

Fallen Angels: A Contemporary Christian Ethical Ontology of Childhood

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Children have long been recognized in the Christian tradition as something of a mystery. They are objects of the first command to humanity in the Genesis mythology to “be fruitful and multiply,” the central promise of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, the sign of the incarnation, the first to be welcomed into the kingdom of God, and the preeminent symbol of the discipleship of “children of God.” No lesser thinkers than Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Schleiermacher have written extensively about children’s theological meaning. Yet children today often fall through the cracks when it comes to the study of Christian ethics. For the past century or more, Christian ethicists may have spoken about children *within* larger concerns such as war, business, biomedicine, sexuality, marriage, and women, but not as a sustained disciplinary subject in and of themselves. This remains the case despite children’s lives facing, in today’s post-industrial era, just as profound a social, economic, and cultural crisis as they did, for example, in the Reformation with the emerging power of states or in modernity with the rise of industrialization.

This paper takes up just one important dimension of a possible Christian ethics of children, namely what I call the ontological question of *how to conceptualize what children are as they come into the world*. Do children initially enter human society innocent or sinful, good or evil, blank slates or bursting with natural potentialities, passive or full of agency, undeveloped adults or already fully human, animal-like or spiritual, members of the private or the public sphere, individuals or relational and social? Such questions are particularly suited to religious investigation because they ask, not just about empirical realities observable by psychology and sociology, but about the mystery of human origins. How one answers such questions will make an enormous difference for a range of other important ethical issues: what child rearing should aim to accomplish, how children should be treated by parents and society, which adults and social institutions should have which child-related responsibilities, and so on. Historically, for example, ethicists who have started with the view that children are pure and innocent have tended to place greater value on nurturance and the primacy of mothers’ roles, whereas those starting with

children's sinfulness have tended to place more value on discipline, the role of fathers, and involvement by the larger community.¹

My argument here is that a more complex view of childhood needs to be found in Christian ethics today that can encompass children's at once original goodness and original sin. I show that Enlightenment perspectives on children have now led to a culture that perceives children as pre-rational proto-adults instead of full human beings in their own right, and that this increasingly allows children to become reduced to social commodities. At the same time, major traditional Christian ethical perspectives on children have failed to stand up to this commodification because of their own oversimplified concepts of childhood. The symbolism I develop of children as "fallen angels" is an effort to retain a more complex sense of children's mystery as human beings, while keeping in view their unique struggles and vulnerabilities in today's world.

The Disappearance of Childhood in Contemporary Culture

It is relatively well known that children today, in both developed and undeveloped parts of the world, face increasing and sometimes unprecedented social problems. In the richest country in the world, the United States, for example – my own country and the primary, though not sole, focus here – children in the 1970's surpassed the elderly as the poorest and least able to access health care of all age groups, with the youngest children in the worst circumstances.² Children in this country also spend on average 10 hours a week less time with their parents than they did thirty years ago, and are bombarded with corporate advertising and images of violence and adult sexuality as they spend on average 23 hours a week in front of television and computers. Similarly, teenagers face increasing rates of depression, drug use, teen birth rates, homicide, and suicide.³ Marriage,

1 I have explored some of these other issues in *Animals and Innocents. Theological Reflections on the Meaning and Purpose of Child-Rearing*, in: *Theology Today* 59.4, 2003, 559-82; *The Christian Ethics of Children. Emerging Questions and Possibilities*, in: *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 4.1, 2004 (electronic journal); and "Let the Little Children Come". *Child Rearing as Challenge to Contemporary Christian Ethics*, in: *Horizons* 31.1, 2004, 64-87.

2 On poverty, see United States Census Bureau, *Census 2000*, P60-210 (www.census.gov), vi and ix. On health care, see Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West, *The War Against Parents. What We Can Do for America's Beleaguered Moms and Dads*, New York (Houghton Mifflin Company) 1998, 250.

3 On time with parents, see Victor R. Fuchs, *Women's Quest for Economic Equality*, Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Press) 1988, 111. On television, see William Doherty, *Take Back Your Kids. Confident Parenting in Turbulent Times*, Notre Dame, IN (Sorin Books) 2000, 138-39. On teenagers, see Hewlett and West, *The War Against Parents*, 46-50, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Kid's Count Data Book 2000*, 28. Alissa Quart's *Branding, The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (Arrow) 2003, argues that children are increasingly "branded" by media.

which has traditionally protected children from poverty, is now in all developed countries in significant decline, with more than half of children in the United States spending at least part of their childhood living apart from one of their parents.⁴

It is important to recognize, however, that children's issues are also global. In the European Union, the situation for children is largely better, but still troubling and heading in the United States' direction. Here a disproportionate 21% of children live in low-income households (although this varies significantly by country), and concern is growing about children's rights and health in a context of globalization.⁵ In the developing world, where the vast majority of children live, the situation is in many ways much worse. A third of the world's children suffer from malnutrition, a quarter live in abject poverty (family income of less than \$1 a day), and, each day, approximately 33,000 children under the age of five die from easily preventable causes.⁶ In addition, global children's rights are facing setbacks in the areas of labor and prostitution, primary education, increasingly punitive judiciaries, and health and educational inequalities for girls.⁷ Further, many parents and community leaders in developing countries feel their children are increasingly "enslaved," as one commentator puts it, to Western corporate greed and cultural hegemony.⁸

What is less well understood, however, are the longer-term shifts in cultural outlook toward children that have helped to fuel and maintain these trends, even against concerted efforts by many child advocates, some of whom are well funded. A seismic shift has gradually taken place in the past three hundred years, led by developed countries, in how to understand the idea of "childhood" itself (as opposed to the empirical reality of "children"). Childhood has become increasingly privatized, individualized, and invisible to the public and social sphere (which has been conceptually separated from the private sphere). As a result, it has gradually devolved into one more consumer commodity to be *used for* the market choices of

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- 4 Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent. What Hurts, What Helps*, Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Press) 1994; Frank F. Furstenberg and Andrew Cherlin, *Divided Families. What Happens to Children When Parents Part*, Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Press) 1991; and David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions 2000. The Social Health of Marriage in America*, Report of the National Marriage Project, Rutgers University (2000) (marriage.rutgers.edu).
 - 5 The European Children's Network, *Including Children? Developing a Coherent Approach to Child Poverty and Social Exclusion across Europe*, 2002, and *Children's Rights are Human Rights*, 2002. The World Health Organization, *The Health of Children and Adolescents in WHO's European Region*, 2003.
 - 6 UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children*, 2002, and *Special Session on Children*, May 2002 (www.unicef.org).
 - 7 UNICEF, *Convention of the Rights of the Child* (www.unicef.org).
 - 8 Keith White, *Media and Children*, Unpublished Presentation at Child Theology Consultation, May 2004.

adults. The irony is that this shift has taken place largely in the name of modernist humanism, which has increasingly applied a uniquely “adult” interpretation to what “the human” really means. The consequence is that childhood *per se* has slowly and silently been written out of the public sphere and public moral discourse. Allow me to explain.

