For the Sake of Children? Theology, Care and Children

Annemie Dillen

"For the sake of the children," thus, the author prefaces her article. The message is obvious: for the past centuries of theologizing, children had simply been lumped with the adult world to whom theology has been addressed. But this is structural injustice since children as a group have their own needs. And methodologies for adults would simply not work for them, although any advocacy for adults can with modification be applicable to children. Subsequently, the author admits to the complexities involved in pastoral practices and doing theologies about children. She suggests four points of discussion: ethicization, the burdening of "children as the future of the society," intersectionality, and parentification. These four points are convincingly argued in the paper. Summarizing the quadruple quandary are the following questions: a) can parents legitimize "punishment" for the sake of bringing up a disciplined child; b) can children be considered only because of their potentials or for who they can be in the future and not for what they are in the present; c) can children be simply confined to one characterization; d) can children be given - "some" parental responsibilities– or letting them do whatever they can contribute for the welfare of the family. This article is a must read to gain a new perspective on children– far beyond romanticizing and/or condescending on them.

Introduction

Who benefits from our theology? This is one of the most challenging questions for theologians who are worried about the outcomes of their work and the power issues and privileges at stake. Since the beginning of the 21st century many books and articles have been published about a large population being ignored by theologians for many centuries: the children. Children will mostly benefit from all forms of theological thinking that will help

people flourish, advocate for more just societies and contribute to the common good. However, they also have specific needs and strengths, which makes it important to focus on children as a group while recognizing at the same time that each child is unique and each context is different. In this paper I will explore how various societal and theological practices, positions and assumptions can be considered as 'more' or 'less' for the sake of the children. It will become clear that societal positions and practices in relation to children are ambiguous and diverse and that the same is true for theological positions. This means that although this chapter is a practical theological reflection and thus refers somehow to the classical triad of 'see–judge–act,' it hopes to avoid easy correlational thinking as if theological evaluations might offer clear answers to societal problems. There are far more frictions and complexities involved in practices and theologies about children than one might think at first hand.

Children in Society

In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations. It has been ratified by 194 countries; only the US and Somalia did not ratify the text. This document was the end of a long process, which started in 1924 with the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child (League of Nations). The 20th century shows in many ways an increasing attention to the wellbeing of children. In the beginning of the century, the focus was more on children's need for protection and provision: safety, food, education, shelter, etc. At the end of the century, the discussions moved towards participation rights and included a stronger focus on the agency of children.

When thinking about children's rights, it is good to name a few of these at the beginning of this article. Very important is the provision on violence against children, especially the prevention of physical abuse and corporal punishment in society, in families, in schools and in church contexts. Children have to be protected against commercial exploitation (such as child labor, trafficking and, sexual abuse). Children have a right to health and wellbeing, which means that teenage pregnancies or child marriages should be

prevented. Children have a right to have enough nutrition and shelter. Important also in the context of this article is the right to choose their own religion and to have a freedom of thought. This can be interpreted as the right to religious education and spiritual nurturing, when provided in a way that does not indoctrinate them but gives them enough space to think.

Internationally, many efforts are focused on the protection of children, their education, health, and so on. At the same time everyone is aware of the injustices against children, such as violence caused by war, or within family members, exercised by their own parents, grandparents, legal guardians and siblings. Many children are confronted with hunger and poverty. Internationally, children are 'commodified' as cheap labor in all forms of industry and in areas such as media/entertainment or even sex work. Numerous children are confronted with 'forced migration' as many families cannot live safely in their own country or place of origin. In other situations, where parents choose to migrate, e.g. due to a new work assignment, children do not have much choice either. These examples indicate very broad domains, and refer to diverse forms of injustice. A few other examples of attitudes of adults show again the ambiguous place children are placed in society. Some airline companies restricted their flights for 'adults only.' The same is true for restaurants or hotels. The indication 'Children not permitted' does not even raise much protest. It seems acceptable to create places 'only for adults,' as there are also places 'only for children.' Is segregation of adults and children the new normal? Even in various churches, this happens when children are sent to designated room/place for a special service and only come back at the end of the liturgy. Simultaneously, there are instances where children are oftentimes put on a 'pedestal' (like they are expected to excel in school). Generally, parents invest a lot in their children, financially and emotionally. Sometimes children are considered as 'cute,' or as 'angels', but the other side of it is—they are being used in a capitalist context—to stimulate adults in buying new products, because parents also want the best for their children. The trend to sexualize children's clothes/apparel fits into this consumerist logic. But, did the adults ask the children what are their interests? What do they need? Or, what are their perception of the world? There are new

initiatives such as children's parliaments, in villages and towns or in schools. Parents mostly practice a less authoritarian style in their education as compared to what it is used to be half a century ago. At the same time, there are many areas where the voices of children are seldom heard.

