

LET THE LITTLE CHILDREN COME: CHILD REARING AS CHALLENGE TO CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN ETHICS

John Wall
Rutgers University, Camden

ABSTRACT

A contemporary culture of market individualism in the United States today is increasingly marginalizing the lives of children. This situation requires Christian ethicists to raise once again, as in the historical past, the question of the larger meaning and purpose of child rearing as a serious disciplinary concern. This paper identifies fundamental issues of child rearing ontology, teleology, deontology, and practice, and maps out some newly emerging Christian ethical responses by communitarians, liberationists, and covenantalists. It then develops a larger social ethics of child rearing—drawing on a range of historical theological resources—able to speak to children's issues in a disciplinarily complex, publicly meaningful, and culturally transformative way. Its argument is that child rearing should be rescued from its increasing social privatization through a revised covenantal social ethic that strengthens the unique tasks of families but also places them within a larger interdependent nexus of community and state supports.

In the last hundred years, the job of thinking critically about child rearing in the United States has largely devolved upon the human sciences of psychology, sociology, ethnography, and history. Ethicists, while occasionally including children in larger discussions of war, business, poverty, sexuality, gender, and medicine, have not made the distinctive vulnerabilities and possibilities of child rearing a sustained, focused concern in its own right. This situation contrasts sharply with the past. Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (named after Aristotle's son) take up child rearing as perhaps the central moral task of the *polis*. Thomas Aquinas understood children's moral development as implicit within the actualization of natural and human law. Martin Luther and John Calvin understood children's education as key

John Wall is Assistant Professor of Religious Ethics at Rutgers University, Camden, and Associate at the Rutgers University Center for Children and Childhood Studies. He is co-editor of Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought (Routledge 2002) and Marriage, Health, and the Professions: If Marriage is Good for You, What Does This Mean for Law, Medicine, Ministry, Therapy, and Business? (Eerdmans 2002), as well as numerous articles on hermeneutics and religious ethics, Paul Ricoeur and contemporary continental thought, the relation of ethics to poetics, marriage, and children.

to societal redemption. And in modernity, Rousseau wrote an entire moral treatise on child rearing (the *Emile*), Locke grounded social contractualism in part in the notion of children entering the world as blank slates, Kant ended his magisterial *Critique of Practical Reason* with a final section on children's learning moral rationality, and Schleiermacher wrote two immensely powerful texts on children as images of God (*Christmas Eve: Dialogues on the Incarnation* and *The Christian Household: A Sermonic Treatise*).

Ethicists should be concerned once again today with the meaning and purpose of child rearing because a growing cultural ethos of individualism and market rationality has made children the new socially marginalized, the new "other." Evidence for this can be seen in the deepening deterioration of many dimensions of children's lives in the United States. Children now surpass the elderly as the poorest and least able to have access to health care of all age groups.¹ As a society, we spend nine times as much on the elderly as on children today.² Within the family, children spend significantly less time with their parents than they did in the 1970's,³ for perhaps the first time in history are more likely than not to live some of their childhood apart from one parent,⁴ and have an unprecedented 33% chance (up from 5% in 1960) of being born outside of marriage.⁵ In addition, despite greater aware-

¹In the early 1970s, children overtook the elderly as the poorest group in the country. During today's relative affluence, 16.9% of American children under 18—or 12.1 million children altogether—live below the rate of poverty (United States Census Bureau, "Census 2000," available on Census web site, www.census.gov, P60-210, vi and ix). Approximately 10 million children have no form of health insurance, according to Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornell West, *The War Against Parents: What We Can Do for America's Beleaguered Moms and Dads* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 250. Adrian Thatcher calls children, as a result, the new socially "oppressed" in *Marriage After Modernity: Christian Marriage in Postmodern Times* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 132.

²Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 74.

³Victor R. Fuchs shows in *Women's Quest for Economic Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 111, that over the 1970's and 1980's children's time with parents declined by on average around 10 hours a week. David Popenoe claims this trend continues, in "Modeling Values for Children in Families," in Jack E. Westerman, ed., *Parenthood in America: Undervalued, Underpaid, Under Siege* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), pp. 90-98, 92-93.

⁴Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 2-3; Jason Fields, *Living Arrangements of Children: Fall 1996*, Current Population Reports, P70-74, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2001; and Tavia Simmons and Martin O'Connell, *Married-Couple and Unmarried-Partner Households: 2000*, Census 2000 Reports, CENSR-5, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003. Living apart from a parent is also shown in these and many other writings to be a contributing factor toward problems like child poverty, physical and emotional illness, truancy and poor performance in school, and sexual abuse.

⁵David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "The State of Our Unions 2003: The

ness of the issue, 2.5 million children in America are still sexually abused each year.⁶ For teenagers, the 1990's saw significant increases in depression, drug use, teen birth rates, homicide, and suicide.⁷ And children of all ages are now the targets of multi-billion dollar corporate marketing and exposed through television and the internet to historically unheard-of sexuality and violence.⁸

Given these and other well-known indicators of children's problematic status in our post-industrial world, ethicists should fundamentally rethink child rearing as an enormously significant challenge to the social order. They need to do so in a way that understands why children's lives today are so obscured from public discourse, and what historical resources may be brought to bear in developing a new child rearing ethics for the future. I propose that the best way to do so is by asking four basic ethical questions whose outlines I develop out of Aristotle's theory of four causes (formal, final, efficient, and material) and the French thinker Paul Ricoeur's moral hermeneutics.⁹ These are, simply put, in question form as follows: (1) ontologically, how do children come into this world, (2) teleologically, toward what goals or ends should child rearing be aimed, (3) deontologically, what kinds of obligations and responsibilities, and for whom, do these ends entail, and (4) practically, by what means should these obligations be accomplished?

Along these lines, this paper maps out first a picture of the kind of market individualism that I believe is the root cause of children disappearing from public ethical view, and then three emerging possibilities specifically out of Christian ethics for re-imagining child rearing today, which I label communitarian, liberationist, and covenantal. I conclude by joining elements of these, particularly the third one, in a further

Social Health of Marriage in America," report of the National Marriage Project, Rutgers University (2000) (see web site at marriage.rutgers.edu), 29.