John Locke can be credited with helping to inspire great gains in children’s education and development, and a powerful critique of the then prevalent harsh Puritan disciplinarianism in England, in his enormously popular and influential 1693 treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Children are not animals to be civilized but vessels for the infusion of Reason. Children come into the world with enormous rational *potential*. They are each a *tabula rasa* or “blank slate” upon which Reason may be written through enlightened education. The purpose of child rearing is then for the child to subordinate “his Will to the Reason of others” so that he (and perhaps also she) will learn to “submit to his own Reason, when he is of an Age to make use of it.”⁹ The early Reformation view of submitting the *evil* will to *God* is replaced with an Enlightenment submitting the *irrational* will to *Reason*.

The advances here came, however, with a price. While Locke is not without allowance for children’s playfulness and energy, these distinctive attributes of childhood *per se* came to be valued less in themselves than as means for directing children toward something they are not yet: rational adults. Play becomes a tool for the eventual capacity for work. As Locke says, “Nine parts of Ten are what they are, Good or Evil, useful or not, by their Education.”¹⁰ To say that children come into the world as blank slates is really to say that they are not yet *fully* human, that they lack the key trait defining humanity, namely principled rationality. Good or evil, useful or not, humanity has simply not yet developed within them. Children are viewed as coming into this world as merely *pre*-adults, and not as something inherently important to society in and of themselves. Only through systematic adult education is a distinctively human Reason impressed upon an otherwise formless lump of wax.

Another consequence is that, as in the Reformed thinking to which Locke was reacting, children’s education is to be turned over quickly from mothers and women to fathers and men, for the former threaten children’s rational development through their irrational “Cocking and Tenderness.”¹¹ This may seem surprising to us today, but as we will see, twentieth century assumptions about women’s primacy in child rearing have a different origin.

9 Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, in: *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke*, eds. J.W. and J.S. Yolton, New York (Oxford University Press) 1989, 105 and 138-39.

10 *Ibid.*, 83.

11 *Ibid.*, 84.

One might expect that Locke's Enlightenment successor Jean-Jacques Rousseau would have a more robust view of childhood *per se*, since Rousseau's extremely popular book *Emile, or On Education*, almost a century later in 1762, envisions children as coming into the world filled with the goodness of nature. Rousseau in fact criticizes the by then prevalent Lockian view and insists, "They are always seeking the man in the child without thinking of what he is before being a man."¹² The purpose of child rearing should instead be to protect and nurture what "the Author of nature" has already endowed in children from birth. Nature supplies children with a substantive goodness of their own.

But in fact, Rousseau continues to share with Locke the presupposition that children are to be infused by adults with Reason, that such is accomplished only through education toward adulthood, and that after a period of female nursing this Enlightened task must be handed over to fathers and men as the more rational creatures. "A father ... owes to his species men; he owes to society sociable men; he owes to the state citizens."¹³ Women are almost too pure for this larger social task, and girls not ultimately its proper object. What Rousseau adds is the further Romantic notion that children come into the world, not just blank slates, but naturally innocent and good, like "noble savages" who only become evil and disordered when society corrupts nature instead of perfecting it. But the result, again, is that childhood itself is separated off from full – that is, "rational" – humanity. Nature must still be rationalized to achieve humanity in the sense of social and public citizenship.

This modernistic tendency to view children as coming into the world as pre- or proto-adults, still yet to be educated into humanity proper, was taken in the twentieth century to perhaps its logical and most extreme conclusion. For here, in various ways, children are increasingly viewed as existing to be *instruments* of rational adults. Children are not only pre-adults but, finally, *in the service of* adults. This view arises alongside a larger growth of utilitarianism as an all-consuming ethic in late modernity. As Jürgen Habermas puts it, a rationalized market functionalism has come to "colonize the lifeworld" of culture, communities, and families.¹⁴ This can be seen, for example, in the public educational mantra in the United States of achieving "excellence," which has less to do with any kind of pre-modern Aristotelian "excellence" as *arête* or "virtue" – becoming a contributor to the social good – and more to do with the market value of becoming number one, out-competing everyone else, and developing one's potential for "getting ahead" in the world when one becomes an adult.

12 Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom, New York (Basic Books) 1979, 34.

13 *Ibid.*, 49.

14 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume Two, Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, Boston (Beacon Press) 1987, 325, 355, and 367-73.

One of the most influential books on childhood of recent years is the Nobel Prize-winning economist Gary Becker's 1981 *A Treatise on the Family*. Here, Becker applies "rational choice" economic theory to child rearing to show that everything parents and society do for children is really a subtle and complex calculation of market self-interest. Extending Adam Smith's theory of capitalism, Becker argues that child rearing is implicitly – and therefore should be more explicitly – governed by underlying rational choice principles in which, as in all things human, "individuals maximize their utility [or goods]."¹⁵ The apparent altruism of parents toward their own offspring results from the fact that "their utility is raised when their children are better off."¹⁶ That is, parental "investment" of time, money, and resources should be calculated in view of its anticipated short- and long-term emotional, familial, and financial payoff. The entire system can then be reduced to a series of elaborate child rearing equations, such as those filling Becker's book.

What is wrong with this picture is not that parents and society do not in many senses act in this way; indeed, parental investment is key to funding the enormous energy and resources that child rearing requires. What is wrong is that a market rational choice analysis involves the necessary disappearance of the very object it seeks to understand: the child. For children are by definition, even by Becker's own admission, *not yet* fully rational calculators. They are not yet themselves agents or subjects in the "rational choice" arena. Rather, they are only that world's *objects*, there to fulfill the calculated interests of parents, communities, and society. They fit into this model only as others' private goods and preferences. The result is that children come into the world as passive consumer commodities, present for all ethical intents and purposes only for the satisfaction of the utilitarian ends of adults.

There are other ways in which children are reduced in contemporary culture to adult commodities as well. Among these I would count certain forms of evolutionary ecology that subordinate children to parental (and societal) *reproductive* value (more along Rousseau's naturalistic lines).¹⁷ Or one could point to certain understandings of democracy that exclude children from an arena of public competition among interests.¹⁸ Even some conceptions of children's "human rights" operate on the traditional mod-

15 Becker, *A Treatise on the Family*, Enlarged Edition [original edition 1981], Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Press) 1991, ix.

16 *Ibid.*, 5.

17 Wilson, *Sociobiology. The New Synthesis*, Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Press) 1975; Midgley, *Beast and Man*, Ithaca, NY (Cornell University Press) 1978; Buss, *The Evolution of Desire. Strategies of Human Mating*, New York (Basic Books) 1994.

18 John Rawls' "political liberalism," for example, assumes that public discourse rests on autonomous agents determining their own interests based on "rational" procedures that it is far from clear children play any part in. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Press) 1971.

ernist assumption of “rights” as attached to individualized rationality and agency, children gaining them only insofar as they are *analogous* to adults. Rights language only makes children visible *as children* if it is tied instead to the risk of vulnerability and social commodification.

Perhaps the most widespread form of children’s marginalization lies, ironically, in the more “experience near” realm of the family. As Hugh Cunningham has shown in *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, economic development and an increased romanticization of childhood in Europe and North America has led in the late twentieth century to the view that children should no longer contribute *to* society but instead be separated off and protected *from* it.¹⁹ The result of this, in part, is that children are chiefly brought into the world for little other purpose than the consumer life-style preferences of their *parents*, much like owning a pet or developing a hobby. While it is good that children no longer have to work long hours in dangerous factories and have the leisure to play and learn, these benefits have also been accompanied by a notion that children exist chiefly for the private satisfaction of the parents who choose to have them.