Theological Positions on Children

Do theologians and churches offer an answer on the various threats (violence, hunger, poverty, etc.) that children are confronted with? Or do theologians learn from the increased attention given to children especially for their participation rights in society, in line with what Edward Schillebeeckx called '*Fremdprophecy,*' theological learning from other disciplines or areas?[1] Both questions have to be answered positively and both affirmations do not exclude each other.

Does the church and its theology offer a 'safe harbor' for children—a place where they will receive care, protection, education, especially in situations where others (families, the state, etc.) cannot provide these basic needs? In many cases the answer would be 'yes,' but a necessary caveat has to complement this answer. The opposite is true as well. The church and Christian theology have often also functioned as a danger for children, or were not very powerful in protecting them from violence and abuse. The crisis of sexual abuse in the church itself makes this clear.

In the New Testament, the stories about Jesus welcoming children, putting a child in the middle, admonishing people to 'become like children' and telling them not to hurt children, can be considered as a very powerful plea to take care of children. Even the stories about Jesus' birth, where God himself is presented as a 'vulnerable child,' have stimulated Christians to take children seriously and to prevent all forms of exclusion. In Mark 9:36-37 of the New Testament we read: "Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them: 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me'." Another

[1] Edward Schillebeeckx, "Theologische draagwijdte van het magisteriële spreken over sociaal-politieke kwesties," *Concilium* 4, no. 6 (1968): 29.

passage in Matthew 18:4-5 reads: "Welcoming children could be interpreted as welcoming God, which is even much stronger than only 'following Jesus' example'."

However, many aspects of the bible tell us about the abuse of children. For example, there is a story about the daughter of Jephthah (Judges 11:29-40) who was sacrificed because of a religious promise of her father. She was Jephthah's only child, does not have a name, but has to die to fulfill a promise. Many other texts in the bible speak about the law against child sacrifices. Nevertheless, it happens... and the bible shows us this other, realistic side of life, where rules are not always followed, and this is true for the children's rights convention and its many violations in today's world. Many children in the bible were unnamed and their suffering is legitimized in light of a higher aim. Here we can think about the last of the ten plagues, where the first born sons in Egypt are already dying before the pharaoh decides eventually to let the Israelites leave Egypt. The wellbeing of the Israelites seems to be more important than the suffering of the first born sons. When Jesus was born, many other children died as well, because King Herod ordered that all little boys had to die. This story is present in the Catholic liturgical celebration of the innocent children, on the first Sunday after Christmas and reminds us of all those children who are suffering but often not recognized, because adults consider other aspects of life as more important.

Since year 2000 many books have been written about children and the bible. Nevertheless, this is only a recent evolution, as it is in various other theological sub-disciplines. Studies on children are only recently attracting the attention of theologians. Children studies in social sciences have been developed since the end of the 20th century and the focus was more on children as children, and not as 'not yet adults.' Searching for the agency of children in relation to theological tradition and pastoral practices, is something new. It is quite different from the classical focus on the socialization or the protection of children.

The Catholic Church has done a lot for children. Among them are the care for orphans, establishment of catholic schools, health care and other various services, often offered by religious

congregations.[2] Teachings about every human being as an image of God have inspired Christians to protect even the most vulnerable among children: like those with handicap, living in poverty, orphans, and most especially the unborn. Nevertheless, children raised only limited theological reflection, until recently. Traditionally, fields such as religious education in schools, Christian initiation in families, and catechesis with children get quite a lot of attention. With this we can conclude that the church was strong in caring for and protecting children on the one hand and educating them (especially as believers of Christ) on the other hand.