⁶Michael V. McKenzie, *Domestic Abuse in America* (Lawrenceville, VA: Brunswick, 1995).

⁷Hewlett and West, *The War Against Parents*, 46-50. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2000 "Kid's Count Data Book" reports that the teen birth rate in the United States in the late 1990's was twice that of any other developed country, about 6 births per 1,000 females ages 15-19 (p. 28).

⁸William Doherty, in *Take Back Your Kids: Confident Parenting in Turbulent Times* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2000), 138-39, reports that by the age of 18, the average child in the United States has seen 10,000 food advertisements per year, as well as 200,000 acts of violence and 20,000 murders on television.

⁹Aristotle, *Physics* II.3 and elsewhere. Ricoeur's ethical thought is not patterned explicitly on Aristotle's four causes, but it does in fact have the structure of a movement from an ontological theory of human capability to three specifically moral capabilities that he terms theological esteem, deontological respect, and a culminating mediation of these in practical wisdom (or "critical praxis"). See Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992). Ricoeur himself does not, however, take up the ethics of child rearing.

constructive proposal of my own. My aim, however, is less to decide the issue than to ask the question of what a meaningful and rigorous contemporary discipline of the Christian ethics of child rearing could look like today.

I. Moral Individualism and Childhood's Marginalization

There have been many great benefits from Enlightenment modernity's upholding of the freedom, rationality, and rights of the autonomous individual: democracy, greater social equality, free markets, technological and scientific advancement, and so on. But the picture is more ambiguous when it comes to children, who are by definition *not* yet fully competent and competitive social agents and indeed highly dependent upon others for their well-being. On the one hand, children have enjoyed a monumental "trickle-down" effect from modernity in the form of such things as improved medical care, lower mortality, increased technical education, and legal protections against abuse and labor. On the other hand, children's unique vulnerability has been increasingly overshadowed. Children have devolved into the merely private sphere of the home and family and disappeared from having a significant status in the public realm in part because they are only proto-adults, pre-rational beings not yet able to exercise full human autonomy. Even psychologists, on whom public reflection about child rearing has chiefly fallen, generally view children *developmentally* from the point of view of the realized adulthood *toward* which they should be moving.

The degree and depths to which such a worldview leads to the effective disappearance of children from public ethical reflection can be illustrated by the highly influential book by the Nobel Prize-winning economist Gary Becker, *A Treatise on the Family*. Becker's intention is to come up with a model of family, marriage, and child rearing that is eminently rational and public. This should be done, he believes, by explaining how family dynamics, both diachronically and synchronically, in fact operate at bottom along the same lines as market economies. Becker's "rational choice" model builds on the Enlightenment economist Adam Smith's theories of the marketplace to show that, whether they realize it or not, in families too "the behavior of different individuals is coordinated by explicit and implicit markets" in which the purpose is for "individuals [to] maximize their utility [their "goods"]."¹⁰ Like in business contracts, financial investments, professional advancement, and the social distribution of wealth, child rearing

¹⁰Gary Becker, *A Treatise on the Family*, Enlarged Edition (original edition 1981) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), ix.

is also (or should be) a matter of rational calculation and utility maximization among competing autonomous individuals.

Becker's argument is not individualistic, however, in the simple sense of self-centered and unconcerned for others. He uses sophisticated contemporary economic theory to show why rational utility in child rearing (as to a lesser degree in other social practices) is also "altruistic." Here, Becker links up with another highly influential contemporary perspective on child rearing, that of sociobiology (or evolutionary biology) rooted in Charles Darwin's theories of competitive natural selection. Parents' altruistic care and concern for the well-being of their children results from the fact that "their [parents'] utility is raised when their children are better off."¹¹ Putting time, money, resources, and effort into child rearing is on the whole a good investment, likely to bring increased returns in terms of financial, emotional, and social benefits. Since parents receive the largest returns, they are likely through rational choice calculation to make the largest short-term sacrifices.¹²

Becker's use of economic rational choice theory to understand the meaning and purpose of child rearing may strike some as odd, but in fact it represents in a highly formalized way the logical outcome of modernistic attitudes toward children. When parents try to think about why they have children, and when social and political agencies try to evaluate their child rearing commitments, it is natural today to boil it down to child rearing's anticipated *rewards* or *value*. I raise my children because it will make me happy. I will pay taxes for children's public education so that they eventually become productive workers to run society and pay my social security. One of the few languages we have for speaking of responsibility toward children is this kind of *utilitarian* balancing of the potential benefits or goods of investing our scarce time, energy, and resources into children instead of something else. In terms of the four ethical questions mentioned earlier, this ethos answers that children come into the world blank slates on which must be written productive adult rationality or "excellence," and this is done by highly invested parents and technically skilled experts by means of training in autonomy and competition.

What is wrong with this picture is not that adults do not really act in this manner, for surely from a certain angle they do and even should. And it is somewhat beside the point, as one critic of Becker has argued, that no clear or quantifiable "value" can be attached to the soft mea-

¹¹Ibid., 5.

¹²What is more, parents are more altruistic than children, because "contributions to children tend to be more productive [or "efficient"] than contributions to parents because children have longer remaining lifetimes." Ibid., 302.

asures of investment made in children or predicted outcomes.¹³ The deeper problem is that any analysis of the ethics of child rearing from a market individualistic point of view necessarily involves the disappearance of the very object of analysis itself: the child. Children themselves are not yet the kinds of fully autonomous agents who participate in these sorts of market calculations. Becker even goes one step further and makes children into *instruments* of adult social productivity. Children in and of themselves somehow exist outside the human moral sphere because they are only its passive recipients or commodities. It would not be surprising, therefore, if children in Becker's world ended up in the situation they are in fact in today: increasingly marginalized in the strivings of government, business, mass media, culture, and even parents to derive from children their own adult satisfactions and pay-off. The German ethicist Jürgen Habermas would say that here we find an instance of late modernity's reification of functionalist reason, its marketplace "colonization of the lifeworld."¹⁴ Children need a different kind of adult moral attention if they are not to become invisible as members of society themselves.