Such a view can be found in a great deal of child rearing popular psychology, as for example in the 2002 tellingly titled *Becoming Good Parents: An Existential Journey*. Here, it is argued that “parenting provides parents with new channels for the expression of a wide variety of emotions. It allows them to deepen their capacity for love and empathy. ... Through parenting, parents are forced to examine their own goals and values and thus are enabled to formulate a philosophy of life.”²⁰ This and the enormous volume of similar books that crowd the shelves of today’s bookstores do, to be fair, seek to help focus on children for the children’s own sake as well. And it is clearly good for children to have parents who find such satisfactions in their roles. But at the same time, the troubling implication is that children exist primarily as objects to satisfy parental emotional needs, perhaps even as means for parents to get back in touch with their own “inner child.” Humanistic psychology in particular often assumes that parents who seek personal fulfillment through them best serve children. The idea of children as a dimension of fulfilled adult life – when held *by itself*, unmediated by larger concerns as well – still reduces children to privatized commodities.

While these broadly consumerist models of childhood are far from the whole story in contemporary advanced- and post-industrial culture, they are peculiarly prominent. Historians now widely believe, contra the famous assertion in 1960 by Philippe Ariès, that children have more or less

19 Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500*, New York (Longman) 1995, 190.

20 Mufid James Hannush, *Becoming Good Parents. An Existential Journey*, Albany, NY (State University of New York Press) 2002, 5.

always been objects of private satisfaction for their parents.²¹ But today this dimension of child rearing dominates all others. As objects of parental fulfillment and corporate gain, children increasingly disappear as persons in and of themselves in the public moral realm.

The root of this problem, I suggest, is the modernistic idea that full humanity consists only in the capability for Reason. While this view has many advantages, it tends to reduce *childhood* to only potential or inchoate humanity, full humanity coming about only to the extent that adults either train children to be rational or use them for their own rational purposes. The idea that children come into the world as blank slates has not only remained current three centuries after Locke, but it has been deepened into various senses in which children are objects within adult social schemas, blank slates upon which adults write *their own* chosen preferences. In effect, childhood becomes increasingly a reflection or image merely of us, an idol of our own adult desires and interests, lacking a distinctive human meaning and substance.

Childhood Innocence

Could children be rescued from adult commodification if adults understood them as coming into the world with their own special innocence and goodness? Could Christianity suggest that, instead of making children images of ourselves, we view them more primordially as images of their Creator? This strategy has animated several major theologians in history, most notably Friedrich Schleiermacher, and plays a large role in much of contemporary Christian discussion of children.

I want to argue here that such a view has the advantage of showing why children should be understood as full human beings in their own right, even in their unique vulnerability, dependency, and lack of fully developed rationality. At the same time, however, it is not in itself a sufficient explanation for why children demand special adult responsibility. For the notion of children as innocent gifts from God unfortunately plays into, indeed in a certain sense underlies, much of contemporary culture's sense that children are chiefly *private* rather than public concerns. It can therefore offer only a partial response, even if still a helpful one.

Friedrich Schleiermacher's powerful articulation of the ontological innocence of children as they enter the world was written during the rise in nineteenth century industrial bourgeois culture of "separate spheres" of

21 Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, Harmondsworth (Penguin) 1960. Recent historians who contest Ariès' view in this regard are: Linda Pollock, *Forgotten Children. Parent-child Relations from 1500 to 1900*, New York (Cambridge University Press) 1983, 141-42; Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680*, London, 1982, p. 118; and Ralph Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1450-1700*, London, 1984, 156.

the private home of women and children and the public workplace largely of men. Mothers were to nurture children in the pure haven of the home, protected from the fallen greed and avarice of the outside market economy and society. Rather than “rationalizing” children into public citizenship, a task previously assigned primarily to men, the unique and special world of children was to be protected. In two influential and popular texts, *Christmas Eve: Dialogue on the Incarnation* (1806) and *The Christian Household: A Sermonic Treatise* (1820), Schleiermacher argues that children come into the world as fresh gifts from God, not yet corrupted by – and indeed therefore models for the improvement of – the larger social world into which they must eventually enter.

The first text is a novella in which a young girl named Sophie (implying “wisdom”) turns out to be the true “gift” of Christmas, an incarnation of the joy and goodwill for which humanity is primordially created. As her mother claims, Sophie represents in fact the incarnation of Jesus, for the child is herself “the pure revelation of the divine.”²² As Dawn DeVries argues, Schleiermacher thinks adults should “be converted and become as little children.”²³ The child’s presence in adult company is, like Christmas, a kind of renewed “baptism” for adults into children’s “immediate union” with God.²⁴ The gospel emphasis on Jesus’ nativity and its including children as first in the kingdom of God are taken to their logical conclusion, namely that children are the surest signs and representatives of God in this world. Extending this thinking, the younger the child, the closer she or he is to humanity’s original sacred creation, uncorrupted by fallen adult strivings.

This romantic view of childhood innocence is only softened slightly in Schleiermacher’s later text, which was written after starting his own family of six children. Here, he associates the child’s special capability for “pure reverence” – for “the feeling of absolute dependence” – with its special closeness to what he calls the “sacred sphere of nature.”²⁵ As in Rousseau, nature is to be the guide for society and not the other way around. But unlike in Rousseau, nature in the form of the sacred gift of the child trumps even human reason as the true measure of human goodness. Reason is not discounted, but it has to find its ultimate origins in a childlike spiritual wonder if it is to avoid being turned toward distorted worldly and utilitarian ends. The central reading Schleiermacher chooses for these sermons

22 Schleiermacher, *Christmas Eve: Dialogue on the Incarnation*, trans. Terrence N. Tice, Lewiston, NY (Edwin Mellen) 1990, 36.

23 DeVries, “Be Converted and Become as Little Children”. Friedrich Schleiermacher on the Religious Significance of Childhood, in: *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia Bunge, Grand Rapids, MI (Eerdmans) 2001, 329-49.

24 Schleiermacher, *Christmas Eve*, 55, 62.

25 Schleiermacher, *The Christian Household. A Sermonic Treatise*, trans. Dietrich Seidel and Terrence N. Tice, Lewiston, NY (Edwin Mellen) 1991, 42.

is Paul's admonition: "Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged."²⁶ He interprets this saying as a prohibition against corrupting children through adult "authority" and "force," calling adults instead – and especially mothers, as the primary protectors of the inner sanctum of the home – "to remove anything whereby love can be disturbed and open simplicity may be wounded."²⁷

While today such doctrines of separate spheres and social corruption have become rightly suspect, the notion of childhood innocence has enjoyed remarkable staying power. Witness, for example, Karl Rahner's claim that "we do not move away from childhood in any definitive sense, but rather move toward the eternity of this childhood, to its definitive and enduring validity in God's sight."²⁸ Or witness Herbert Anderson and Susan Johnson's 1994 study *Regarding Children*, which reads Christianity, in part, as making the counter-cultural claim that "each new life becomes a miracle, a unique gift to be protected and nourished," which means that "we cannot know the fullness of God without understanding what it is to be a child."²⁹ In these and other ways, Christian thinkers have often been at pains to point out, in the face of modern utilitarianism and secularism, that children are not only fully human from birth, but they are in fact the model, as shown in the gospels, of the meaning of full humanity itself, a meaning that adults, not children, must strive to develop.

