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Children and Christian Theology

Annemie Dillen

Children and childhood are increasingly considered as a theological concern. In this contribution, an overview of various perspectives on children, childhood, and Christian theology is presented. The article describes a diversity of images of children as they figure in social sciences, in biblical studies, in the history of theology, in ethics, and in practical and systematic theology. By considering these images, it will become clear how children are sometimes considered as passive objects but, in recent times, mostly as active subjects showing resilience and agency. Children are not only to be protected; they also have a voice. This idea is made explicit in recent scholarship on the relationship of church communities with children, on children and liturgy, religious education, and pastoral care.

Keywords: Christian theology, Theologizing with children, Childhood studies, Children's perspectives, Liberation theologies, Agency, Resilience, Liturgy, Religious education, Pastoral care

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1 Introduction

Reflecting on children and childhood matters for theology. Many people, including theologians, believers, social workers, and scientists, may find this statement surprising: while children's views or perspectives on childhood are important themes, are these really topics to discuss from a theological perspective? However, since the new millennium children and childhood have been explicitly considered by theologians, and as a concern of theology, more and more. In this contribution, various perspectives on children, childhood, and theology are presented. A diversity of images of children are described, as they figure in social sciences, in biblical studies, in the history of theology, in ethics, and in practical and systematic theology. It becomes clear how children are sometimes considered as passive objects, but in recent time mostly as active subjects, showing resilience and agency. Children are not only to be protected, they also have a voice. This idea is made explicit in recent scholarship on the relationship of church communities with children, on religious education and pastoral care. On an international level, children's spirituality is increasingly studied. In particular, the concept of 'theologizing with children' figures into children's religious education, and shows how the contribution of children themselves should be taken seriously.

The growing interest in children and childhood as a theological theme is partly related to the growth of childhood studies as a separate, interdisciplinary field in the social sciences, which is related to broader developments in society (Cook 2020). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the societal and scientific discussions related to this convention are examples from the context in which childhood studies started to grow. Within theology, a heightened interest in children might have arisen from the increased presence of female theologians and theologians with families. The life situations and general interests of those who determine the research agenda might have had some influence for theology as well. The topic of children is potentially related to many subdisciplines within theology but this entry starts with general trends within the field of childhood studies.

2 Childhood studies

First, some relevant terms are clarified, then some general trends in social scientific work on children are discussed. In a third step, discussions in relation to psychology and developmental models of children are presented.

2.1 Terminology

When the term 'child' is discussed in the field of 'children' and 'theology' or 'religion', it often refers to young people between zero and eighteen years old, with most emphasis on

the younger age under twelve. However, ages are arbitrary and influenced by contextual factors and therefore seldomly mentioned explicitly. Sometimes the terms ‘adolescents’ or ‘youth’ are mentioned, to refer to ‘older children’; sometimes not. Also here, there is a diversity of definitions in the literature. Most important is the idea that the term refers to a continuum, with a huge diversity within the group of children, which should be taken seriously. In this contribution the terms ‘religion’ and ‘theology’ are mostly used in reference to Christianity. The various meanings of terms as ‘child theology’ will be described under section 4 and section 5 in this contribution.

2.2 Social sciences and children

‘Childhood studies’ is the name for the research category in which children are taken as a central theme and where the perspectives and agency of children are taken seriously. Sociology, pedagogy, psychology, and philosophy, as well as theology and ethics, are developing more and more research on children, opening possibilities of finding different paradigms for thinking about and dealing with children. Recent childhood studies stress rather rigorously the autonomy of children and react against a view of children as dependent, weak, and not-yet-adults who should be socialized and protected. These studies have paid close attention to children’s contributions and agency as well as to their vulnerabilities.

The image of a child as a blank canvas, a not-yet-adult, is critiqued by childhood studies because it can lead to children being presented as incompetent and irresponsible objects of socialization. They are seen as pedagogical projects. This traditional socialization vision can be called ‘adultocentric’, ‘anticipatory’, ‘functional’, and ‘deterministic’ (Van den Bergh 1998: 95). If children are only treated in line with the socialization paradigm, they are only evaluated and developed in specific domains, namely those that are important in schools and clubs. A child’s other competences, such as skills in family tasks, being a leader or emotionally and socially developed, having good moral skills, etc., are often neglected. Childhood studies stress that children should not be reduced to competences that bring profit and social advantages.

2.3 In dialogue with developmental psychology

Within childhood studies, the critique of the image of a child as a passive, to be socialized not-yet-adult is based on arguments from the point of view of psychology. Traditional approaches in developmental psychology have been critiqued on the basis of this alternative image of the child. Traditionally, one thinks of a child as being rather egocentric; later the child develops itself in stages, following ‘nature’, and leading to a clear goal. Today, one reads in the critical literature that this traditional view is too universalizing and seems to operate from a determinist worldview. Recent theories of developmental psychology increasingly look for young children’s own capacities for communication,

because the concern with these phases and thinking in terms of what children cannot yet do actually hinder their communication (Koops 1997: 48). Scientists have discovered that babies and small children have many more skills than we tend to assume. Small children are able to perform certain cognitive operations and to form symbolic representation and abstraction. Young children are, therefore, not as fundamentally unlike adults concerning the structure of their thinking. Research indicates that, typically, at the age of three a child is able to distinguish mental and physical worlds and to comprehend that people react on the basis of their own subjective conceptions rather than on the basis of objective facts. In general, young children are, from at least the age of four, able to see different perspectives and interpretations of reality (Koops 1997).

