

# Growing Up Protestant, by Margaret Lamberts Bendroth

reviewed by [Linda Lee Nelson](#) in the [June 5, 2002](#) issue

The popular psychoanalyst Alice Miller assesses the intersection of children's lives with Christian values and concludes that the Christian tradition functions as a "poisonous pedagogy" for those who seek child-rearing advice. The historian Philip Greven writes about the intimate relationship between a Christian worldview and the physical abuse of children. Too often newspaper headlines highlight crimes against children motivated by religious convictions. This reductionist reading of Christianity has not been answered by more balanced Christian perspectives on the nature of the child and the complexities of discipline. Rushing into the gap are fundamentalist authors like James Dobson who, once again, exhibit a narrow reading of biblical and Christian values.

Fortunately, a new day has arrived for Christian parents and children, as an ever-widening circle of scholars are uncovering and publicizing the diverse, vibrant and nurturing riches of the Christian past. Contemporary research makes clear that alternative resources abound for those who wish to think theologically about the nature of children, discipline and parental responsibilities. Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, a professor of history at Calvin College, is one of the scholars who has taken up the necessary work of organizing Christian thinking on the family. According to Bendroth, her book originated as part of the "Lilly Endowment project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith" at Valparaiso University. Also contributing to the enterprise is the work of scholars from two additional working groups: the "Family, Religion, and Culture" project at the University of Chicago and the "Child in Christian Thought" project at Valparaiso University.

Bendroth reviews the role of religion in America during the past 100 years in order to "summarize and reflect upon a long discussion about Christian child rearing, the role of godly parents, and the meaning of religion in modern life." The subjects of her research on "domestic piety" are "white, middle-class mainline Protestants, here principally northern Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists and Congregationalists,

generally moderate to liberal in theology." She observes three distinct emphases at work in the Protestant tradition: "It defines parents as positive agents of grace in the lives of their children"; it argues for the importance of "reinforcing social institutions," such as schools and churches; and it emphasizes "respect for the separate world of children" and the "integrity of each child's religious growth and development."

The American champion of these Protestant themes is the Congregationalist theologian Horace Bushnell. Bushnell's *Christian Nurture*, with its portrait of the redemptive power of the family, was published in 1847 as a rebuttal to the evangelical understanding of children. Bushnell returns "God to the world of parental activity." Salvation is not an individual act of adult conversion, but a "gradual, unfolding process" advanced by parental love and familial actions that mediate grace. Infant baptism is the formative step in this corporate definition of redemption. It ensures the integrity of the child's own faith.

Bushnell's familial definition of redemption diverged from the evangelical focus on adult conversion. Indeed, evangelicals believed that this eschatological drama between God and the sinner could actually be impeded by family entanglements. Evangelical parents, because of their belief in the rebellious will of the child and the inborn lure of evil, sought to break children's wills in order to prepare them for conversion. This preparatory activity sometimes justified physical or psychological violence. Conversion itself required "emotional and physical rigors" beyond the reach of children. Bushnell denounced such treatment of children as a nurture of despair. Rather than breaking a child's will, he sought, through the formative power of love, to "impart an internal sense of power and control."

After outlining Bushnell's theology, Bendroth asks the question of longevity: How has the tradition of nurture been received and adapted by subsequent generations? A vast array of cultural and ecclesiastical evidence convinces her that "public optimism about the redemptive power of the home" continued well into the 1950s, that "golden era of family religion." The limitations and deficits of "domestic piety" were not evident until the tumultuous social transitions of the '60s. Now Protestantism must encounter the new reality of a family life that is no longer nuclear but "divorced, blended and extended." The middle-class home has become the subject of Protestant lament. Protestant leaders encounter a membership ill-equipped to face this strange new world.

In their worship of the family, Protestants had turned inward, isolating themselves from any engagement with larger social problems. Their inability to walk through the modern world with healing authority was intensified by their religious illiteracy. The family failed in its role as theological educator; children had no core identity as Christians. Christians knew themselves merely as middle-class. Church leaders not only realized that they had failed in their pedagogical task but, even more important, discovered that there was never any theological justification for family religion to begin with.

Ironically, those evangelicals who regarded family life as secondary to the pursuit of conversion became the promoters of "family values." Evangelicals filled the void in leadership left by the failure of "family religion." The New Right became the protector of the middle-class family. In the 1980s evangelicals united around a "distinctive social and moral agenda." The model of evangelical child-rearing, with its themes of hierarchy, discipline and corporal punishment, "offered a clear and compelling alternative to randomness" in a "rapidly decentralizing culture."

The protagonist of Bendroth's fascinating historical summation, Protestantism, exhibited tragic flaws that led to both introspection and transformation. Bendroth suggests that remedies for the deficits in Protestant theology and practice may be located in the alternative emphases of Roman Catholic and African-American Protestant communities. Catholicism's Christian Family Movement sustained among its members both a social awareness and an identity that surpassed the boundaries of the family. Its members knew themselves as the mystical body of Christ. The church, not the family, was the mediator of grace. In the African-American church, parents were the foremost teachers of morality, forced to tell the truth about racism and justice. The didactic purpose of family life received essential support through the informal institution of the extended family--an entity which has been lost among today's urban blacks, Bendroth asserts.

The moral of this story is that families are fragile entities that require an identity, tradition, community, story or sustaining power that transcends the kitchen table. Families hunger for transcendent resources that release them from ghetto and mansion, from apartment and duplex--resources that ground them in sacred movements both mystical and compassionate.