The advantage of this notion of childhood ontological innocence is that it confers upon children a distinctive moral value in their own right. It does so because it refuses to reduce the meaning of human life to adult reason, looking instead at the larger picture of human createdness as good. If the eventual outcome of modern Enlightenment rationalism is to make children effectively second-class citizens, then this may be countered by a deeper affirmation of children's original createdness in the image of God, indeed their unique closeness to God as not yet humanly corrupted. In this way, we welcome children into the world, not as pieces of wax to be molded by adults, but as fresh opportunities for the incarnation of goodness and the renewal of the world itself. Rather than disappearing from public moral view, children recall society to its own primordial possibilities.

Such an affirmation of childhood innocence is not in itself enough, however, to resist children's contemporary commodification. There is a hidden alliance between innocence and privatization. Insofar as children enter the world not yet corrupted by it, it is natural to seek protection for

26 Col. 3:21. Discussed by Schleiermacher in: *The Christian Household*, 38-53.

27 *Ibid.*, 45 and 53.

28 Rahner, *Ideas for a Theology of Childhood*, in: *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8, London (Darton, Longman & Todd) 1971 (33-50), 35-36.

29 Anderson and Johnson, *Regarding Children. A New Respect for Childhood and Families*, Louisville, KY (Westminster John Knox) 1994, 9 and 20.

children by sequestering them within the child-oriented realms of home and school. This is in fact exactly what has happened in developed – and increasingly developing – countries in the century and a half since Schleiermacher wrote. It is true that the privatization of child rearing has saved children from the dangers of factory work, increased time spent on schooling, and provided children with more years of leisured play time than ever before (arguably today in developed countries all the way up into the late twenties). But the price for these protections has been the privatization also of child rearing *responsibility*, which increasingly falls on the shoulders of small nuclear families, and, indeed, on the unpaid generosity of mothers (or their low-paid, mostly female surrogates). Privatizing childhood leads to privatizing child rearing.

In the United States in particular, which has taken the ideology of childhood innocence further than anywhere else in the world, it has become extremely difficult even to have a conversation about children receiving the same social, political, and economic supports as, say, the elderly and the disabled. Children are trotted out in political campaigns as symbols of moral compassion, but in the process are denied meaningful social support. The cultural assumption is that children are either the responsibility of their parents alone, or uniquely resilient beings whose purity and innocence will transcend and overcome mundane worldly obstacles. Ironically, therefore, the effort to elevate children into a status of unique moral value has also gradually absolved adults outside the private sphere of much of the child rearing responsibility that even modernity insisted they have. It places children, like women in the nineteenth century, up on an ethereal pedestal, so that they are pure yet also separated off from public social concern.

Children as Evil

Considerations such as these might lead us to ask whether children would be better served if we frankly acknowledged their fully human participation in sin. Strange though such a notion may sound to many contemporary ears, it has a long and distinguished history in Christian thought in figures like Augustine and John Calvin, has significant currency in Christian communities in developing countries, and is making something of a comeback in certain urban African-American and poor white churches in the United States that face some of children's most trenchant social problems.

The key benefit to viewing children as coming into the world with original sin – which does not necessarily mean children are *more* sinful than adults – is that it acknowledges the profound humanity of their struggle to grow and develop in this world. As a result, it calls not just parents but also the entire adult community to offer children substantive

and energetic guidance as they learn to participate meaningfully in society. The drawback to this view, however, is that it has a tendency to commodify children in a different way, for it risks reducing children to uncritical and passive recipients of already established adult social values and purposes. Let us see how this view of children's ontological nature works and what it may still have to offer.

The classic Christian articulation of childhood evil is found in Augustine's autobiographical *Confessions*, where he confesses that "no man is free from sin, not even a child who has lived only one day on earth"; indeed, "I was born in sin and guilt was with me already when my mother conceived me."³⁰ Evidence for this original sinfulness of children is found when considering babies' actions such as crying for food and throwing tantrums when they do not get their way. These are not behaviors for adults to imitate, but, on the contrary, behaviors to be rooted out and discarded as we grow up. Children are demanding and self-centered and only gradually learn to tame their passions, have concern for others, and relate productively to the social world around them. For Augustine, "If babies are innocent, it is not for lack of will to do harm, but for lack of strength."³¹

Augustine's deeper theological point is not, however, that children are any more evil than anyone else, but that evil is original to the human condition and needs to be frankly addressed. The confession of sin is the starting point for true faith and dependency on the grace of God. To convict children of sin is to recognize their full heritage as children of Adam and their need to face their inner rebellious hearts in order to begin to find the true peace intended by their Creator. Recognizing children's sinfulness is part of a more transcendent form of love. As Martha Ellen Stortz has pointed out, it opposes any simple instrumentalization of children and endows them with a certain respect as ends in themselves.³²

It is, however, John Calvin who develops such notions into a full-blown theology of child rearing. In extensive discussions of children in the *Institutes* and *Commentaries*, Calvin argues that children come into the world as animal-like creatures needing active discipline in order to be turned away from sinful disorder. Calvin agrees with Augustine that children's "whole nature is a seed of sin ... [so that] even infants bear their condemnation with them from their mother's womb."³³ But he further develops the idea that children's inborn "seeds of sin" naturally develop over time into increasing capacities for becoming actual "fruits" of

30 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin, New York (Penguin) 1961, 28.

31 Ibid.

32 Stortz, "Where or When Was Your Servant Innocent?". *Augustine on Childhood*, in: *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Bunge, 78-102.

33 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Philadelphia, PA (Westminster) 1960, 4.15.10. (References here and subsequently in *Institutes* are to book, chapter, and section.)

sin.³⁴ These greater capacities for sin arise first around the age of seven with the child's development of reason, and second at puberty with the development of sexuality. Left to their own devices, the child's growing capacity for reason will only be used for calculating how to get more of what it wants for itself; its budding sexuality will gradually be swallowed by indiscriminate lust. Thus, mature thought and sexuality have to be deliberately and painstakingly instilled.

It is interesting in this regard to examine Calvin's reasons for infant baptism.³⁵ The point is not, as it was for medieval thinkers like Thomas, to save infants from limbo, the place they go if they have *not yet* sinned but remain uninitiated into the church. Baptism for Calvin can have no such ontological effect on the child. Rather, it is primarily carried out for the sake of parents and others charged with the child's moral education and for the child herself to look back on as she matures. It keeps the community from negligence in instructing its children into becoming full "members of the church."³⁶ It also makes adults and especially older children "fired with greater zeal for renewal" and reminds them that "since we are born sinners, we need forgiveness and pardon even from the time in our mother's womb."³⁷ At the same time, the baptized child herself will be able to look back and recognize her baptism as a "sign" or "assurance" of God's mercy against sin, becoming one way of helping prevent sin from "dominating" or "overcoming" as the child grows up into the world.³⁸ Baptism confers a retrospective "seed ... of repentance and faith" that will hopefully grow larger in the child as she or he learns to resist the seeds of iniquity flowering everywhere within.³⁹

The major problem facing parents, communities, and especially the church is therefore, for Calvin, to prevent original sin from "dominating," "ruling," and "overwhelming" children as they grow up into God's promised covenant.⁴⁰ The more "holy discipline" a child receives from adults, the more likely that child will live in God's grace and the more secure will become the social order for God's reign.⁴¹ Calvin therefore took great and detailed interest in all aspects of children's daily lives, from table manners to obeying elders, participating in regular work, and attending church.