The perspective of childhood studies also critiques stage theories in general. While Lawrence Kohlberg, Jean Piaget, and Erik Erikson are famous authors of developmental psychology whose insights are still valuable today, childhood studies critiques the idea of a kind of linear development in which the last stage is regarded as the normative ideal, and thus all previous stages as somewhat underdeveloped. There is wide variety among children and adolescents and not every child develops in the same way (with the same stages in the same order).

The critique of the developmental stages has led to two different positions in relation to children and religiosity. The American practical theologian James Fowler (1940–2015) is one of the most well-known authors in this field. His book *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (1981) can be considered as a classic. Stage 0 refers to ‘primal undifferentiated faith’, in line with basic trust as described by Erik Erikson. This stage refers to the time between birth and age two. The next three stages are called ‘intuitive projective faith’ (three to seven years); ‘mythic-literal faith’ (seven to twelve years) and ‘synthetic-conventional faith’ (twelve and older). Although these stages still form an important background for many scholars and practitioners, there is a tendency to focus more on children’s competences and their own agency in childhood studies. Some scholars argue that many children are able to think in a more abstract way about religion at a younger age than twelve (Henckens et al. 2011). Others would suggest that the mythic-literal faith is not just a stage which should be transformed into synthetic-conventional faith. They criticize the ‘not-yet’ view of children by valuing the mythical-literal faith much more and considering it as important in its own right (Bucher 1989; 2002).

Another critique is that the socio-economic and cultural context of children is neglected in classical stage theory approaches: for example, when considering children who migrate. The experience of children around the world who live or have lived in two or more cultures is neglected (Casteel 2020). Within migration contexts – including, for example, difficult life circumstances, a parent’s new workplace, living with a new culture while keeping one’s own – a child’s faith development while growing up is not a straightforward evolution.

The change in paradigm suggested by childhood studies is described so far in terms of a shift in focus from children as not-yet-adults to children as subjects with a focus on their own agency. This is just a rough sketch. The next section describes various images of children in reference to biblical studies. Which images of children can be found in the Bible is the next question.

3 Biblical perspectives on children

When thinking about the Bible and children, or about theology and children in general, we are confronted with at least three perspectives. The first is twofold: (a) what theology and the Bible say about children and childhood, and (b) what theology can learn from the perspective of children and childhood. The second perspective is what children themselves think about the Bible and theology (theology *of* children). The third refers to a didactical question: how does one discuss, study, and encounter the Bible with children (theology *with* children, Bible didactics). A similar, but slightly different question is how to teach the Bible or theology to children (theology *for* children), which can include, for instance, the question 'what is a good children's Bible'? The second and the third perspectives will be discussed later, whereas we start here with the (first) question: what does theology *about* children look like? The Bible is one source of an answer.

3.1 Children, care, and protection

If one would ask any Christian person to say something about the relation between Christianity and children, the chances are high that one of these two connotations will be made: that children have to be protected, especially the very vulnerable, with a classical focus on unborn children, orphans, and other groups of children with special needs; and/or that children have to be educated and socialized into the Christian faith. Children as 'vulnerable' and 'persons to be socialized' are two images present in the Bible that have often been used historically.

In the Bible, the reader often finds references to the care of orphans and widows. In the book Deuteronomy (e.g. Deut 10:18; 14:29; 16:11–14; 26:12–13) the reference to caring for orphans is ubiquitous. In the Psalms, we also read about care for orphans; for example:

> O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more. (Ps 10:17–18)

Various prophets warn the people and tell them to care for orphans (e.g. Isa 1:16). In the New Testament as well, real faith can be seen in the care for the most vulnerable: 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in

their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world' (Jas 1:27). For many Christians, the reference to children in Mark (10:13–16) is most well known:

> People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

Many biblical texts warn people to not forget the most vulnerable, those who are often considered as a hindrance, a burden in society. Children and other vulnerable people are also made in the image of God. Throughout history, many Christians have cared for children with special needs and especially unborn children whose lives might be at risk.

This care for children, especially for the most vulnerable ones, sounds very laudable. However, based on recent work of theologians inspired by childhood studies, three critical comments about the interpretation and the use of these texts can be made: (1) biblical references to violence against children should also be discussed; (2) biblical texts, especially those about Jesus with children, should not be romanticized and children should not be essentialized; (3) a focus on vulnerability is important, but children's agency and their resilience should not be forgotten.

3.1.1 Violence against children

The Bible encourages the reader to protect children, but this is not the whole picture. While feminists refer to biblical 'texts of terror' that are very negative about women (Trible 1984), there are similar texts about children. Often forgotten are the children who died – who were murdered – in the story of Moses, in which the pharaoh orders the deaths of all Hebrew boys under the age of two (Exod 1) and the firstborns are condemned to death in the last of the ten plagues in Egypt (Exod 11:4–10; 12:29–30); and in the birth story of Jesus, when king Herod orders all children killed in order to make sure that the newborn king (Jesus) would also die (Matt 2:16). We also read about parents sacrificing (or intending to sacrifice) their children, for instance Jephthah's daughter (Judg 11:34–40). These stories about innocent children could remind the reader that very often children are killed, suffer, or are not seen in name of so-called higher aims.

The violence described in biblical stories is usually interpreted within the larger context of the text and the society. However, it happens that biblical texts are abused in order to legitimize violence. Throughout history and even today, especially in conservative Protestant circles (Gershoff, Miller, and Holden 1999), some biblical texts have been used to legitimize corporal punishment of children. Often quoted is Prov 13:24: 'Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them.'

