs of poor children and seeing them as individuals with gifts and talents that can be cultivated.

### **Reconsidering Original Sin and Baptism**

Aquinas believes that children who die before baptism are sent to limbo and disregards biblical passages that speak of children as models for adults and regards them as incomplete and irrational beings who lack wisdom and virtue.

Menno Simons, 16<sup>th</sup> cent. Anabaptist leader, distinguishes between inherited and actual sinning, believing that until the age of discretion, children remain innocent through the grace of Christ; also, spiritual maturity does not coincide with chronological maturity.

### **Alternative Perspectives on Sin and Children**

Horace Bushnell states that it's not the child's sinful nature, but its culture or family life that could corrupt him.

Dawn de Vries (on Friedrich Schleiermacher) claims that he believed that children are born with as much potential for salvation as for sin.

William Werpehowski (on Karl Barth) claims that although Barth takes human evil seriously, he rejects its hereditary transmission that would rule out a human agent's responsibility for evil.

### **Children as Models of Faith**

Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Rahner regard children as human beings worthy of respect and as models for adults. Rahner asserts that children are fully human from the beginning, and that Jesus uses them as examples because they lack ambition and artificiality, they do not seek honors or fame, they have an attitude of "infinite openness" and "wonder.

### **Contemporary Conceptions of Children**

Some theologians take into account child's sinful nature and speak of the responsibilities of children and accountability. Others speak of them as gifts of God, vehicles of revelation. Some argue that although we live in an apparently child-centered culture, our dominant attitude towards them is indifference and even contempt, as indicated by our treatment of poor children. Others state that we view children not as beings with intrinsic value, but as consumers, commodities or **economic burdens (very true in Romania)**

## **3. Insights into Obligations to Children**

### **Theological Reflections on Parenting**

Chrysostom, Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, Simons, Francke, Schleiermacher, Bushnell emphasize the vocation of parenting, a serious calling, a spiritual discipline. Chrysostom speaks of parents as restoring the image of God, teachers who read their children the Bible, pray with them and are good examples. Jane Strohl describes how Luther rejects the idea that certain occupations are religiously superior or more spiritual (priesthood); instead, he insists that all believers are equal members of the priesthood. He wants parents to help their children become mature confessors of the faith and responsible members of the community. Steven Ozmet: "never has the art of parenting been more highly praised and parental authority more wholeheartedly supported than in Reformation Europe.

Luther strongly emphasizes that faith comes only through God's grace and activity and believed that nurturing faith in children is an urgent task and it comes in part as a result of the diligent work of parents, teachers, adults.

Schleiermacher sees faith as something "caught" rather than "taught". Bushnell in *Christian Nurture*, speaks of family as a "little church" and believes that the primary agent of grace is family, not church. He maintains that "religion never thoroughly penetrates life until it becomes domestic" and has high expectations for parental influence. He also stresses the importance of "small things" and claims that "it requires "less piety...to be a martyr for Christ than it does to...maintain a perfect and guileless integrity in the common transactions of life."

Although child's obedience to parents is clearly a biblical theme that is echoed in the work of most theologians, some of them also cite specific reasons why children should not obey their parents. Calvin: when parents lead their children to violate God's law. Many remind parents not to provoke their children to anger. Many people in churches today believe that programs offered in their congregations provide the primary place for the faith formation of children and leaders have erred in allowing the focus of faith development to shift away from the family and become centered in the congregation. The family has the most potential of any institution for shaping the spiritual and moral lives of children. Best vehicles for transmitting faith: family rituals, family service projects and meaningful conversations with children in the home.

### **Responsibilities of the Church, State and Community**

Not only the parents but also the church and the state are responsible for the moral and spiritual formation of children. The message received at home must be supported by the church and state so that it takes roots in the hearts of the children. Several theologians also recognize that the state, church and schools need to participate in the protection and moral formation of children.

### **Child Advocacy: Central to a Vision of Christian Faith and Life**

Several theologians strongly connect care of and advocacy for children to their vision of Christian life and faith. The calls to love thy neighbor, seek justice, help the poor, serve others, heal the sick are not always applied to the needs of children. Several essays though tie a view of Christian life and service to the care of children. Though John Wesley's is harsh when he talks about discipline, he shows a strong commitment to poor children. Like Francke and other Pietists, Wesley believed that a central part of the Christian life is service to the poor. He provided education for poor students, mixed students with different social and economic backgrounds, helped establish several institutions to care for the sick and the poor. His commitment still influences the educational and social programs in the Methodist church. The Gospels tie discipleship to care for and service of children. Judith Gundry-Volf argues that Jesus teaches the disciples to "welcome" or "receive" one such child in his name, demonstrating service and hospitality. His teaching about true greatness places children at the center of the Christian community and requires of all who would be great in the community to serve children.

### **Contemporary reflections on Communal Obligations to Children and Grounds for Advocacy**

For those inside the church, the essays provide theological foundations for child ministry, religious education, child advocacy = vital parts of church ministry. Educating the church about theological foundations for taking care of children will motivate them to address the challenges children face today, pay attention to their spiritual and moral formation. It also prompts all readers to discover obstacles that are preventing us from treating more children with care and compassion.