34 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.15.10-11. See also Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, 46 volumes, Edinburgh (Calvin Translation Society) 1843-1855, reprinted in 22 volumes, Grand Rapids, MI (Baker Books), 1989, Commentary on Gen 8:21.

35 For a detailed discussion of this, see Barbara Pitkin, "The Heritage of the Lord". Children in the Theology of John Calvin, in: *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Bunge, 160-193.

36 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.32.

37 *Ibid.*, 4.16.20 and 4.16.22.

38 *Ibid.*, 4.15.11, 4.16.9, 4.16.21, and 4.16.32.

39 *Ibid.*, 4.16.20.

40 *Ibid.*, 4.15.11.

41 Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, Commentary on Psalm 127.

Perhaps most influential of all, Calvin advocated children's systematic public education. Further, he advocated strong marriages and fathers' active involvement in child rearing, considering these necessary for the vigorous moral education of children.

Contemporary culture is significantly more likely to view children as initially good than initially evil, but at least a couple of variations on this theme do hold some sway today. One is the non-religious tradition of Freudian psychoanalysis, which in its own way is a critique of Enlightenment rationalism and an attempt to pay closer attention to the moral and sexual struggles within the world of children themselves. (Psychoanalysis is today, however, significantly less popular than humanistic psychologies based on the contrary affirmation of children's inherent goodness). Freud detected certain aggressive, violent, animal-like "instincts" in young children for sexual possession of their opposite-sex parent and hence, in the Oedipal conflict, aggression toward their same-sex parent. These "primordial" instincts are only gradually "civilized" through the development of a super-ego or conscience, and eventually through an ego strong enough to resist destruction by powerful unconscious psychic drives. "The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction."⁴² Like a man on horseback, Freud claims, the ego develops some measure of happiness and socialization as it matures, but only insofar as it recognizes and learns to handle the more powerful and potentially violent animal-like instincts beneath it and with which it was born.⁴³

In Christian ethics, however, the closest view one will find to this belief in children's innate disorder or sin is the very different perspective of various brands of communitarianism. Communitarians (broadly understood) are generally less interested in the nurturing of children's inner goodness than in transmitting, in an otherwise fallen world, robust social values. Stanley Hauerwas, for example, resists adults viewing children as their "equals" because this makes us "raise our children permissively [and] fear 'imposing' our values on them."⁴⁴ Children will grow up without values and character, especially in today's cultural climate of individualistic autonomy, unless families, churches, and communities have the courage to *initiate* them into larger social and traditional mores. "Intimacy and care are indeed important, but equally important is the initiation of children into moral beliefs and institutions which we value."⁴⁵ The implication

42 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey, New York (W.W. Norton) 1961, 111.

43 Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. James Strachey, New York (W.W. Norton) 1960, 19.

44 Hauerwas, *A Community of Character. Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, Notre Dame, IN (University of Notre Dame Press) 1981, 160.

45 *Ibid.*, 173.

– although not as dramatically stated as in Augustine or Calvin – is that children’s original sin must be contained and resisted through an active socializing discipline. Children are not simply good in themselves but need values to be *transmitted* to them.

In other communitarian literature we hear the re-emergence of the need for children to become publicly “civilized.” As Gilbert Meilander puts it, “Parents commit themselves to initiating their children into the human inheritance and, more particularly, into the stories that depict their way of life. In so doing, they shape, mold, and civilize their children.”⁴⁶ Or, in a more political vein, Amitai Etzioni insists that civic social responsibility grows only from the “transmission,” “installation,” and “internalization” of social “values.”⁴⁷ And Jean Bethke Elshtain argues, somewhat differently again, that we need “a revamped defense of family authority” in order for child rearing to succeed in “inculcating moral limits and constraints.”⁴⁸ Children will naturally and gladly take upon themselves the contemporary world’s self-interested nihilism, the implication goes, if not inculcated with senses of social responsibility. A world without disciplined child rearing might resemble something like William Goulding’s scenario in *The Lord of the Flies*.

The advantage of viewing children as originally sinful beings is that it takes seriously the very real challenges that child rearing faces and the real inner and outer struggles that children themselves must gradually learn to handle. It refuses to sequester children into the private realm alone since parents by themselves cannot be expected to take on the enormous dimensions of such a child-rearing task. Most important, to recognize children’s evilness is to recognize their fully shared humanity, to recognize that children are neither irrational pre-humans nor pure super-humans but creatures who face difficulties of worldly existence comparable to those faced by the rest of us. To recognize this is to see that children face these difficulties without yet having gained the perspectives and skills that adults have to handle them, and so need a great deal of extra discipline and initiation into the beliefs and rituals that make living a good life in this world a possibility.

At the same time, however, a third kind of child commodification creeps into the picture. While the utilitarian and romantic views of children tend to *separate* children from society, this more realist view tends to *absorb* them into it. In the effort to avoid reducing children to objects of merely private satisfaction, children may easily be reduced instead to

46 Meilander, A Christian View of the Family, in: *Rebuilding the Nest. A New Commitment to the American Family*, eds. David Blankenhorn, Steven Bayme, and Jean Bethke Elshtain, Milwaukee, WI (Family Service America) 1990 (133-48), 143.

47 Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule. Community and Morality in a Democratic Society*, New York (BasicBooks) 1996, 179 and 181.

48 Elshtain, *The Family and Civic Life*, in: *Rebuilding the Nest*, eds. Blankenhorn, et al., (119-32), 131. See also Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman. Women in Social and Political Thought*, Princeton, NJ (Princeton University Press) 1981, 326.

objects of *public* narratives and values. The languages of “transmission” and “initiation” have a darker side that can easily obscure children’s unique being in the world and their developing capacities for approaching the world critically and anew with innocence and wonder. The assumption is that adult society (or at least certain adult societies) has a sufficient purchase on the human good that, rather than infusing new grace into the world, children are to have grace infused by it into them. In this case, children are not so much good *in themselves* as, again, good *for* larger social, cultural, and adult projects and purposes.

Children’s Createdness

These considerations suggest that the contemporary commodification and disappearance of children from public ethical view can be adequately resisted only through a more complex ontological understanding of how children come into the world. Such an understanding must avoid the subtle ways in which the above two kinds of Christian approach unwittingly play into – even as they also resist – a contemporary utilitarian child rearing culture. Such a view, I now wish to suggest, should combine the good reasons above to affirm children’s original innocence and original sinfulness within a more profound ontological picture. Marcia Bunge has emphasized the need for a more balanced view of this kind, as has Bonnie Miller-McLemore in her creative retrieval of Christian views of children’s complex moral and spiritual agency.⁴⁹ The notion of humanity overall as both sinful and primordially good is of course central to a great deal of historical and contemporary Jewish and Christian ethics, and none of the above Christian perspectives ultimately deny it. Exploring this possibility is hardly theologically novel, and I will not defend the larger theological thesis here. What does require further development, however, is what such an integrated perspective could mean specifically with regards to children.