It is deeply problematic to directly quote such a text to underpin contemporary violence against children, as all texts need to be considered in their historical and literary contexts. Context alone should not constitute a defence of biblical texts. It is, therefore, expected from Christian readers today to clearly condemn such violent practices described in the Bible and read the texts as ‘stumbling stones’, as texts that encourage them to reflect on what is ethical today (Dillen 2011b). They might be encouraged in their striving for a non-violent way to relate to children by various parts in the Bible that condemn violence against children and call for protection and care (see section 3.1, above).

3.1.2 Beyond romanticization and essentialization

In reference to the notion of ‘receiving the kingdom [of God] as a child’ (Mark 10:15), American practical theologian Joyce Ann Mercer writes:

> Some make sense of this phrase and the story from which it comes by referring to an essentialized notion of a child as one who naturally, spontaneously, and passively accepts the kingdom of God. Others read the story through its Matthean version, identifying supposedly childlike qualities such as humility as the requisite characteristics for entering the kingdom of God. I find both of these options problematic because they uncritically assume certain emotional and expressive qualities as essential to childhood and identify participation or membership in God’s basilea with the assumption of such features. (Mercer 2005: 52)

She warns against romanticizing and essentializing children and suggests an alternative interpretation. The children welcomed by Jesus are children in the crowds, those living on the streets. Mercer reads this text as an encouragement to advocate for the most vulnerable persons more than an interpretation of how important children are as examples of faith, openness, humility, and trust. However, this focus on the vulnerability of children might be one-sided.

3.1.3 Children’s agency and resilience

Children have to be protected – and societies often fail to do so. That was clear in biblical times and is clear today. To consider children as full persons, subjects, it is, however, important to name their own agency in terms of giving to others and in terms of their resilience. Children are not merely (possible) victims. Children might overcome very difficult situations and develop themselves as human persons throughout those experiences. This is also not a quality only of children; in that case the focus on resilience could be another form of essentialization. Stressing the resilience of children means focusing on contexts where children have opportunities to find persons to help them develop into resilient persons and to advocate for more justice to prevent situations where children become victims. Children are able to give to adults, to care for them as well. The command to honour one’s parents is one example of how children also give – either

as young children or when they are adults (Dillen 2012a). The term ‘giving’ is derived from the ideas of the psychiatrist Ivan Boszormenyi Nagy (1986) who speaks about intergenerational relationships in terms of ‘give’ and ‘take’, and highlights the importance of adults recognizing children’s giving. In this context, it is important to notice that every child is different, and that speaking about children as a group is only legitimized as a form of ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak 1996).

3.2 Children and socialization

A second image of children that can be found in the Bible and in societies nowadays is the image that children are persons to be socialized. A common idea in most religions and worldviews is that children should learn, especially about faith. Well known in this context is the pericope of Deut 6:6–7: ‘Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise’. Throughout history, a strong focus has been put on socializing children into faith, often with the argument that ‘children are the future of the church’.

Also here, two comments could be made based on recent theologies of childhood. First of all, children are not only relevant for the future (Dillen 2009). This image focuses strongly on the ‘not-yet’ perspective, on their capacities to come, rather than who children are in the present. The critique of developmental models in psychology is helpful to put this focus on ‘children as the future’ into perspective. Speaking with children about spirituality, practising faith, or teaching them core elements of a religion is not only valuable because they will be adult believers, passing on the faith. It is also valuable because a child’s spirituality may help them cope with various aspects of life, with faith supporting them in situations of mourning, thankfulness, or hope.

Secondly, while children must be socialized, this is not a mono-directional process (see section 5.2). Children teach adults a lot, too, and interactive learning is also very important in the context of religion. Here, the biblical texts about children as examples of faith (see e.g. Mark 10:13–16, quoted above; and Matt 18:1–5) might be interesting. Texts about Jesus as a child, as a baby or as a twelve-year-old boy in the temple show the power, or the agency, of a child as well. The Christ-child, being visited by the shepherds in Luke 2:8–20, illuminates something important for readers today, but also for Mary in the text: ‘But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart’ (Luke 2:18; Miller-McLemore 2002).

4 Theological views on children

Most Christian theologians refer to biblical sources when they develop ideas about children, but elements from tradition, church teaching, church practices, and other

disciplines (such as social sciences, philosophy) also influence their reflections. This section presents a short summary of insights from various theological subdisciplines.

4.1 Historical theology

Texts about children in the Bible have been studied extensively, especially since the beginning of the twenty-first century (Bunge, Fretheim, and Gaventa 2008). At the same time, scholars have also devoted studies to historical texts about children. Particularly groundbreaking was the book of the American theologian Marcia Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought* (2001). In this volume, various authors discuss theologians who have influenced the church in many ways and wrote clearly about children: John Chrysostom, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Menno Simons, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Horace Bushnell, Mary Church Terrell, Karl Barth, and Karl Rahner. A few movements with views about children are also discussed, i.e. seventeenth-century missionaries to New France, German Pietism, and contemporary feminist theologians. Future research might complement these studies with more chapters on theologians or normative ecclesial teachings with a strong influence in various denominations, such as Roman Catholicism or Orthodoxy (see e.g. Browning and Miller-McLemore 2009). As research in history, the history of the church, and theology turns more and more to the study of daily life and material objects, it is also interesting to investigate what kind of theology about children can be discovered by studying homilies, catechetical books, paintings, ritual objects, and church practices.