Unfortunately, this privatization and commodification of children has also taken place in parts of the Christian church, on both the right and the left. On the right, child rearing is sometimes tied in with a conservative libertarian social ethics in which parental "freedom" to exercise authority over children is associated with theological "freedom" from sin. Children are to be disciplined out of evil in the service of the mission of the kingdom of God, a mission interpreted, however, from a rigid, predetermined, and strictly adult point of view. On the left, child rearing often devolves into protecting autonomous individual rights—of children and parents alike—but in a way that obscures children's unique social vulnerability. Or child rearing is reduced to the fulfillment of parents' own spiritual journeys, with insufficient attention to children's dependencies. In neither of these extreme cases are children understood to be much more than pre-adults, so that children themselves again disappear from view as a distinctive public concern.

¹³W. Brian Arthur, "Review of A Treatise on the Family," *Population and Development Review* 8/2 (1982), 393-398.

¹⁴Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume Two, Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* [German original 1981], trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 325, 355, and 367-73. Habermas himself specifically mentions child rearing: "the one-sided rationalization or reification of everyday communicative practice . . . [results from] the penetration of forms of economic and administrative rationality into areas of action that resist being converted over to the media of money and power because they are specialized in cultural transmission, social integration, and child rearing, and remain dependent on mutual understanding [through lifeworlds] as a mechanism for coordinating action" (p. 330).

the use of another as a means for my own satisfaction, or irrational, since a child would only enter the world as a threat to my autonomy."¹⁸ The deeper communitarian critique is that individualism fails to grasp children's membership in the wider human and divine community.

The solution to this problem is to rethink the very meaning and purpose of parental and social child rearing. Child rearing is not just about raising healthy, autonomous, competitive individuals. It is essentially about the transmission of family and cultural values and the initiation of children into responsible membership in particular and vibrant communities. "Without the family, and the intergenerational ties involved, we have no way to know what it means to be historic [i.e. narratively and communally embedded] beings."¹⁹ Child rearing involves passing on the sacred and traditional beliefs that give life larger meaning and bind us into God's purposes for history. This means that parenting, schooling, and religious education are processes of *initiation*. "Intimacy and care are indeed important, but equally important is the initiation of children into moral beliefs and institutions which we value."²⁰ Gilbert Meilander makes a similar point: "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."²¹ Initiation does not mean just the passing on of religious faith, important though this is, but also the specifically moral inheritance of substantive communal values and senses of social responsibility.

Although Amitai Etzioni is a more politically oriented and secular kind of "communitarian" than Hauerwas, when it comes to child rearing he is equally concerned with what he calls the "transmission," "installation," and "internalization" of larger social "values."²² The good society depends essentially on children having been inculcated with senses of social responsibility, civic-mindedness, and belongingness to meanings and purposes beyond themselves. As Jean Bethke Elshtain has similarly put it, "a revamped defense of family authority" is required so that child rearing can overcome superficial individualism by "inculcating moral limits and constraints."²³ Child rearing can

¹⁸Ibid., 172.

¹⁹Ibid., 165.

²⁰Ibid., 173.

²¹Gilbert Meilander, "A Christian View of the Family" in David Blankenhorn, Steven Bayme, and Jean Bethke Elshtain, eds., *Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family* (Milwaukee: Family Service America, 1990), pp. 133-48, 143.

²²Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), 179 and 181.

²³Jean Bethke Elshtain, "The Family and Civic Life" in Blankenhorn, et al., eds., *Rebuilding the Nest*, pp. 119-32, 131. See also Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 326.

II. *Communitarianism and the Transmission of Social Values*

The sharpest, earliest, and least ambiguous response from academic Christian ethicists to this individualistic and privatistic view of child rearing comes out of *communitarianism*. Although the term "communitarianism" can have various meanings, I use it here in a broad sense to indicate the notion that individuals—both adults and children—find meaning and purpose only through participation in larger historical communities. Theologically, Christians are to live according God's presence in the historical narrative of the church. Along the lines of the four questions I am pursuing, the communitarian ethics of child rearing essentially runs like this: children come into the world with a raw natural potential for social existence that needs to be shaped and educated into responsible social citizenship, and this should be done primarily by parents but also secondarily by the community, the church, and civil society through the transmission of traditional values. Communitarians go beyond the simple "family values" rhetoric of Christian and other ultra-conservatives. They build on the child rearing ethics of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas that charts the complex and dynamic course of the development of children into functioning and responsible participants in communities.

The most prominent recent Christian ethicist to develop such a view of child rearing is Stanley Hauerwas, who was one of the first ethicists systematically to take on the contemporary market culture of child rearing in two chapters of his 1981 book *A Community of Character*.¹⁵ Hauerwas' point of departure is that the crisis in family life of the late twentieth century represents the eventual and perhaps even inevitable reach of modernist "liberalism" even into the sphere of the home. "The social roles of the family have been sacrificed in the interest of creating an individualistic economic and political order."¹⁶ One consequence of liberalism is that parents today feel they should not exercise too much authority over their children, and indeed increasingly see children as their "equals." "We thus raise our children permissively, because we fear 'imposing' our values on them and psychologically damaging them."¹⁷ But another and more profound consequence is that, as noted above regarding Becker, we as a society lose sight of children as an end in themselves and unwittingly instrumentalize them for adult market purposes. "Any reason I might give for having a child, in the terms of an ethic of autonomy, would appear immoral, on grounds of

¹⁵Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

¹⁶Ibid., 170.

¹⁷Ibid., 160.

include initiation into not only family and church but also the larger values of the body politic.

Communitarians are also sharply aware of how child rearing not only *creates* community but also essentially *depends upon* it. For Hauerwas, there can be no meaningful practice of child rearing apart from a coherent tradition, shared by a historical community, of values, stories, and rich accounts of the ends and purposes of human life. In his case, the Christian church in particular "is formed by a story that gives it the convictions necessary to sustain those called to marry and have children in a world that has been bent by sin and evil."²⁴ Most communitarians view this larger social context as including marriage, although Etzioni, for example, is more concerned with the greater role of civil society. For many Christian communitarians, marriage is part of God's plan for humanity all the way back to Creation. But overall, child rearing ultimately operates in something of a circular fashion by transmitting larger social values into children's lives so that children themselves may grow up to participate in their wider community's substantive structures and identity.