Two major, interrelated (theologically relevant) views on children form the basis of these practices. On the one hand, children are considered as vulnerable beings, in need of protection and care by providing them food, shelter, and other necessities. Caring for children can be considered as a moral obligation that reflects the Christian identity of many institutions. On the other hand, they are considered as not-yet adults who have to be socialized, and can be trained as future believers or church members. In both ways, the inner person and dignity of children as such is not very visible. Children are considered in relation to what they have to receive, or to what adults can give them. This is of course important and it is very relevant to recognize the vulnerability of children and to argue for more protection for them. However, caring for children can be considered as 'unbalanced' if what the children themselves can offer like their own voices and experiences, and their participation in church and society, are not recognized because all the focus is on their future and the future of the church and society. The views on children as subjects needing to be protected or educated, either go together with a romanticized view on children ('children as angels'), or in a more negative view, focused on sin and prevention of sin ('children as devils').[3]

Both views are also present in secular forms in contemporary society. The romanticized view starts from children's

[2] Hubertus Lutterbach, *Gotteskindschaft: Zur Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte eines christlichen Ideals* (Freiburg: Herder, 2003).

[3] See Annemie Dillen, "Neither Angels nor Devils: Theological Views on Children's Responsibility." *INTAMS Review,* no. 18 (2012): 192-202.

'cuteness' or their 'example for adults' as obedient, spontaneous and open to the world—often explained in reference to biblical texts about Jesus and the central place given to children. The negative view on children was developed more extensively in theological reflections on sin and the value of moral education. Both views express essentialist and monolithic views on children and do not consider them as complex persons with competences; the possibility to commit sins but also to contribute to society.

If children are considered as not-yet adults, and when adult life becomes the norm for everything, the harm done to children might be more easily legitimized than in situations where children are considered as subjects with their own person and dignity as child, and not only in light of the future. Adults might argue that children's pain (related to specific educational practices, or forms of exclusion in specific aspects of society and church), is only temporary, as children have to be prepared for adult life. In the name of 'good education' many children suffered. Stories of sexual abuse, in various Catholic institutions—with clergy and teachers legitimizing themselves in reference to views where adults decide and are more powerful over vulnerable children (who are taught to be thankful for everything they receive). The children's needs, the pain they suffer, their own way of experiencing life, often continues to be unheard and unseen from this 'not-yet-adult' perspective. This explains also why so many people were shocked when they first read and heard about the consequences of sexual abuse, after so many sexual abuse scandals were reported.[4]

Many practices are legitimized, as they are covered on the premise 'for the sake of the children.' But because of this, many children have been abused in the past, and still continues at the present, be it in their own families and/or in societies worldwide. The main question is 'what are the best interests of children?' It is clear that nobody will claim that he or she has done something that disrespect children. But both in society and in theological and

[4] These last four paragraphs are similar to a part of a chapter which will be published in French as: Annemie Dillen, "La théologie de l'enfance et l'abus sexuel dans l'église", in *Comprendre les abus sexuels dans l'Eglise catholique,* eds. Stephane Joulain, Karlijn Demasure, Jean-Guy Nadeau (Paris: Bayard, 2020).

pastoral traditions, these 'interests' have been interpreted in many different ways, often neglecting the uniqueness of each child when it comes to his or her needs.

How children are approached in recent theological studies, not only depends on the context in which these articles or books are written, but also on the theme the study is focused on. Bonnie Miller-McLemore, one of the pioneering authors on 'theology and children' distinguishes three main approaches in which contemporary feminist theologians discuss the topic of children.[5] They speak about children in relation to motherhood, as motherhood is also getting more and more attention within (feminist) theology. Attention for children does not mean focusing on the care or the (religious) education of children, but also investigating how children contribute to the spirituality of mothers. The giving child is present, at least in theoretical approaches, such as in the recent work about parenting as a source for theology[6]. More empirical studies in this field need to be done. A second approach, distinguished by Miller-McLemore, is the reflection on children in relation to the common good and family life.[7] Families play an important role in societies, and therefore the principle of subsidiarity is very important: the smaller units of families have to be recognized in their role for caring of children, but they also need the support of the broader society ("subsidy" as help/support). Among theologians there are discussions about the interpretation of this principle of subsidiarity in relation to families and children, and some, more conservative, authors would defend the special role of parents, arguing against democratic forms of education and

[5] Bonnie Miller-Lemore, "Let the Child Come Revisited: Feminist Theologians on Children," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 446-473.