Following Bunge's pioneering work, various books with historical perspectives on children and theology have been published. The German church historian Hubertus Lutterbach wrote extensively about children, publishing, among others, *Gotteskindschaft. Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte eines christlichen Ideals* (Childhood of God: Cultural and Social History of a Christian Ideal, 2003), in which he explained how the idea of being a child of God has contributed to the care for children through history. In 2010, his book *Kinder und Christentum. Kulturgeschichtliche Perspektiven auf Schutz, Bildung und Partizipation von Kindern zwischen Antike und Gegenwart* (Children and Christianity: Cultural-historical Perspectives on the Protection, Education and Participation of Children between Antiquity and the Present, 2010), provided an extensive history of the relationship between children and the church from the perspective of Catholic theology. In various German articles, Lutterbach explained how the sexual abuse of children by priests is problematic, especially given the long tradition of caring for and protecting children throughout church history.

In the English-speaking world, British Anglican theologian Edmund Newey published *Children of God: The Child as Source of Theological Anthropology* (2012). The title of this book is very similar to Lutterbach's book *Gotteskindschaft*, but Newey focused more on major theologians, like Bunge's edited work, while Lutterbach wrote a cultural and

social history showing the influence of Christianity. As in Bunge's book, Newey discusses Thomas Aquinas and Friedrich Schleiermacher, but also Thomas Traherne, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Charles Péguy. The book's main concern is the influence of the idea that persons are children of God upon theological anthropology. The human condition is characterized by vulnerability, incompleteness, and hope, a view that is elaborated through this metaphor. It becomes clear, then, that the term 'child' is used in various ways: sometimes authors write about concrete children and how churches and societies relate to them (e.g. Lutterbach); others speak about children and childhood in a metaphorical sense (e.g. Newey).

Most attention in historical studies about children is, however, given to the thoughts of famous theologians who speak about children and ideas about childhood. The American practical theologian Jerome Berryman authored the monograph *Children and the Theologians* (2009) where we find, as in Bunge's book, an overview of famous theologians like Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Karl Rahner. Berryman adds others such as Irenaeus, Blaise Pascal, and Rowan Williams. The American ethicist John Wall carefully notes that this historical overview does not include female theologians and suggests some himself: Christine de Pisan, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila (Wall 2010). Only when Berryman (2009) discusses the work of contemporary theologians does he include some female theologians (such as Marcia Bunge, Kristin Herzog, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, and Joyce Ann Mercer).

The various theological overviews about children and childhood are characterized by a diversity of views. Some theologians are very positive about children and praise them in many ways, while others consider children mainly as sinful or not very important. The diversity among children themselves, however, is only rarely recognized (Wall 2010).

New areas of research could be found at the intersection of childhood studies and religion on the one hand with other aspects of social identity such as gender, race, class, etc., on the other. In historical works, the recognition of diversity among children (e.g. their various ethnic backgrounds) is less present than in the work of contemporary theologians.

4.2 Practical theology and theological ethics on children and childhood

Part of the theological research on children describes children and childhood in the Bible and in the history of theology and the church. Scholars from various other disciplines have taken children and childhood as a research topic as well (see Dillen and Pollefeyt 2010; or Fassoni, Dias, and Pereira 2010). Each year, papers on a diversity of topics are presented within the Childhood Studies and Religion Unit, which meets during the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. From 2010 to 2017, an online journal on the topic of Childhood and Religion was also published (http://childhoodandreligion.com).

The field of childhood studies and religion was dominated in the beginning by US-based Protestant scholars. However, in various other parts of the world (such as the Philippines, South Africa, Australia, Germany, Brazil, and Canada), scholars are also studying children, childhood, and religion, but their focus is often on doing theology with children or on the spirituality of children, which will be discussed below (see section 5.3).

Within the field of childhood studies and religion, a large group of practical theologians have additionally contributed to the debate, for example Pamela Couture (2000), Bonnie Miller-McLemore (2003), Joyce Ann Mercer (2005), Elaine Champagne (2005), Dave Csinos (2020), Gerhard Büttner (2021), and many authors who contributed to the book of Rosalind Tan, Nativity A. Petallar, and Lucy A. Hefford (2022). This is not remarkable, as their research is often closely connected to all kinds of (church-related) practices in which children might be participants. The contributions of practical theologians will be mainly discussed in the various subtopics below. Here the work of Christian ethicists deserves attention.

The American ethicist John Wall has been writing about children and ethics for more than twenty years. He argues for a 'childist ethics' and is director of the Childism Institute at Rutgers University (www.childism.org). The term 'childist' should be read in line with 'feminist': it refers to advocacy for children and especially taking children's perspectives seriously in ethical thinking (Wall 2019). This approach goes beyond 'childhood studies', as a childist perspective challenges all kinds of social research and practice, not only those about children. Wall shows how fundamental norms and practices in all domains of society are challenged when ethical thinking takes into account the perspectives of children. A childist perspective critically discusses all forms of adultism in society. Adultism is a term similar to racism or sexism, and refers to an approach where adults are the (sometimes unconscious) norm, where children are discriminated against (e.g. when they are not welcome in certain shops, aeroplanes, hotels, etc.) or neglected (e.g. in daily interactions). Wall also develops an anthropology of children, arguing that ethical practices with, and thinking about, children are influenced by the way people think about children (Wall 2007).

Wall's recent work argues for giving voting rights to children. Here we see how classical ethical thinking about children was focused mainly on providing and protecting the rights of children, whereas now there is – fully in line with interdisciplinary childhood studies – a tendency towards stressing participation rights. This is a clear example of the move from a child-care/child-protection perspective to a child-liberator perspective.

