

Two New Books Related to Theology and Children

Reviewed by Don Ratcliff, Ph.D.

Collier, John (editor). *Toddling to the kingdom: Child theology at work in the church*. London: Child Theology Movement, 2009.

Richards, Anne, & Peter Privett (editors). *Through the eyes of a child: New insights in theology from a child's perspective*. London: Church House Publishing, 2009.

These two volumes are filled with theology, each is written by a variety of talented scholars, relate to children, and they are both from the U.K. That is where the resemblance ends. Each of these important contributions to the study of theology and children is worth the time to read and carefully reflect upon, but in spite of surface resemblance, they each make a very different contribution.

The Collier text surveys some classic and recent contributions to the field of child theology. Now almost a decade old, the child theology movement offers the question, "How would theology be different if the church did what Jesus did by placing a child in the midst of the theological discussion?" In a manner similar to liberation theology, feminist theology, and other recent theologies, the question relates to reframing theology with the child as a central concern. Not always theology about children, child theology asks what difference the imagined or literal presence of children might make to the understanding of a theological concern. The movement grew out of a concern by many who worked with at-risk children throughout the world, that they lacked a sufficient theological base for their work. The Viva network responded initially with several short essays at their conferences, and posted these on their web page. Some of the earliest contributors have now become key leaders of the movement, that has grown considerably over the years. The giants are all here: Collier, Marcia Bunge, John Wall, Keith White, Haddon Willmer, and others, but then so are up-and-coming new faces, such as Bill Prevette.

The 29 chapters tend to be short, but provide enough detail to comprehend the issue at hand. A key theme of the book, oppression, is also part of the title of chapter one, while chapter two is a response to that concern. The three chapters that follow provide a definition and outline of the area, distinguishing child theology from other similar ideas—chapter five may be an important chapter to read before reading the other two books considered in this review.

The second section of the book examines accounts of children's experiences, the questions raised about children from conferences (these are carefully categorized), cultural components of childhood experience, the dream of a new kind of society, and the problem of labeling. The chapter on culture includes sections on rites of passage and rituals, but these topics are both examined in terms of how cultures demean children (other topics of the chapter, such as sexual exploitation, materialism, and child labor, continue this negative theme).

A third section considers the resources available for doing child theology. These include the important rights underscored by the United Nations "Rights of the Child" document. Marcia Bunge

considers the limitations of previous spiritual formation efforts with children, then unwraps a “broad and complex view of children” from the history of theology that includes children being understood as gifts from God, sinful but also moral agents, humans that need guidance because they are still developing, made in the image of God, models of faith, and in need of compassion and justice. This chapter encapsulates her much longer scholarly work, *The Child in Christian Thought*. Her chapter is followed by a far too brief examination of hermeneutical concerns, and a longer chapter by Keith White outlining key stories about children in the Bible and forming a rich framework for mission from Christian theology, including the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, Pentecost, and the second coming. He reexamines some of the key themes of scripture that relate to children in the following chapter, and specifically reflects upon the importance of Psalm 8:2 and experiencing Matthew 16-21 in two additional chapters.

While section four is titled “Experiments in Child Theology,” it has nothing to do with experimental research methods, but rather portrays several attempts to put child theology into practice. While specific urban locations are considered in chapter 21, the remaining 8 chapters of the book consider the difference a child-focus makes to the theologies of sin, ministry, church, mission, eschatology, family, education, and finally Christology.

This is a good book, providing a fuller portrait of child theology than some previous books have given. Both classic writings and more recent work are considered, and the short chapters make it easier to read for the busy professional or lay person. One important item that I would like to have seen is a history of the child theology movement itself. Curiously, the person who has done the best work in this area—Bill Prevette—did participate marginally in the book project. His fine survey of this history is available online—see the link in the left margin at www.childfaith.net/theology. In spite of this limitation, this is a strong work that is an important addition to the growing literature on child theology. Because of its broad scope, and developed theological themes, it may be the most important book in this area to date.

Several times in *Toddling to the Kingdom*, a comment is made that it might be good to have children involved in the discussion of child theology. However, there is also some ambivalence expressed in this regard; apparently a child was included in one or two of the sessions held on child theology at various meetings around the world. The ambivalence was not as much that the child did not contribute substantively, but rather than it may be another form of oppression to push the child to participate. Having attended one of these sessions, it is hard for me to imagine a typical child adding a great deal to the theological work that occurs. However, editors Anne Richards and Peter Privett believe that a child’s perspective on theology is precisely what is needed, albeit not specifically following the current trajectory of the child theology movement.

The only author in common between these two books is Keith White, and his role shifts from being a major player in developing broad themes in the former text, to a chapter on creation in the present text. Yet this chapter on a focused topic proves that White’s scholarship can go deeply into a single doctrine, as well as survey the broad themes of child theology.

The voices of children are clear throughout this promising work—children are not just a consideration in the discussion, but their comments are quoted and become the focus of the theology developed. Most of the authors have apparently researched children, and draw in the voices of children throughout this work. This is a great strength of the book, but the lack of a methodology chapter is a serious omission. Who are these children that are quoted at length, how were they chosen, and do they represent typical church-attending children in their comments? We can only guess about the answers to these questions. But it must be admitted that including children in a theological discussion is a fairly new idea; one can only hope that subsequent work in this area will at least attempt to provide a picture of who the children are, and what other children they best represent.

The chapter titles provide a sense of the broad scope of this work: creation, spirituality (authored by Rebecca Nye, perhaps the most important theorist in the children's spirituality movement in the last two decades), word, play, sin, forgiveness, grace, salvation, death, judgment, angels, heaven, and hell. In some respects it is like a standard theology textbook, but the focus on children's concepts of these important topics bring in a unique perspective. This is a great book for those who love children and appreciate their perspectives, but are less certain about studying a standard theology textbook. Perhaps the unconventional approach to theology is due to the fact that academic theologians are noticeably absent from this work, with the possible exception of Anne Richards.

Like *Toddling to the Kingdom*, this is an important book, one that I treasure because the voices of the children are so clear on these theological topics. But it would also be good to hear the voices of academic theologians as well—and to be fair, perhaps we do hear the voice of Anne Richards indirectly throughout the book, since she was the senior editor of this work. But I can only guess about this. I hope this book is the harbinger of even better things to come in this area.