(A further project, which I do not take up here, is how putting children “in the midst” of Christian ethics could, in turn, change the field of Christian ethics itself – just as feminism changed ethical thought through the point of view of women.⁵⁰ The challenge from childhood will be particularly acute because, unlike women, children cannot fully participate in such a disciplinary revolution themselves).

The most appropriate place to begin developing a more complex ontological picture of childhood is, in my view, in mythologies of human

49 Bunge, Introduction, in: *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Bunge, 1-28. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come. Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*, San Francisco (Jossey-Bass) 2003, 144.

50 The Child Theology Movement has recently begun such a project along broader “theological” lines. See www.viva.org/tellme/events/cuttingedge/resources/2002/haddon.html.

Creation.⁵¹ To start from adult rational capacities, as in Locke and those who follow him, is to approach the situation of children backwards, with the inevitable result of grasping childhood only as a precursor to adulthood. Languages of the mythology and symbolism of Creation, by contrast, open up the possibility for re-grasping (*religare*) children as they come into the world in their own human primordially, in relation not to preconceived adult capabilities but to human origins. How to understand children in themselves is in part a hermeneutical question about the kinds of language in which ontological questions may be raised. As Paul Ricœur has said, mythic symbolism helps us re-enact, even if we can never fully capture, the more primordial dimensions of human existence.⁵² Christian ethicists can make a truly invaluable contribution to discussions about children by pressing the question of what children are to its ultimate limits, asking the question of children's primordial appearance in the world.⁵³

The most influential mythology of Creation for Christians is the Genesis 1-3 account of God's creation of humankind and of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. While these are in fact two distinct stories, and while they have been used through the centuries of Christian ethics for various instructive and oppressive purposes, we can still derive from them today some perspective on children's origins. The beginnings of human life as we know it in this world are symbolized here as both primordially good *and* primordially evil, both part of God's good Creation *and* infected – prior to history as we actually know it, and prior to expulsion into this world – with original sin. Human life as we know it is inaugurated not through reason or nature alone, but through a “fall,” a fall that marks our original sin but within a *still more original* goodness. Human beings enter history turned away from the divine goodness that is nevertheless still their own most fundamental reality as made “in the image” of God.⁵⁴ “Fallenness” captures this mysterious and paradoxical original human tension.

51 For a larger defense of this starting point, see my forthcoming: *Moral Creativity*. Paul Ricœur and the Poetics of Moral Life, New York (Oxford University Press).

52 Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan, Boston (Beacon Press) 1967, and, with André LaCocque, *Thinking Biblically*. Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies, Chicago (The University of Chicago Press) 1998.

53 Religious ethics as this kind of questioning of limits was first developed by Paul Tillich in his influential hermeneutics of the “theology of culture” and subsequently taken up and amended by thinkers like Langdon Gilkey, David Tracy, and William Schweiker.

54 This larger theological point is made in such various recent works as Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Volume I. *Human Nature*, New York (Charles Scribner's Sons) 1964, chs. IX-X; Jürgen Moltmann, *Creating a Just Future*. The Politics of Peace and the Ethics of Creation in a Threatened World, Philadelphia (Trinity Press International) 1989; Paul Ricœur, *Figuring the Sacred*. Religion, Narrative, and Imagination, ed. Mark I. Wallace, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 1995, chs. 11, 14, 19, and 21; William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, New York (Cambridge University Press) 1995; and Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, New York (Routledge) 2003, chs. 3, 4, and 10.

This symbolism can be used to deepen our ontology of childhood in at least two complementary ways. First, the Augustinian and Calvinistic view of children as containing the seeds of sin should not blind us to the even deeper necessity to affirm children as nevertheless creatures made in the image of God. As Miller-McLemore argues, using feminist theological interpretations of the image of God, “children complicate life, but they also serve to sanctify it.”⁵⁵ She claims that children are “a complex amalgamation of imperfection and potentiality ... full persons trying to learn how to wield power appropriately and how to have a real say in their lives, sometimes to a fault.”⁵⁶ While the idea of childhood evil is particularly useful in helping us understand children as full human beings like the rest of us, children’s *true* humanity must also be affirmed – even if only mythologically! – as resting in a still more primordial innocence that children bring with them into the world. It is true that children start out as self-centered, demanding, and not yet “civilized,” but it is also even more the case that their unruly natures infuse the world with new sparks of joyfulness, grace, and incarnation that our jaded and over-structured adult lives have obscured. The very capacity for sin in children presupposes a prior capacity for goodness *from which* sin has fallen. And so we are called actively to discern in every aspect of children’s lives, however disordered (indeed, however frightening to our adult need sometimes to suppress childhood itself) the shining image of humanity’s perfect Creator.

Related to this is the connection made in the Genesis symbolism between the goodness of Creation and that of human *pro*-creation. The very first command to humankind before the fall is to “be fruitful and multiply.” This suggests in part that, as creatures created in the image of our Creator, we are meant ourselves to be “creative.” Bringing children into the world should be an expression of faith in humanity’s ultimate procreative and socially creative goodness. It is a practice of hope for ongoing human renewal. As Don Browning has argued, one of the most profound claims of Christianity is that “childbirth participates in the divine creative process.”⁵⁷

As a result, whatever other circumstances may surround sexuality, conception, and pregnancy, ultimately the arrival of a child into the world should be greeted as a sign that our fallen state may experience in some small way its still more primordial renewal. This mythically oriented claim

55 Miller-McLemore, *Heard and Seen. The Challenge of Religious Formation in Families*, in: *Religious Education of Boys and Girls*, eds. Werner G. Jeanrond and Lisa Sowle Cahill, London (SCM Press) 2002, 45-54. See also Miller-McLemore, “Let the Children Come” Revisited. *Contemporary Feminist Theologians on Children*, in: *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Bunge, 446-73.

56 Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 144.

57 Browning, *Marriage after Modernization. How Globalization Threatens Marriage and What to Do about It*, Grand Rapids, MI (Eerdmans) 2003, 243.

should precede any claim about *when* a child's humanity actually begins along the sequence of its biological development (a question I will not enter into here). If Augustine tended to associate sin with sexuality and hence also with children, this must be countered with a more complex view that procreation is nevertheless *primordially* good, as celebrated in Genesis and elsewhere, like the poetry of the Song of Songs. Hidden within the fallen shame of nakedness in Genesis is a more original createdness of Adam and Eve as one flesh. Indeed, Augustine's contemporary John Chrysostom argues that children's being as "one flesh" between their parents makes sexuality and procreation ultimately good.⁵⁸ *Within* the sad realities of this world, children's birth can be seen as a concrete sign of the continuing possibility for human meaning and harmony.

What is more, not only are children products of human creation, but they are themselves fresh infusions into the world of humanity's creative spirit. As images of their Creator, they bring to society an original mysterious creativity and transformative power that society constantly suppresses. Perhaps something like this creative power is suggested by Jesus placing a child "in the midst" of his disciples as a model for the transformation required to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:1-6). While children must also somehow be understood to participate in their own social self-enslavement as children of Adam, they have not yet succumbed so deeply and systematically to it as have we adults, in whom the Creative spirit has been so tamed and distorted.