Various Christian authors have contributed to discussions on children's rights. Most defend children's rights, sometimes in dialogue with positions where the language of rights is considered problematic by authors who defend hierarchical relationships and focus on

the responsibility of adults. Kathleen Marshall and Paul Parvis have argued in their book *Honouring Children* (2004) that, from a Christian perspective, children's rights should be endorsed: upholding rights is defending a bottom line – what is absolutely necessary. Of course, social life means much more than claiming rights; people are persons-in-relation. In order to prevent overly harmonious views of social life which might lead to a blindness to all kinds of direct and indirect violence against children, children's rights are very important. A combination of the three 'P's (protection, provision, and participation) as the main rights for children is crucial, but one may find differences in focus. Some research is focused on issues related to poverty and social justice (see Couture 2000) while others focus on the prevention of violence against children, in families, and in society, but also in the church (see Dillen 2020). Authors in line with John Wall focus more on participation and children's agency. (For the wider discussion on rights in the context of Christian ethics, refer to Justice and Rights.

Within the German-language field, interesting contributions are offered by Marianne Heimbach-Steins (2017) and Ana Maria Riedl (2017). Their research project investigated the German concept *Kindeswohl*, which refers to the general wellbeing of children and acting 'for the sake of children'. Riedl, inspired by Judith Butler, argues that recognizing children as subjects and focusing on participation should be part of the societal discussions about children's wellbeing.

Children's own agency in terms of advocacy for justice, sustainability, and inclusive societies is becoming more and more acknowledged (Roche 2020). Various authors (e.g. Roche 2009) argue that speaking about children's wellbeing should encourage Christian theologians to focus on mutual interactions between what is called the public and the private, and between the (constructed) ideas of children as (mostly passive) victims and their own agency. This becomes clear when reflecting on children living in a consumer culture (Roche 2009; Mercer 2005). Children are often commodified, used for profit, as in cases of advertising and marketing or child labour. At the same time, they themselves contribute to this consumer culture; and they react and protest against it, as becomes clear in their actions for the environment (Roche 2020).

Recently, an international group of theologians, mainly ethicists, coordinated by the Austrian theologian and social ethicist Clemens Sedmak, started to investigate what a social theology of childhood could mean. The international exchange, in dialogue with the traditions of various churches, especially the Catholic Church, could offer some new insights. It will be especially relevant to bridge the gap between various discourses, e.g. on participation and children's agency, on preventing child abuse and supporting children's resilience and flourishing, and on classical social ethical themes (solidarity, subsidiarity, etc.). Most authors, however, acknowledge that it is no longer fruitful to strive

for a theology of the child in the singular. Terms in plural (e.g. theologies, children) should remind readers of the diversity among children and among theologians.

4.3 Systematic theological perspectives on children and childhood

Just as various authors in the field of (social) ethics try to rethink ethical approaches with attention to children, a similar attempt is made by some systematic theologians. For example, in 2021, Marcia Bunge edited a new book entitled *Child Theology: Diverse Methods, Global Perspectives*, featuring twelve theologians from six continents and diverse branches of Christianity. Building on a diverse range of sources, these theologians seek to re-examine and rethink Christian beliefs and practices (such as those relating to sin, hope, and creation) with attention to children (see e.g. also Tan 2007). They describe this task as 'child theology' or 'child-attentive theology'. The term 'child theology' could be confused with other child-related terms, such as the German term *Kindertheologie* (see section 5.2; also translated as 'child theology' but meaning theology done by children). Recognizing this, Bunge clarifies that, like feminist, Black, or other liberating theologies, child theologies seek to reinterpret fundamental Christian beliefs and practices by honouring the full humanity of groups who are often voiceless or marginalized – in this case, children (Bunge 2021; see also Grobbelaar 2019: 1–2). This approach to systematic theology is closely related to what Wall calls 'childism' and is being pursued by theologians in a range of contexts (see also Grobbelaar and Breed 2016b).

The perspective of children functions as a starting point for critical and constructive reflection on theological themes (see, for example, the various contributions in the volume edited by Weber and de Beer 2016) but theological reflection also helps to understand children and childhood as such. This is demonstrated by, among others, David Jensen in his book *Graced Vulnerability: Towards a Theology of Childhood* (2005). The concept 'vulnerability' is highlighted by considering children, but also helps the reader understand the human person, especially children. A similar reflection, not based on childhood experiences as such, but on experiences of maternity and giving birth, is offered by Elisabeth Gandolfo (2015).

5 Religious education and children

Various approaches of theologies about children or theologies/ethics from the perspective of children ('childist ethics') have been presented. In most of these contributions, the main idea is that children, as subjects with their own agency, should be taken more seriously. This is, of course, true for many domains of society and relates to discussions about children's own voices in relation to topics such as violence, poverty, or climate change.

Taking children's own voices seriously is also very important in church practices. Many theologians argue that, especially within church contexts, serious progress could be made.

A first domain under discussion is religious education. This term is used here mainly in reference to school contexts, where courses about religion are formally organized. Educational work in church contexts or families is discussed below under the heading 'Catechesis, faith formation, and children' (section 6.4). Next, research about teaching religion in relation to children is discussed, and then one particular example of taking children seriously within religious education receives attention: theologizing with children. Finally in this section, the scope is broadened beyond educational contexts towards children's spirituality.

5.1 Children's agency in faith communication

Researchers in the field of religious education who are influenced by childhood studies have argued that children are not just empty vessels. Children should not be moulded. Their own agency should be taken seriously. This means that speaking about the transmission of faith or faith transfer can only be done in combination with an increased interest for children's own contributions and in interaction with them. The term 'faith communication' might be more conceptually correct than faith transmission or transfer, although 'communication' is too often interpreted as verbal communication while faith communication also implies practices, emotions, senses, and other such dimensions.