[6] See e.g. Claire Bischoff, Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, Annie Hardison-Moody (eds.), *Parenting as Spiritual Practice and Source for Theology: Mothering Matters* (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2017).

[7] Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family. A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000).

against state influences,[8] while others would argue that parents are very important but that the state has a role to play in the protection of children as well and in the support of parents. A third group of feminist theologians writing on children do this in combination with the topic 'social justice,' and focus on children's rights, on forms of exclusion of children and on problems related with issues such as poverty.[9]

Next to these three approaches described by Bonnie Miller-McLemore in relation to feminist theology, one other very large stream of research is related to religious education, under the key terms 'theologizing with children,' 'children's spirituality' and 'child theology.'[10] The agency of children, listening to their voices and stimulating their own thinking are central. Other theologians speak about children in relation to dogmatic or systematic theological aspects, e.g. under the umbrella of 'theological anthropology.' In his book 'Children of God' Edmund Newey discusses how children are 'the source of theological anthropology'. Here again, as in many other recent books, the question is not only what adults have to do for children, but especially also how children can influence adults' thinking and practices.

Children as Subjects

So far, I have demonstrated the variety of theological positions in relation to children, and I have shown how they can be used 'for the sake of children,' but can also sometimes be misused as theories that are legitimizing or concealing negative practices

[8] Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Power Trips and Other Journeys: Essays in Feminism as Civic Discourse* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 45-60.

[9] Pamela D. Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000).

[10] See for an overview: Mirjam Zimmermann, "What is Children's Theology? Children's Theology as Theological Competence: Development, Differentiation, Methods", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): art. no. 2848. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2848. See also Annemie Dillen, "Between Heroism and Deficit: Challenges to Research on Children's Spirituality from a Christian Theological Standpoint." *Concilium: International Review of Theology* (English edition) 5 (2007): 57-68.

towards children. One way to try to prevent this misuse of theological ideas about/of/for children is really 'for the sake of children,' is to reflect further on the meaning of the idea of children as subjects within theology.

Three major ideas can be highlighted in this context. First, not yet mentioned in this article, but very relevant, is the idea of children's resilience.[11] Children are more than vulnerable persons or victims that have to be protected. Elsewhere, I referred to children who do not only have to be considered from a 'caretakers' perspective but also from a 'child liberators' perspective.[12] This means that their own concerns, strength and capacities have to be seen, although this should not lead to a mentality where everything is legitimatized, particularly child abuse, with the argument that 'children are much more resilient than we think,' and they will cope with it. Personal resilience should never be an argument to neglect social responsibility. The focus on resilience should be an argument that increases hope and thus stimulates social action in favor of the children and with children themselves as agents.

The second interpretation of 'children as subject' has already been mentioned and relates to studies of children's own spirituality and newer forms of doing theology with children, listening to their voices and stimulating their own reflection. Participation then means not only being present, but also having a voice in the process of what is being done with children in churches and in society, and even in the academe. It is a challenge to think about ways on how to make children 'co-researchers' in academic research on children.

A third way of thinking about children as subjects is extensively described by the American ethicist John Wall, who speaks about a 'childist ethics'[13] in line with feminist ethics: ethics

[11] See e.g. Annemie Dillen, "The Resiliency of Children and Spirituality: A Practical Theological Reflection," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 17 no. 1 (2012): 61–75.

[12] See Annemie Dillen and Stephan Gärtner, *Discovering Practical Theology: Exploring Boundaries* (Leuven: Peeters, 2020).

[13] John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010); John Wall, "Rethinking Human Rights in Light of Children",

from the perspective of and for the sake of the children. He illustrates how thinking from the perspective of children can start from different positions and views on children. He distinguishes three positions—'bottom up,' 'top down' and 'dialectical' and develops his own 'elliptical view.' The bottom up position refers to very positive approaches on children, with a focus on the idea that children are gifts. This is generally a rather romanticized view on children, with a focus on their purity or wisdom. Wall mentions that this position runs the risk of neglecting social threats for children and parents, such as child poverty, dangers of child birth, violation of children's rights and neglect of their voices.