A wonderfully concrete secular illustration of this communitarian approach is offered by the psychologist William Doherty in his recent popular parenting book *Take Back Your Kids*.²⁵ Although Doherty does not identify himself as communitarian *per se*, his advice to parents shares the key features of responding to a culture of permissive individualism and encouraging parental authority to instill substantive and socially-oriented values. The two great problems with parenting today in Doherty's view are "the consumer culture of childhood"—by which he means that "children are viewed as *consumers* of parental services, and parents are viewed as *providers* of parental services and *brokers* of community services for children"—and "the therapeutic culture of parenting" in which parental authority is ceded to non-directive and non-judgmental child affirmation.²⁶ So many parents feel out of control of their children and overburdened with chaperoning children's activities because instead of educating their children to become responsible contributors themselves to family and society, parents think they are there to serve children's individual self-interest. "The consumer culture will teach your child to act like a demanding brat, and the therapeutic culture will keep you from being assertive enough to exercise your parenting responsibility."²⁷

According to Doherty, this means first of all that parents should get

²⁴Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 174.

²⁵Doherty, *Take Back Your Kids* (see n. 8 above).

²⁶*Ibid.*, 15-23.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 26.

back into the business of teaching their children core social values. "We have the first generation in human history where the vast majority of stories told to children are passed on, not by people who love them and want to impart values, but by people [in television, advertising, movies, the internet, and so on] who want to make customers of them."²⁸ By self-consciously imparting values to our children we adopt an "authoritative" attitude that avoids the alternatives of "permissive" loss of control and "authoritarian" wielding of power, between which contemporary consumer parenting constantly oscillates. Second, parents should reinvest in family *rituals* like meals together, outings, and meaningful holidays. "Rituals are where the family's group culture is created and maintained, where the child feels part of something larger"; they are "by nature anti-individualist."²⁹ Rituals are not services provided to children but whole family events in which children play an active part and learn to take responsibility for important shared values. Finally, parenting should not be a "competitive sport" in which adults are over-invested in their children's accomplishments and successes, but a process of "growing good citizens" who actively seek out ways to give themselves to others and to contribute to larger social well-being.

The usefulness of these communitarian perspectives is that they clearly and coherently stand up against the above disappearance of children from the public moral realm. Not only do they see children as valuable members of society in their own right, but their purpose and goal is to teach children responsible participation in, rather than detached consuming of, the social networks that give life larger meaning. In this, they develop the profound Christian conviction from Thomas Aquinas that while children are born with the *potential* for the common good, this potential must be actively developed and fostered by the child's community itself, including parents, extended family, neighborhoods, schools, and the church. Adapting Aristotle, we might say that the real meaning of "excellence" is not the competitive, individualistic "excellence" so often touted today of being number one, but the excellence of *arete* or virtue in which children learn to contribute toward the genuine social good.³⁰ Through virtue children become not just rationally autonomous but "rational" in the self-transcending sense of what Thomas called "both able to learn from another and to consider by himself" at once.³¹

²⁸*Ibid.*, 36.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 57.

³⁰Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (New York: Macmillan, 1962), Book I, chapters 7-9.

³¹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948),

The major limitation of this communitarian perspective, in my view however, is that it has less to say about children's deontological social protection. The transmission of social values depends on at least minimal social rights such as non-poverty, health care, funding in schools, non-violence, and the like which, in fact, are major problems in many children's lives today. Such protections are not necessarily individualistic. They have to do with the systemic social structures that allow for community and responsibility in the first place. They require thinking of children as not just citizens-to-be but also full members of society in their own right. And they require attention to children as objects of unique and superabundant love. In this fallen and disordered world, children are owed a basic human dignity quite apart from considerations of instilling communal values and aims.

III. *Liberationism and the Restructuring of Child Rearing Conditions*

It is questions such as these that have animated a very different Christian ethical response to the meaning and purpose of child rearing that I will broadly label *liberationist* (not to be confused with classic "liberalism" or "libertarianism," both of which characterize a position such as Becker's). Liberationists are concerned with issues of economics and politics, but not as in Becker with importing rational choice models into family functioning. Rather, today's free market individualism falls short of the kind of justice required of the kingdom of God in which children's special vulnerabilities do not expose them to oppression. When it comes to our four questions about the ethics of child rearing, a liberationist perspective suggests something like the following: children come into the world with an inchoate innocence and powerlessness that must be protected against the distortions and oppressions of the fallen world through the restructuring of familial, economic, and political systems in the direction of eschatological justice.

The most sophisticated Christian ethical development of such a perspective is Pamela Couture's *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty*.³² Although Couture only infrequently uses my label of "liberationist" in her book, and although she is drawing on the Wesleyan tradition rather than the original roots

Supplement, Q.43. a.2. Thomas envisions a three stage developmental cycle in which the first seven years the child "neither understands by himself nor is able to learn from another," in the next seven "can learn from another but is incapable by himself of consideration and understanding," and arrives eventually at the above ability for fully social participation. Although Thomas' stages are clearly problematic from a modern psychological point of view, their description of the mature adult outcome is rich and suggestive.

³²Pamela Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000).

of liberationism in Catholicism, her argument is that children in the United States are systematically oppressed, that theology's chief aim is to fight for those who suffer, and that therefore addressing children's marginalization should be one of the principle missions of the church as an agent for social transformation. As Couture puts it, "The central work of pastoral or congregational care is care for the most vulnerable persons in society, poor children," and "through this work of care . . . the church can genuinely transform itself and influence society and culture."³³

Such a perspective views children less as potential or undeveloped adults than as having a special fragility and vulnerability before the great power of adults and social institutions in their lives.³⁴ Couture distinguishes two areas in which children are particularly at risk today: "material poverty" in the sense of decreasing household income and quality of medical care and education, and "the poverty of tenuous connections" in loosening bonds with parents, neighborhoods, churches, and the economy. Children are the poorest members of society today because they are the most culturally and socially marginalized. Herbert Anderson and Susan Johnson have called this problem a growing "culture of indifference": "in a society that glorifies size, strength, and self-sufficiency, anyone who is small, weak, or needful is treated with contempt."³⁵ Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West put it more strongly: "One of the best-kept secrets of the last thirty years is that big business, government, and the wider culture have waged a silent war against parents, undermining the work that they do."³⁶ Those who adopt Becker's view that moral life is a competition of private interests not only ignore children in themselves but play into a social culture that is actively doing them harm.