Power imbalances between adults and children should be recognized in the context of faith communication (Dillen 2011a). Educational contexts involve asymmetry between teachers and children but this need not lead to 'power over' children. An alternative way of thinking about power is speaking about 'power with'. This approach stimulates teachers to search for ways in which the voices and experiences of children themselves could be heard. Children and teachers co-construct what is learned in classrooms.

This view on teaching religion is based on a specific theology of children, as discussed in this contribution (section 4 above), but also a specific understanding of religious traditions. Within a Christian context, a hermeneutical approach – where tradition is open for interpretation and where various possible understandings are accepted – is at the core of this concept of religious education where mutuality, power with, and children's agency are central.

This approach also asks teachers to be flexible rather than sticking to their textbooks. Religious education characterized by a 'power with' children approach asks teachers to trust that what children express is not automatically heterodox. Teachers could discuss what children say; this method does not imply that children are always right – but neither are teachers. Learning from each other (teachers and children), as well as from teaching

materials, contexts, others outside the classroom, and experiences is not always evident in practice. Many teachers support children's agency in religious education classes, but in other cases they choose safety: offering one correct answer, not welcoming difficult questions, using their own power to discipline children, or demanding children memorize ideas without supporting further searching and questioning.

5.2 Theologizing with children

Within the field of religious education, scholars elaborate various didactical models, often in relation to their denomination and the legal bases of religious education in schools in particular countries. Within the German-language context, the ideas of theologizing with children and children as theologians have been developed since the 1990s, especially by the Austrian theologian Anton Bucher (1992). Other pioneers in this field are Gerhard Büttner, Friedhelm Kraft, Petra Freudenberger-Lötz, Elisabeth Schwarz, and Mirjam Zimmermann (for an overview, see Zimmermann 2015). The basic idea is that children are theologically competent: theology is not merely an academic discipline. Other authors, such as the British theologian Jeff Astley, write about 'ordinary theology' as theology by lay persons, meaning non-experts or non-professionals. Within the field of children's theology and theologizing with children, this idea is developed in relation to children in line with the 'philosophizing with children' movement. Children are capable of thinking in a philosophical or a theological way, especially when they are encouraged to do so by adults, such as parents, teachers, or catechists. Within an Australian context, for example, Geraldine M. Larkins (2021) has investigated children's responses to questions about God.

Academic theologians have supported empirical research on ways in which children act as theologians. They also describe how religious education classes might look when teachers stimulate children's theological reflection. From 2002 until 2016, a yearbook was published with chapters by various authors (*Handbuch für Kindertheologie* series). Different topics are discussed, including children's theological views on themes such as Christology, creation, church, and religious diversity, among others. Many conferences in German and in English are organized by the German-language and international network for child theology (*Kindertheologie*), where new research on the topic of child theology and theologizing with children is presented. Scholars from countries such as Norway, Malta, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic are involved (see e.g. Freudenberger-Lötz and Büttner 2015).

Theologizing with children is closely related to what is described above as the hermeneutical-communicative model of religious education, as it is developed in Belgium. The core idea of theologizing with children is that children can ask theological questions and search together for answers. Teachers can help them by offering stories, pictures, and rituals that help them in their questioning. Other children and teachers might confront

children with different possible answers and new questions. Theologizing with children means searching together without having a ready-made answer or truth.

The German theologian Hanna Roose conducted a study to assess how much children's theology or theologizing with children happens in primary schools in Germany (Roose 2019). By observing specific class situations, she discovered that teachers might be willing to stimulate children's theologizing but often do not see the opportunities to do so, or are too quick to give the 'right answers' or to correct children. For many teachers, the challenge is to avoid moralization (see Pollefeyt and Bieringer 2005). Some teachers tend to search for a lesson to be learned from biblical stories or Christian practices. A lesson of the parable of the father and his two sons (Luke 15:11–32) might be interpreted as an encouragement to forgive, while many other possibilities, such as the love of God, the frustration of the eldest brother, the complexity of family relations, the value of celebrations, etc., may be missed when children have to learn one clear lesson. Many other examples can be given. There is also the danger of presenting biblical stories in a literal way, often based on the idea that this is how children think (see Pollefeyt and Bieringer 2005). Children might have to learn the plot of biblical stories without being challenged to ask real questions and to search together for various possible interpretations. Theories about children as theologians are well developed but are not always accepted in practice, often because teachers feel insecure and do not know how to deal with this open-ended form of learning where children share power with the teacher (see e.g. Grobbelaar 2019).

In addition to the question of how much theologizing with children happens in practice, one of ongoing question relates to teachers' and children's religious identities: do they have to be believers in order to theologize? Various authors think not. The question is, however, whether it is legitimate to call children 'little theologians' if they would not identify with this term themselves. The same legitimacy issue is relevant for another term: spirituality.

5.3 Children's spirituality

Whereas the idea of 'theologizing with children' is mainly being developed within German-speaking countries – often in a context of confessional religious education in classrooms – similar movements are taking place in English-speaking contexts under the umbrella term 'children's spirituality'. In 1996, the first issue of the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* was published by Taylor and Francis. In 2000, a group of scholars in the United Kingdom started to organize conferences on the topic of children's spirituality; during their 2006 conference, the International Association for Children's Spirituality was founded (www.childrenspirituality.org). These new initiatives testify to the growing interest in children's spirituality at the beginning of the second millennium.