In this regard it is also important to recognize the stark reality, today and for perhaps all of history, that children's suffering, however much a sign of human sin overall, comes more from the sin of adults than from the sin of children themselves. Of course, all of us suffer from what others do to us, but children have fewer capacities and resources to resist it. Adrian Thatcher argues that children suffer disproportionately from "the complex of structural sin," since they "are often the ones with no voice, the unconsulted and sometimes undeserving victims of oppression."⁵⁹ Pamela Couture similarly argues that children are the greatest victims of both "economic poverty" and "the poverty of tenuous connections."⁶⁰ Children's inherently undeveloped power in the world should at least mitigate any sinfulness we might be inclined to attach to them by recognizing their relatively more powerless situation in the world in the first place. It is not just, as Augustine says, that children lack the strength to sin. It is also that they lack the strength to stand up in the world for their own good, a

58 Chrysostom, Homily 20 on Ephesians 4. See David Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church*, Minneapolis, MN (Fortress Press) 1992, 83.

59 Thatcher, *Marriage After Modernity*. *Christian Marriage in Postmodern Times*, New York (New York University Press) 1999, 152.

60 Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God. A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty*, Nashville (Abingdon), 2000, 23-47.

goodness which is therefore all the more important for us adults to recognize, affirm, and nurture. Herein also lie more appropriate grounds for conceiving of children's political rights than modernist grounds based on adult autonomy: namely, as a resistance to social marginalization.

From the other side, the perspective offered by this Creation mythology helps us complicate any purely Romantic idea that children begin life with purity, which is then corrupted by the world. If children are able to grow up to become corrupt, then they must also contain within themselves the seeds of sin in their fallen human capacity for turning away from their own created goodness in the first place. Sin does not *just* take hold of us from without, but is always also on some level an expression of corrupted human freedom. Even if only inchoately and without social power, children participate in sin as a voluntary choice that builds up from within. This capacity for choice and responsibility, however small, endows us in part with our humanity. Babies, of course, do not know what they are doing when they throw their violent tantrums. And minor children are not yet fully responsible for what in adults would be considered crimes. As Hans Jonas argues, it is not children but adults who are most "responsible" for children, for "the newborn unites in himself the self-accrediting force of being already there and the demanding impotence of being-not-yet."⁶¹ And yet, it would be a mistake to view children's "seeds" of responsibility as without the inherent and inscrutable propensity for wrong. This would deny the fuller complexity of their existential human struggle.

Lisa Sowle Cahill has made the important point, in this connection, that perhaps one of the most unique dimensions of Christian views of families is their function of guiding children from an otherwise narrow capacity for love toward ever greater love and generosity toward the larger world. "The central criterion of authenticity to the guiding vision of early Christianity [is] the degree to which Christian families succeed in forming members in an ethos of mutuality, equality, and solidarity and in subsuming kin loyalty under compassion for the 'neighbor,' the 'stranger,' and the 'enemy'."⁶² Nothing could more powerfully oppose the contemporary culture of children as private commodities. Families need to function, in this view, as "domestic churches" that, among other things, direct children's otherwise self-interested and limited proclivities toward ever wider acts of authentic love and justice. To assume that children are already pure and good blunts any such transcending vision of the possible human capacity for love.

61 Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*. In *Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, Chicago (The University of Chicago Press) 1984, 134.

62 Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective*, Minneapolis, MN (Fortress Press) 2000, 47.

The Genesis Creation mythology helps articulate this greater complexity by imagining a self-inflicted fall to lie at the very *origins* of human life in this world. Adam and Eve are not of course children. But, in their child-like innocence in the Garden of Eden, they do find also, buried deep within them, a mysterious and paradoxical capability for rejecting innocence itself. This original human capability for evil can be symbolized in the quasi-human talking serpent; or possibly, as Immanuel Kant says, it is simply “inscrutable.”⁶³ But Genesis resists any dichotomization of the innocence of children from the fallenness of their surrounding society. Evil is not a matter of ontogenetic (or phylogenetic) human development, from a childhood Garden of Eden into an adult fallen world. Rather, it lies at the origins – explicable only through myth – of why human beings are the way they are in the first place. However little they may have acquired worldly ways for actualizing it, and however mysterious it must seem, children are still born with an original human *capability* for sin, and this should be a serious concern in how they are understood and raised.

Finally, it is not unwarranted to suggest that children need special help in this regard. As life progresses, the unique and powerful human capability for evil all too easily blossoms into all manner of cruelty, greed, competitiveness, and violence. To attribute these capabilities to anything other than humanity itself is to entertain a Manichean dualism of Good and Evil that lets human freedom off the hook. Every moral ill in history is at least in part the responsibility of persons who started out life as fresh-faced babies. Thanks to Freud and others, we are now well aware of how the roots of adult behavior begin very early in life. Children stand in a stage of human development where they begin to form core elements of how they will be and act as adults in the world. And even a casual observance of children shows capacities for deliberate cruelty and harm. It is at least worth presuming that children from the very start, however inchoately, must struggle to realize their primordially innocent freedom in relation to *its own* all too fallen propensities.

Fallen Angels

The question remains in the end, however, if children are at once originally sinful yet still more originally good, what then makes childhood unique? Do not adults too share in this primordial human paradox?

I want to conclude by developing a fresh language of children’s coming into this world around the symbolism of “fallen angels.” By this I do not mean to associate children with Satan, as this phrase is used in John Milton’s rather romanticized recasting of the Genesis myth in *Paradise*

63 Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt T. Hudson, New York (Harper Torchbooks) 1960, 38.

Lost. Rather, while children share the ambiguity of human good and evil with the rest of us, they do so in a peculiarly sharp way. As we grow older, we gain from our culture and surroundings, and develop within ourselves, increasing capacities for *mediating* the created and fallen polarities of our existences, for putting language to them and mitigating their disproportionality. This is in part “the work of culture”⁶⁴ whose benefits and distortions children only gradually come to enjoy. But as we first come into the world, the inner disproportion of goodness and evil may be closest to its original mythical intensity. Children experience in a more direct and unmediated way than adults the primordial dimensions of human existence, and the more so the younger the child. It is in this fallen innocence that, at least from a Christian ethical point of view, the true “mystery” of children’s initial being in the world may be said to consist.

Let us return to the myth of Creation one last time. The way in which Adam and Eve *are* like children is that they experience the paradox of human goodness and evil in the sharpest possible terms. They find themselves capable of living in oneness with Creation and yet simultaneously rebellious from it. They lack all cultural, traditional, and societal means for overlaying this inexplicable break with any meaning. All they can do after the awareness of the fall is to run and hide in the bushes. Adam and Eve have not yet developed Noah’s beginnings of civilization, Abraham’s foundation for the covenant of generations and nationality, or Moses’ inauguration of communal life under the law. Each of these social covenants adds a new cultural and symbolic means for responding to humanity’s primordial rebellion from its createdness. The mythical Creation that precedes these covenants points to what it might mean for children to enter the world as human, yet without the larger historically developed means for realizing this humanity within the complex and constructed realities of a reflectively interpreted culture.