Christian ethics can not only name this problem but also resist it through a practical hope in the still greater power of God's people for societal transformation. Couture argues that "*shared responsibility* become words of liberation when they result in practices that contribute to the resilience of children and those who care for them, the kind of resilience that continues to share responsibility despite overwhelming

³³Ibid., 13 and 15.

³⁴Hans Jonas makes the argument, from a secular philosophical point of view, that children's vulnerability makes them in fact "the archetype of all responsibility." "The state bears a responsibility for the children within its jurisdiction quite distinct from that for the welfare of its citizens in general. . . . [A] child's dying of hunger, that is, permitting its starving to death, is a sin against the first and most fundamental of all responsibilities which man can incur." *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 134.

³⁵Herbert Anderson and Susan Johnson, *Regarding Children: A New Respect for Childhood and Families* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 17.

³⁶Hewlett and West, *The War Against Parents*, xiii.

odds, gains, and disappointments, a resilience that is tenacious because it arises from God's grace.³⁷ In Couture's view, the foundation for caring for children in their special vulnerability is the gift of grace, grace as superabundant giving to children both in the home and in society at large. Through grace we learn to restructure our busy and preoccupied adult lives around children's needs, not because of children's "worthiness" for help, but because "love and generosity are the fundamental relationship of neighbor to neighbor."³⁸ Children are unique gifts from God demanding adult love in the spirit of giving in turn.³⁹

While communitarianism tends to view the larger community as ordering the values into which children should be initiated, liberationism takes in a sense the opposed view that it is society itself that requires transformation if the unique value of children is to be protected and welcomed. Liberationism tends to give a more prophetic role for child rearing to the church. Parents certainly have an important responsibility in protecting children from economic hardship and cultural invasion, but the church has the unique social power and resources to engender transformation in the structures of society itself. Children's social and economic rights are not individualistic but "communal," since they are dimensions of the harmony and peace required for the kingdom of God on earth.⁴⁰ Children depend on church activism for "strengthening and transforming the social ecology of communities."⁴¹ As Anderson and Johnson put it, "when we say 'it takes a village to raise a child,' we mean that two competent parents are not enough for the task of childrearing; we also need to develop supportive environments that are economically viable."⁴² Liberationism can even suggest that family life is a training ground in which children learn to become activists against social oppression themselves.⁴³

The chief value of such a liberationist ethics of child rearing is that it insists upon both protecting and enhancing children's dignity as full

³⁷Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God*, 16.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 57.

³⁹One is reminded of Schleiermacher's view that love for children as gifts from God stands up against the fallen world by "manifest[ing] the workings of the divine Spirit" and recognizing humanity's ultimate "absolute dependence on God." See Schleiermacher, *The Christian Household: A Sermonic Treatise* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 64.

⁴⁰Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God*, 44.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 92.

⁴²Anderson and Johnson, *Regarding Children*, 18.

⁴³A powerful statement of this view can be found in Kathleen and James McGinnis, *Parenting for Peace and Justice: Ten Years Later* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990): "If we [parents and children both] can experience the possibility of peace—nonviolence conflict resolution—at the family level, then our faith in the possibility for peace and our willingness to work for it at the other levels grows" (25).

members of human society. In an age of increasing libertarianism, market rationality, and economic globalization, it may be more important than ever to understand children's unique vulnerability and need for a caring and compassionate social ecology. The larger village of familial and extra-familial social support that children have historically been able to depend upon is eroding before our eyes. How far we are able to extend social rights and resources to these most vulnerable creatures among us is a measure of how closely we approximate in this distorted world the loving interdependency and grace ultimately demanded by God.

A limitation of the liberationist perspective, however, is that its focus on social and economic policy often overlooks the crucial protective role for children of families and marriage. The central problem of systemic oppression, coupled with a sense of children's special vulnerability, tends to suggest in liberationism equally wide-ranging political and social solutions. But Adrian Thatcher has argued, a "theology of liberation for children" could also include the protections offered by "the classical understanding of children as a good of marriage."⁴⁴ Marriage is not necessarily oppressive toward women and children, but has in fact been understood since Augustine as capable of safeguarding children especially from economic hardship. This is one of the major reasons the Reformers made marriage a legal rather than merely ecclesial contract. Recent social scientific evidence, not from conservatives but from liberals, has come to the similar conclusion that marriage is one of the most effective ways to promote children's (and women's) economic, physical, cultural, and psychological welfare.⁴⁵ Obviously marriage will not solve the larger social systemic forces behind children's poverty, especially in the poorest communities, but questions of social policy should not further marginalize family and marriage as crucibles for the radical care and commitment that may be uniquely provided by parents.

IV. Covenantalism and the Dialectics of Social Integration

These considerations bring us to a third cluster of perspectives on the Christian ethics of child rearing for which I will invent the label *covenantalism*. This third perspective is less systematically developed than either of the above two because its focus is more on families as

⁴⁴Thatcher, *Marriage after Modernity*, 132-70.

⁴⁵McLanahan and Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent*; Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).

social institutions than on child rearing *per se*. But it has the advantage of balancing a teleological aim of children's development with a deontological sense of cultural and social obligation, thereby mediating on some level important concerns of communitarianism and liberationism above. Covenantalism suggests that child rearing is a dialectical process whereby children are integrated, through the mediating covenantal institutions of family and marriage, into the larger social world. Familial institutions are not just private enclaves but vital public and spiritual structures that channel larger resources into children's lives at the same time as maturing children's capabilities for social participation. In terms of our four questions, a covenantal ethics of child rearing runs something like this: children come into the world with relatively fragile tendencies and needs that require careful and intensive integration into active social responsibility through a strengthened family and marriage culture.