Under the title ‘children’s spirituality’, a variety of contexts and topics is discussed. The focus is not limited to school contexts and religious education. Scholars publish on topics such as peace, health, education of the whole child, non-religious identities, etc. Most contributions present empirical research on children’s spirituality.

The term ‘spirituality’ as such is very broad and is used in many different ways. The British scholar Rebecca Nye defines children’s spirituality as:

> an initially natural capacity for awareness of the sacred quality to life experiences. This awareness can be conscious or unconscious, and sometimes fluctuates between both, but in both cases can affect actions, feelings and thoughts. In childhood, spirituality is especially about being attracted towards ‘being in relation’, responding to a call to relate to more than ‘just me’ – i.e. to others, to God, to creation or to a deeper inner sense of Self. (Nye 2009: 6)

Nye also describes children’s spirituality as ‘relational awareness’. Characteristic for this description is its all-encompassing nature and its focus on a ‘natural capacity’ for spirituality. Critical questions can be asked about this natural capacity (Dillen 2020; Csinos 2020). It is clear that many children are open to spirituality if it is somehow nurtured and if the conditions of their context stimulate spiritual growth. However, for some children, this might be very complex. Context is certainly an important factor influencing the possibility of openness for spirituality that should be studied further (Csinos 2020).

The description of children’s spirituality as relational awareness is very significant as it might stimulate important practices with children. Nye (2009) has created the acronym SPIRIT (Space, Process, Imagination, Relationship, Intimacy, and Trust) to summarize important aspects that are to be stimulated in fostering children’s spirituality at home, in churches, schools, health care contexts, and elsewhere. However, the vagueness of the concept of children’s spirituality might lead to critical questions. Is it acceptable to claim something as children’s spirituality if the children do not consider themselves spiritual? What if they do not believe in God or in some form of transcendence? Nye’s definition seems to include transcendence. What is the relationship between Nye’s concept of spirituality and meaning-in-life as a psychological concept? Whereas some psychologists define spirituality as one way of finding meaning, others, including Nye, would probably consider forms of meaning-making or finding meaning as one aspect of spirituality. Further research about the different interpretations of these concepts, especially in their relation to religion and religiosity, is needed.

The field of children’s spirituality has, for a long time, been dominated by scholars from the UK, the USA (see Yust et al. 2005; or the Children’s Spirituality Summit movement, formerly called the Children’s Spirituality Conference: Christian Perspectives, with publications such as Ratcliff 2004), Canada, and Australia. However, new research is

being published by scholars from other regions, such as the Philippines (Baring 2012), Poland (Heland-Kurzak 2019), and Sri Lanka (Lambert 2023). Some authors restrict themselves to the description of children's spirituality, while others combine their study of children's spirituality with suggestions for practices to do with children to support their spiritual development.

6 Church communities, pastoral care, and children

The most classical field of thinking about children and theology is centred around church practices. What do church communities do with children, and what place do they give to children? Four fields are described below: liturgy, pastoral care, Christian social services (or *diakonia*), and catechesis (or faith formation).

6.1 Children and liturgy

The Dutch researcher Lydia van Leersum-Bekebrede, in her PhD dissertation (2021, Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam) about children and liturgy, realized that most relevant articles and books focus on what *should* be done with children in liturgical contexts, but that very few researchers investigate what is actually happening in churches. Practices with children are very diverse. There are communities where children gather with parents in special services, but also contexts where children are away from adults for part of the time, listening to stories and talking about the stories in their own way. There are churches where children are asked to draw, to use their creativity, to sing, to read, and to fully participate in services and celebrations. In other places, they mainly sit and are silent.

From the perspective of childhood studies and its emphasis on children's agency, various authors will focus on the value of participation: children should feel that they have a voice during a service or celebration, such as by formulating or reading prayers, by answering questions about the gospel, or by acting as an altar server. In churches where there are many children attending, these practices might happen often; nonetheless, these authors may ask whether children have to perform what adults have decided upon (whether this is to sit and be silent or to read or be creative). Children might receive far more chances for real participation if adults recognize children's agency (see Van Leersum-Bekebrede 2021).

In other contexts, church leaders might complain that children do not go to church. In regard to this, it is important to remember the idea that children are more than 'the future of the church' (see section 3.2). Rather, it could be beneficial to look into what children need such that they do come to church, and to ask what would be good for them in terms of their participation. In some contexts, this might mean separate services/celebrations for children, maybe in a creative and non-traditional style. In other contexts, this might mean

inclusive and intergenerational services, where (grand)parents and children are invited together and enjoy each other's presence.

In theological research and church practice, discussions continue about whether special services are needed for children or whether this is a form of segregation. These discussions reflect other societal discussions about inclusive activities or special provisions for specific groups, such as people with migration experience, women or men, persons with disabilities, etc. Special services have advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of separate activities, such as specific services for children (with or without their parents), is that they might feel more welcome, encounter others in similar situations, and be engaged in activities that are apt to their interests, capacities, and/or needs. The advantage of more inclusive and intergenerational gatherings is that the whole community shows its hospitality and reflects God's hospitality (Dillen 2009). Various groups and generations might learn from each other. This is not always easy; care-givers with small children are still often asked to leave the church when little children disrupt the structure or quietness of a service or celebration. This raises the question: what do the concepts hospitality, tolerance, and the experience of community mean for churches?