This rawness of children’s coming into the world leaves its traces in actual children’s lives. On the one hand, neediness and helplessness are overwhelming. Hunger brings on fits of tears. As Miller-McLemore argues, “children are often the best reminder of our ultimate vulnerability before life’s whims.”⁶⁵ Any incapacity for fulfillment in the world is not yet balanced by the growing sense that one can approach fulfillment through ordered values and alongside others. On the other hand, love is totally absorbing, joy (sometimes) unmitigated and superabundant. Raw Creativity is expressed in an immense capacity to play. Mythological time infuses historical time through children’s great ability to live in the present. These capacities are not as clouded as they gradually become by fears, anxieties,

64 See Gananeth Obeyesekere, *The Work of Culture. Symbolic Transformation in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology*, Chicago (The University of Chicago Press) 1990.

65 Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother. Work and Family as Theological Dilemma*, Nashville, TN (Abingdon Press) 1994, 161.

and senses of possible failure, but rather reflect a relatively untempered oneness with Creation.

As a result, failure and joy, alienation and goodness are more likely to be experienced in sequential isolation than as related to one another within a larger sense of narrative identity. Time has not yet layered the child's imagination with guiding stories that can weave evil and innocence into an unfolding sense of meaning and purpose. While none of us can of course remember how it actually felt to come into the world (this too reflecting a lack of linguistic capacity), we can still extend what we do experience and remember about childhood toward imagining its originating limits. Here, Christian culture suggests that we may posit the child's dual intimacy with and sense of loss from the good, its immediate experience of the stark ambiguity of human fallibility. In this way, children come into the world as "fallen angels" facing the mythological juxtaposition of sinfulness upon innocence in its sharpest possible sense.

At the same time, faith in the ultimate goodness of Creation should lead us to affirm that, within this original disproportionality, the feeling of absolute goodness is *still more* real than the feeling of alienation and anxiety. Children are angels qualified by having fallen, not demons qualified by also having been good. To recognize children's raw humanity but not to affirm humanity as created in the image of God is to submit childhood to a starkness of truly horrific proportions. The truth, however, at least so far as may be affirmed, is that, even in the tiniest infant, the feeling of disproportionality is *less* primordial than the feeling of a mysterious original harmony with Creation. We come into the world at one with its ultimate meaning and purpose, however much we inevitably also choose against it.

All of this suggests in the end that what each child brings to the world is a capacity for this world's own "new creation." To overcome original sin with a still more original sense of goodness – insofar as this is possible – is to contribute to the re-creation of fallen human society itself. The child is a creative spirit hoping to realize itself within this vale of tears. This creative spirit is here to contribute to transforming *this* world in the direction of its own greater historical possibilities. The real potential of children is not simply to *infuse* society with innocence. It is to enter into the very real conflicts and anxieties of fallen human life with a capacity for turning them gradually toward the good. Children can, and inevitably do, also transform the world for the worse. But if humanity is *most* primordially created in the image of its Creator as it enters into the world, then its more original capacity – or so we may affirm – is for helping to create this world into a better place. It is in this more complex and realist sense that children should be viewed as the hope of the world.

In this way also we may better resist our various adult tendencies toward children's privatization and commodification. Children are full human beings like the rest of us who struggle with a small, limited, and

always somewhat corrupted freedom to choose for the good. This freedom in children is not yet fully reflective and enculturated, and so it does not imbue children with full social and legal culpability. But what children do bring to the world, which is less true for adults, is a fresh sense for the true paradox and mystery of the human struggle, and hence a fresh potential for turning this struggle toward the good. Children are not mere proto-adults but already engaged with the full paradoxes of human existence and already bringing something mysterious and new to the all too human task.

Were children *only* born innocent, therefore, it would be difficult to imagine how they could begin to enter into this fallen and ambiguous human task in a meaningful way. Were they *only* sinners, they would have little of value in their own right to offer. In either case, children would have to be submerged to adult ends until such a time as they took on “fully human” dimensions. They would have to be either disengaged from the public realm or as quickly as possible initiated into it. But as “fallen angels,” children are “messengers” from our Creator with something unique and new to bring to the human effort to create a meaningful world for itself. The disadvantage of children’s not yet having become enculturated is that they are easily prey to worldly distortion. The advantage, however, is that the divine in human life is thereby given, as it were, new life, a possible new face.

Conclusion

Such a view of children’s ethical ontology is not only more theologically apt, bringing children closer into the fullness of traditional Christian views of humanity before God, but it also potentially gives Christian ethicists a more useful and meaningful voice in today’s world. If, as I argued, we live in an age marked by a culture of market individualism, and if this culture has contributed to the disappearance of childhood from public ethical view, then fresh voices are needed to make social debates about children’s lives again more broadly possible. Enlightenment rationalism, for all its value in other ways, finds in the discussion of children one of its profoundest ethical limits. But so also, in different ways, do traditional Augustinian and Romantic strands of Christianity. The challenge is to re-imagine the subtle blend of fallenness and innocence that, in a time of children’s privatization and marginalization, will better grasp childhood’s larger than life humanity.

A Christian ethical ontology of children as “fallen angels” serves also as a more secure basis for the Christian ethics of children overall. A more complex view of how children come into the world helps in forming more complex answers to questions such as how children should therefore be treated, what child rearing should ultimately aim to bring about, and who should take what responsibilities for it. These further questions are beyond

the limits of this paper. But we can at least begin to see grounds here for working past traditionally entrenched Christian debates about, for example, stricter discipline versus more open-ended nurturance, civilizing children versus gaining civilization from them, initiating children into values versus appreciating their value in and of themselves, children's teleological goods versus deontological rights, and the tradition of public roles for fathers and private roles for mothers. Moving beyond such entrenched historical dichotomies starts with doing justice, in one way or another, to the ontological depths of childhood itself in its fully human mysteriousness.

Abstract

Der Aufsatz widmet sich der Frage, ob und wie sich das Wesen des Kindes beim Eintritt in die Welt aus der Perspektive einer christlichen Ethik heutzutage bestimmen lässt. Zeitgenössische Konzepte von Kindheit neigen nach Ansicht des Vf. dazu, Kinder häufig einfach als Noch-nicht-Erwachsene, mithin als nicht vollwertige Menschen aufzufassen, was zur Folge habe, dass man sie nicht selten als Wesen betrachte und behandle, die wie Gebrauchsgegenstände den Interessen der Erwachsenen dienstbar gemacht werden könnten. Die beiden im Zusammenhang der Geschichte des Christentums bislang maßgeblich gewordenen Einschätzungen der Kindheit, also zum einen die tradierte Ansicht, wonach Menschen von Geburt an als Sünder zu betrachten sind, zum anderen die nicht weniger ideologisch überhöhte Vorstellung von der Reinheit und Unschuld der Kinder, vermögen diesen gegenwärtigen, desaströsen Auffassungen dem Urteil des Vf. zufolge nichts entgegenzuhalten, scheinen sie vielmehr eher zu untermauern. Darum sei ein neues Verständnis der Kinder als „gefallener Engel“ notwendig, d.h. als vollwertiger, komplexer menschlicher Wesen, die von Beginn an in den Kampf mit der Sünde verstrickt, gleichwohl noch immer uranfänglich gut sind. Kinder trügen diesen Kampf, so der Vf., auf eine vergleichsweise ursprüngliche und unvermittelte Weise aus und leisteten dadurch einen einzigartigen Beitrag zur menschlichen Lebenspraxis, seien freilich auch in besonderer Weise auf andere angewiesen.