The leading Christian ethicist of such a perspective on child rearing is Don Browning, who does not characterize his own view as "covenantal" but rather as a "critical familism," meaning it values families and marriage as generally good for the lives of children (and parents and society) but also insists on gender equality, both within and outside the home, for mothers and fathers. Child rearing outside marriage need not be stigmatized for contemporary society to recognize the overall benefits for children of a strengthened, not absolutist, marriage culture. For on average, in an ideal world, it is each child's biologically and legally bonded parents who are *most* likely to make the enormous sacrifices and investments that child rearing requires. It is precisely the social institutional nature of marriage that Browning claims is being eroded by the market rationality of modernization and globalization, however beneficial these forces may be within the market sphere itself. He explicitly criticizes Becker's position and argues for "the revival and the reconstruction of the institution of marriage as a crucial new imaginative [i.e. cultural] response to the forces of technical rationality."⁴⁶ The problem with market individualism is not that there should be no place for self-interest in family life, for self-interest is precisely the natural and divinely created grounds on which parents more than others are typically willing to make great child rearing investments. The problem is rather that parents must also make deontological commitments that transcend any immediate or obvious child rearing payoff, commitments to marriage and family as both enduring and egalitarian cultural institutions.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Don S. Browning, *Marriage and Modernization: How Globalization Threatens Marriage and What to Do About It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 7.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 60-70. For a more detailed discussion of Becker see Don S. Browning, Bonnie

Browning identifies the key problem for child rearing today, although by no means the only, as the unprecedented and enormous absence from children's lives of their fathers, chiefly through non-marital child-bearing and divorce. As Thomas, Luther, Calvin, and many others have claimed, and as contemporary evolutionary biology confirms, mothers are on the whole more easily invested in child rearing than fathers because of the biological realities of pregnancy and lactation. The feminist practical theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore agrees that "the biological activities of birthing, giving suck, and rearing hones [the] distinctly human ability to create personhood and community," even if, at the same time, fathers can and must also learn such wisdom.⁴⁸ The male tendency toward non-commitment to offspring is only exacerbated, in Browning's view, by contemporary market individualism, resulting in the vastly unequal gender burdens for child rearing to which we are in fact witness today. Marriage is the most effective cultural nexus that millennia of human culture has devised through which both mothers and children ensure male commitment to child rearing's enormous psychological, economic, and educational burdens. It was for this reason that Catholics tied marriage to canon law and Reformers grounded it in the state. The difficult cultural task today is the reintegration of fathers into child rearing without reinstituting alizing family patriarchy (Browning criticizes the "soft patriarchy" of groups like the Promise Keepers), which can be accomplished on the grounds of a Christian family ideal of the "love ethic of equal regard" involving equal home and work responsibilities for mothers and fathers both.⁴⁹ Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen has argued similarly for a "social partnership" model of child rearing that allows marriages to "put children first, without putting women last, and without putting men on the sidelines."⁵⁰

But marriage is not just, on this view, merely a private agreement or contract, as the contemporary market individualistic ethos would suppose. It can only function effectively if it is also understood as a public cultural institution, constituted by a large array of powerful religious, social, economic, and political supports. This is why I venture to call this perspective "covenantal," because the essential point is

J. Miller-McLemore, Pamela D. Couture, K. Brynolf Lyon, and Robert M. Franklin, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*, Second Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 254-64.

⁴⁸Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother*, 150.

⁴⁹Browning, *Marriage and Modernization*, 44.

⁵⁰Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, "The Signs of Kuyper's Times, and of Ours" in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Stanley J. Grenz, Mardi Keyes, and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Women and the Future of the Family* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), pp. 75-92, 91.

one made by the covenantal theologian John Calvin, that marriage has the power to *integrate* the child rearing task into a vast network of public commitments representing diverse facets of God's action in children's lives.⁵¹ Thus marriage introduces into the parents' vertical union under God what John Witte has called a range of horizontal social covenants such as church mentorship, community guidance, educational investment, and state protection.⁵² What separates a covenantal from a communitarian view is that society not only helps establish child rearing aims, but also, and more importantly, takes on active and fundamental deontological obligations for supporting parents in bringing these aims about.

Closely related to this covenantal view is the Catholic principle of "subsidiarity," which holds that more powerful social institutions like government, business, and the church should "furnish help" (*subsidium*) to smaller social institutions like family and marriage, but without in the process taking over the unique functions that natural law ordains to smaller institutions themselves.⁵³ Browning argues, in fact, that "the best public theology for marriage eventually should bring the two models of covenant and subsidiarity together."⁵⁴ The Catholic feminist theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill speaks in this way of the family as "domestic church." Supported by the larger church, families have the special task of nurturing children into wider social connections and commitments. "Humans have a natural capacity for intimacy, empathy, compassion, and altruism that can be learned and fostered in close associations like the family."⁵⁵ At the same time, such capacities should be "gradually extended . . . to larger and larger communities."⁵⁶ Cahill in a way introduces a communitarian element into the family institution by insisting on "the responsibility of Christian families to serve the common good."⁵⁷ But this responsibility is effectively carried out only if marriage and family are robust social institutions furnished with help from a wider ecclesial, economic, and political culture.

The great advantage of such a covenantal approach is that it fuses theological and deontological concerns through what Ricoeur would

⁵¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.15.20.

⁵²John Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 95.

⁵³Subsidiarity has its roots in Pope Pius XI's 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* on the conditions of workers, but has subsequently been applied by others to families as well.

⁵⁴Browning, *Marriage and Modernization*, 26.

⁵⁵Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 16.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 6.

call the "practical wisdom" of mediating social institutions. Marriage in particular, while also serving other functions, is uniquely situated to provide a practical cultural environment for simultaneously nurturing children's fragile capabilities and making use in doing so of wider social supports. If families are increasingly unable to make this delicate and complex balance, it is not because marriage as such is obsolete, but because a contemporary culture that privatizes all human relations no longer supports marriage as a distinctive and vital social institution. Non-marital child rearing should be supported as well, especially for the sake of the children themselves, but social support is more effectively and intensively concentrated through a vital culture of marriage.