6.2 Pastoral care for children

When people reflect on church practices and children they may mention the sacraments (such as baptism for children, or children's participation in the Eucharist). The field of pastoral care for children is often neglected, but nevertheless important to mention. Part of the church's mission is pastoral care: the care offered by church ministers, professionals, and volunteers for the whole person, especially for the spiritual dimension. Pastoral care is often associated with contexts of contingency: moments of mourning, trauma, and suffering, but also hope and joy. It is closely related to the field of pastoral counselling, which is often organized in a more systematic one-to-one or small group setting, whereas pastoral care happens in all aspects of church communities). Many recent studies have focused on hospital chaplaincy and children (see e.g. Nash, Bartel, and Nash 2018).

This new research shows how the needs of specific age groups, here children, are increasingly considered within pastoral care. Children might encounter illness themselves or the illness of a parent or sibling. How can one support a child in this circumstance? In schools, youth work, and families, pastoral care for children also deserves more attention. Children who are traumatized, who are (for instance) victims of war, domestic violence, poverty, sexual abuse, or unacceptable behaviour in church contexts deserve due pastoral and therapeutic care. In recent years, more publications have begun to deal with how to recognize the trauma and the pain of children or of adults who were abused during their childhood. Theological literature does not only reflect on consequences for the persons who suffered (during their childhood) but also on what it means for their own spirituality.

However, situations of children's sexual abuse and all forms of unacceptable behaviour towards children are only recently being discussed in dialogue with insights from childhood studies and theology about children with a focus on children's agency (Dillen 2021; see section 2.2 and section 3.1.3).

There are many explanations for violent behaviour carried out towards children. However, it would help to start preventive actions and raise awareness regarding those forms that are often unseen or diminished – smaller forms of adultism occurring in contexts where children are neglected, denied access, or considered as not-yet-adults. Just as preventing violence against women should start with refusing to tolerate sexist behaviour, or as preventing violence against ethnic minorities should start with education about how to prevent prejudice, the same is true for violence against children in all contexts. Therefore, the general ideas about children's agency and participation are important in church contexts, not only in educational or liturgical settings but also for preventing abuse and increasing awareness of the value of caring for children as persons.

6.3 Diaconal care, Christian social services, and children

Discussions about pastoral care are sometimes focused on care for individuals or small groups. Christian social services, or diaconal care, refer to more structural forms of care and a specific focus on social circumstances, such as poverty. As explained above, the history of Christianity shows us a strong focus on caring for children. Inspired by childhood studies, theologians today ask how children may not only be perceived as vulnerable but also as resilient (Dillen 2012b). Children not only receive care, but they also care for others (see section 3.1.3). Children protest against climate change, they collect money for charities, they pray for other children, and they care for their siblings. Giving is important for children and should be recognized.

Of course, in some situations, adults ask too much from children. Psychiatry's term 'parentification' (see e.g. Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 1986: 125), where children take on the role of parents, may be destructive for children if they are obliged to give in this way for a long time and without recognition. However, in a daily situation, it is important to create opportunities where children can give to others, as this is an important way of experiencing meaning in life and of children being recognized in their dignity as human persons. Asking children how they would like to contribute in the specific contexts of church and society is therefore also important, in addition to adequate structural and social care for children in their specific circumstances (Grobbelaar and Breed 2016a: esp. ch. 9).

6.4 Catechesis, faith formation, and children

A fourth domain, central to the church, is catechesis or faith formation. Many catechetical practices are organized specifically for children, such as preparation for first communion

in Catholic churches or catechesis for confirmation. In various contexts, catechesis is organized as Sunday school for all children of a community. Most of what is discussed above in relation to religious education is true for catechesis as well (see section 5). In recent discussions, more attention is given to issues about mutuality, power, and learning from each other.

One practice should be mentioned here: Godly Play. This term, coined by the American theologian Jerome Berryman (2013), describes a specific method of telling biblical stories and stories about the Christian tradition to children. Godly Play storytellers (who receive training to deliver Godly Play) not only tell a story with the support of particular sustainable materials but also encourage children to reflect on the story. Most stories include an aspect of wondering, where a group of children reflects together on the story in dialogue with their own lives. There is no right or wrong answer. The storyteller creates room for the voices of children. Some scholars question whether, and to what extent, this practice should be considered a form of theologizing with children. After the wondering stage, children are invited to be creative and to express what they need at this moment. Storytellers are encouraged to refrain from guiding children, from deciding what they have to create or do at this moment. The session ends with a common celebration, with time for silence, prayer, sharing food and drinks, and a blessing. The theology about children and their agency described above strongly support this practice of Godly Play (see e.g. Hyde 2013).

7 Conclusion

During the last decade, much has been written and published about the intersections of children and theology. This entry summarized the main trends of those written in English, German, French, and Dutch, with a focus on the newest perspectives from different contexts and various parts of the world. However, since many important authors and perspectives were not mentioned or received minimal attention, readers may consult the bibliography to delve deeper into this complex field, where the concepts ‘child’ and ‘theology’ are combined in various ways (child theology, childist theology/ethics, children’s theology, theology of/about/with/for children, etc.) for equally diverse meanings. Areas for future discussion and research could include (Christian) theology’s relation to: child abuse, trauma studies, other religions, views of children themselves, postcolonial and gender perspectives, and discussions about power, among many others.

Children are not always considered persons with their own voices and agency. Most of the authors discussed in this contribution would agree that their vulnerability and resilience should be perceived much more. However, the same applies to other groups, especially the elderly. As societies evolve, could the insights from childhood studies and theology be fruitfully used in another new, challenging, and urgent area of research: late

adulthood? Relationships with these new fields of research might also be discussed in future contributions on this topic.

Attributions

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