The top-down position considers children as sinful. They have to be disciplined, especially by their parents. In line with these views, Wall situates the current opposition against children's rights in the US, with some religiously inspired voices who react against state interventions in the family. Children have to be socialized, and their own voices are not always heard when this position is taken. The third position combines 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches in a dialectical way. The focus then is on the ongoing development of children and their need for social support (health care, education, etc.) to become rightful citizens of society. Children's rights are more recognized in this view, but the danger here is that they are presented as 'not-yet-adults.'

In his own hermeneutical position following Paul Ricoeur, Wall explains how the focus is on relations between children and others. The child-perspective functions as an interruption, which decenter ongoing presumptions or ideas. The child functions as 'the other' and as 'the same.' Participation, provision and protection rights are taken seriously on the basis of this position as a minimum requirement. It is clear that this last position sounds persuading, as it takes children seriously as they are, often like adults, very often also different, and in all cases also 'others' who challenge fixed ideas. The presentation of this position does not solve all the questions concerning children and theology, as I'll demonstrate in the last part of this article.

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in Trygve Wyller and Usha S. Nayar (eds.), *The Given Child: The Religious Contribution to Children's Citizenship* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

Discussion and Conclusion

Many questions are not solved yet. I will explain four different points of discussion, which require further development, research and discussion. First of all, this article supports the idea of developing a theology or a pastoral or social approach 'for the sake of the children.' It has become clear that there are various interpretations of what this means concretely, especially when one takes the four positions described by John Wall into account. The critical view on 'ethicisation' as developed among others by Didier Pollefeyt[14] in the context of post-holocaust theology, helps us to understand the possible dangers of a discourse on "the sake of children." Ethicisation is a way of thinking where evil is legitimized in the name of what is considered as good. This happens when parents legitimize corporal punishment 'for the sake of children.' They should learn to obey to minimize the harm done to them. It also happens when church leaders decide everything and do not give a voice to children in decisions concerning the children themselves. They will often explain that they act 'for the sake of the children,' but is this also the perception of the children or are children really taken as subjects seriously? Therefore, the hermeneutical approach of Wall, referring to the 'interruption' of thoughts and practices by children's perspectives and to the complexity of everything, can help us avoid straightforward 'ethicisation.'

A second discussion point refers to another statement often heard when people mention children. That is, children are often presented as 'the future,' and therefore they have to be taken seriously. Yes, of course, but there are also caveats to make. They do not only have to be considered in terms of what they will be (future citizens, churchgoers, adults, etc.), but especially also in terms of what they are in the present, and what they have experienced in the past. Their sufferings, joys, hope and dreams belong together and have to be seen.

[14] Didier Pollefeyt, "Ethics, Forgiveness, and the Unforgivable After Auschwitz", in *Incredible Forgiveness: Christian Ethics between Fanaticism and Reconciliation*, ed. Didier Pollefeyt (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 121-159.

A third complex issue relates to the question of listening to children's voices, as proposed above. This is very important, also in newer empirical research on children, e.g. from educational, ethical, ethnographical context. It is however important to keep in mind that children are never a homogeneous group. Intersectionality, which is often used in feminist theological texts, is also relevant here. It refers to the idea that people are influenced by various positions (related to privilege, power and oppression) on various aspects of social identity, such as age (here at stake), but also gender, social economic status, religion, etc. It is important that children are not essentialized, i.e. reduced to specific characteristics which would be common for all children. There is also the danger of exploiting children in research, by only profiting from their opinions, without really giving them something in return or asking them to think together or be involved in the research itself.

A fourth discussion point refers to the previous one. It sounds very good to argue that children should have the opportunity to give, to contribute to research, or to practices in churches. However, isn't there a danger of overburdening children? In system therapy, experts speaks about 'parentification' when a child has to take the role of the parent. Any plea for allowing children to 'give' and to take diaconal roles for instance, has to be complemented by a warning of overburdening them.

With all these precautions and complex warnings taken into account, it is nevertheless very relevant to continue thinking about theologies for, from, about and with children.

Annemie Dillen
Catholic University of KU Leuven
Oude Markt 13, 3000 Leuven, Belgium
annemie.dillen@kuleuven.com