What I find problematic in this view is that it may place too much confidence in marriage's institutional capacity to stand up to larger social, economic, and political forces in children's lives. This can largely be explained by the fact that covenantalists have directed their attention more to marriage than to children *per se*. Marriage can *mitigate* the competitive market forces that produce widespread children's poverty and marginalization today, but parents will still be dragged into ever longer working hours, parental gender will still demand unequal child caring responsibilities, and children will still find themselves without vital financial and health resources and at the mercy of corporate power and advertizing, so long as protections are not offered to children also *directly* through wider social policy. While in the past children were reliably connected to extra-familial social contexts like neighborhoods and religious organizations, in today's post-industrial era these connections have been severely eroded by globalization, transience, individualism, and the enormous reach of the marketplace. It is true of course that a strengthened marriage culture might *itself* help to stand up to these forces, but liberationism does a better job of describing the more systemic social and political transformations needed to guarantee at least minimal human support for these most vulnerable of our fellow citizens.

V. A Revised Covenantalism

All three of the above perspectives provide useful resources for addressing children's contemporary social marginalization. Each has something to bring to the kind of robust and deeply grounded dialogue that would be required for the Christian ethics of child rearing to emerge as a serious and sustained intellectual discipline. At the same time, as in most things ethical, each has certain drawbacks and none provides a fully comprehensive answer. What is needed at this stage in the conversation, if children are to come into view once again as a vital

public moral concern, is not less disagreement along the lines above but more. Other religious and philosophical ethical points of view need to exercise their imaginations in new ways that can address themselves to the situation of children today as well. The demands of children should challenge – as they have at various points in history, and as for example the biomedical revolution did thirty years ago – the very discipline of ethics itself.

My own constructive proposal in conclusion is for moving the conversation forward through a revision of the above covenantalism.⁵⁸ Covenantalism is a good starting point because it can be extended to include important communitarian teleological concerns and liberationist deontological ones within its complex practical theology of social institutions. I agree with revised correlational thinkers like Browning, Ricoeur, David Tracy, and Richard Kearney that Christian ethics should mediate all four of these ontological, teleological, deontological, and practical dimensions.⁵⁹ Reformed Protestantism and Roman Catholicism have the breadth to speak to not only human goods and virtues on the one hand, or human rights and justice on the other, but also the nexus of cultural responsibilities by which goods and rights are integrated. And they can speak to today's increasingly ingrained ethos of market individualism with the required social and cultural radicality.

But a new covenant with children, while centered on strengthening marriages and families, should also have broader social dimensions that include on the one hand more substantive child rearing aims and purposes, and on the other a more radical critique of the economy and the state. Such a view is even more idealistic than the covenantalism above because it envisions broad new social systemic transformations on the scale of Reformation restructurings of marriage and more recent Catholic critiques of poverty. A restructuring of marriage around children should be accompanied by a restructuring of social health care, workplace flexibility, tax codes, government funded parental leave, and perhaps even some form of children's voting representation. Such a broad-scale revolution toward child-centeredness is required if the

⁵⁸I have elsewhere developed what I called a "critical covenant" with children based on a synthesis of the historical child rearing ethics of Thomas, Calvin, and Schleiermacher. See John Wall, "Animals and Innocents: Theological Reflections on the Meaning and Purpose of Child-Rearing," *Theology Today* 59/4 (January 2003), 559-82.

⁵⁹I defend this larger position in John Wall, "The Economy of the Gift: Paul Ricoeur's Significance for Theological Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 29/2 (Summer 2001), 235-260. See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), and Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

truly "other" status of children is to be addressed in today's deepening market ethos.

The starting point for a revised covenantalism has to be the ontological question of how children come into the world. One of the chief reasons twentieth century Christian ethicists have largely acquiesced in the privatization of the lives of children is a lingering modern Romanticism about children's pure innocence and goodness. This view grew up within the separate spheres mentality of bourgeois industrialization, and while it is preferable to seeing children as utterly depraved, it also tends to consign child rearing to the uncorrupted, and chiefly maternal, haven of the home, sheltered from the sinful world abroad. It should now be clear that this view alone ultimately dehumanizes children by putting them up—much like nineteenth century women—on an impossible and unrealistic pedestal. Children, as Augustine and Calvin observed, are also sinful creatures like the rest of us. They have unruly passions, confused worldviews, violent tendencies, and limited moral understandings, even if at the same time they have relatively weaker capabilities than adults for enacting or dealing with them. Like in all of humanity, children's evil should be viewed from the perspective of faith as not as primordial as their created goodness. But it has to be faced nonetheless if child rearing is to be recognized as a serious public moral concern requiring broad and intensive social resources. This more complex view of children is one of the most distinctive contributions that Christian ethics can make to contemporary child rearing culture.

Children's struggling with sin means that they are more than mere natural potentialities or innocent victims. On the one hand, the Aristotelian view that children have natural dispositions for the good is true in the sense that natural desires and drives are the groundwork for mature habits, virtues, and happiness; but this groundwork can turn, without genuine and well supported adult involvement, into violence, cynicism, depression, and many of the other symptoms we see rising in children as they are increasingly separated from social resources today. On the other hand, while children certainly are victimized by the present social order, a victimization mentality does not capture the need also to develop children's own given agencies and capabilities. A middle ground needs to be found in which children are understood from birth as both capable of moral responsibility of their own and yet particularly vulnerable to the distortions and self-interestedness of society. Children's simultaneous agency and passivity in relation to the rest of the world is best captured in the view that they belong to a social covenant—like Moses' at Mount Sinai—composed of both larger expectations and higher protections at once.

But ontology is not teleology; it does not tell us everything we need to know about what child rearing should aim toward. In this regard, a communitarian perspective helpfully shows that children should develop increasingly substantial and complex senses of larger social responsibility. Psychological developmentalists following Maslow, Jung, and Rogers all too often suggest that the aim is simply self-actualization. Others following Piaget and Kohlberg see the end as developing an understanding of deontological rules and principles. But Christian ethicists have the resources to suggest more profoundly that the individual is meant to contribute toward the substantive larger common good, to help form a better world ever more closely approximating the human community's originally created perfection. Such a teleological dimension of child rearing requires at the minimum that children develop their capabilities for greater social meaning and purpose. They should strive for more than the marketplace mastery of technical skills, important though these are as means, and develop self-transcending values of social responsibility, care for others, and what Cahill calls compassion for fellow humanity.

The reason this essentially communitarian aim should be placed within a larger covenantal perspective, however, is that human finitude and sin make the concrete nature of these social ends deeply ambiguous. Even within the Christian church itself, no one should feel confident that they know God's full narrative purposes for humanity; as Augustine says, we can at best see God's aims through a glass darkly. But more than that, children grow up within a heterogeneous web of social relations that surpass family and church and include other communities, different worldviews, a changing future, the marketplace, the state, and the entire globe. Children need not just *initiation* into wider social stories, in which their roles and responsibilities come to them already historically defined, but also the nurturance of active *capabilities* for weaving new and more expansive stories of their own. A socially responsible adult is someone who exercises well the social creativity given humanity as an image of its Creator, the creativity to inhabit and retell its inherited stories in ways that transform the fallen and conflicted fray of the world anew. This is not individualism; it is the willingness to equip children to interpret given but fallen human values in ever more critical and socially inclusive ways.

This brings us, however, to the complex third question of who should be held accountable for bringing such child rearing aims about. Arguably today in the United States, this obligation has fallen increasingly on the shoulders of one group: mothers. It is understandable why contemporary feminists have either rejected this unfair burden or demanded larger paternal and societal involvement. Perhaps never before

in the history of child rearing has so much been expected of so few. But if children come into the world far from automatically capable of finding their own way, and if at the same time they are to develop larger capabilities for active participation in the common good, then this enormous task should be taken up by wide segments of society. What needs to be rethought is not just the role of motherhood, or even that of a gender neutral parenthood—important though this remains—but the roles also of fatherhood, extended families, educators, ministers, community and business leaders, television and movie writers, health providers, and policy makers.

Liberationism is particularly helpful here because it insists on a more just division of labor both within the household and beyond it in child rearing's system of social supports. The problem, at least today, is how to expand a sense of social responsibility past only its most private, immediate, and obvious forms. This means first of all, as Thatcher argues, that shared parenting between mothers and fathers is not a question of the liberation only of women, but more fundamentally also that of children: liberation from father absence and its attendant financial, emotional, and communal vulnerabilities. In this sense, marriage is not just *good* for children but also a vital and significant social *obligation*, particularly (but not only) for men. But as Couture shows, this obligation should extend as well to the church, the community, and the state. All children, regardless of the marital status of their parents (over which children after all have no control), need investments of cultural and social capital, safe neighborhoods, other adults in their lives, places to play and get involved in activities, child-friendly workplaces for their parents, and larger political and cultural organizations that will stand up to violent media, environmental toxins, and illegal drugs. Christian ethics can support a radical vision of social justice in which no child in the United States today is left to fester in poverty, to lack basic health care, or to grow up without a fair education. The absence of even these minimal social responsibilities shows how far our culture remains from understanding child rearing's broad public dimensions.

Finally, however, neither robust child rearing goals nor widened social obligations are alone sufficient. For the crux of the social ethics of child rearing, and the engine that will make these other dimensions meaningful and lasting, is the question of the transformation of our contemporary child rearing culture. And here, I think, the covenantalists get the last word, or at least part of it. The profound privatization and individualization of children that has occurred over the past century or more demands an upheaval of the social institution of the family on the scale of other such child rearing upheavals as during the rise

of medieval feudalism, the emergence of modern states, the European settlement of America, and the onset of industrialization. In each of these cases, Christian ethicists have recognized the centrality of marriage for institutionalizing a new child rearing culture, but in different ways: in feudalism through inheritance of property, in states through the legal enforcement of paternity, in colonial America in the centralization of moral education, and in industrialization through the division of separate spheres. What is needed is not a return to any of these past ideals of marriage, much less a reification of marriage *per se*, but a new and more adequate marriage and family culture. For it is in the covenant of society with children through the mediating bond of their parents that children are overall going to be *most* effectively integrated into the public world.

Creative new ways should in the end be developed for strengthening the cultural institution of marriage without condemning divorce, stigmatizing single parenting, or returning to gendered spheres. This cultural renewal might include, for example, increased marriage education at couple's entry into it, greater difficulty exiting marriage when children are involved, and higher financial and tax support for marriage as a public trust. Such cultural rethinking could also, in my opinion, be open to the legalization of same-sex marriage, so that child rearing can here too benefit from marriage's larger public institutional supports.⁶⁰

But marriage itself could never alone sustain the vast social resources that child rearing demands, even when aided, as in subsidiarity theory, by larger social institutions. Children need not only indirect public support through their parents but also direct public support in themselves. The erosion of direct extra-familial connections in children's lives is part of our unique post-industrial and global social problem. A revised covenantalism will understand the social institutions surrounding child rearing as part of an *interdependent social network*. While families should remain central, children also need churches for direct moral and spiritual nurture, schools for learning civil participation in the larger world, cities to provide affordable and enriching places to go after school, and government to guarantee non-poverty, market protections, and health care. These and the myriad other dimensions of the social tapestry by which child rearing is accomplished should be coordinated and enriched through a radical new child rearing culture, with religious organizations and thinkers leading the way.

It is, in the end, children themselves who call us as parents, grandparents, extended family, neighbors, religious leaders, professionals,

⁶⁰ Anglican theologian Adrian Thatcher makes such an argument in *Marriage After Modernity*, 294-302.

and fellow citizens to the complex and intensive social task of child rearing. The failure to hear this call, whether we are direct children's caretakers or not, is a failure to recognize the vulnerability and fragility of human existence itself. Christian ethicists of all kinds should at least be able to agree that social responsibility toward children is more than adult market calculation and rational choice. Perhaps nowhere else is the ethics of covenantal love and superabundant hope put to the test more profoundly than in how we treat these littlest among us. As Jesus says when even his disciples try to keep children away (and, incidentally, during a discussion of marriage): "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:14; see also Luke 18:16 and Matthew 19:14). The fact that we have stopped children coming to our social, economic, and political culture today should stand as a profound critique of our entire moral order. It is up to the discipline of ethics to raise once again its socially transformative voice.