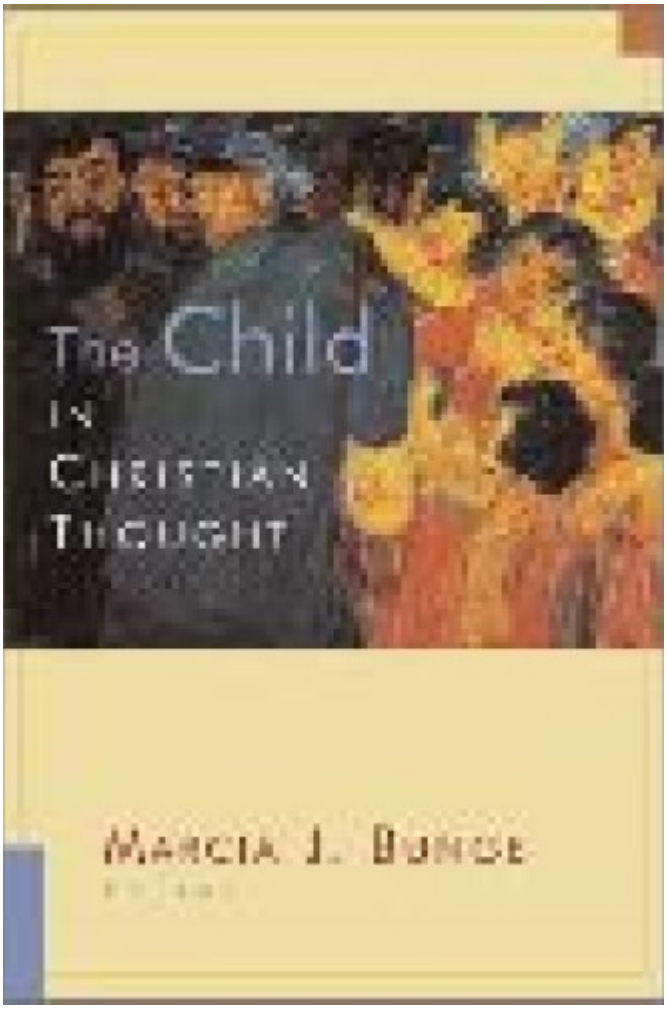
Heart of a child

By Linda Lee Nelson in the September 26, 2001 issue

In Review



The Child in Christian Thought

Marcia J. Bunge, ed.
Eerdmans

Neil Philip's *Illustrated Book of Myths* includes a story the Algonquin Indians tell, titled "Glooskap and the Wasis." Glooskap, the mightiest warrior of all, returns home

after a lengthy period of conquests, only to be defeated by the mighty Wasis, a creature on the floor of his home. His wife warns him not to meddle with the creature, whom she must serve night and day. Glooskap refuses to submit to such a tyrant, but his wife tells him that he has no choice, for “the mighty Wasis holds the past in one hand and the future in the other. He is the master of the world.” Glooskap vows to defeat the Wasis. He stands before the Wasis and declares his courage and strength; the Wasis simply gurgles and sucks on maple sugar. Finally Glooskap thunders a command, “I am Lord of Man and Beast. Come Here!” The Wasis howls back, screaming and screaming until Glooskap cannot stand the pain in his head. The more Glooskap shouts at him to stop, the louder the Wasis screams. Searching now for any solution to quiet him, Glooskap sings and dances for him to the point of exhaustion. His efforts pay off. The Wasis stops bellowing, and Glooskap collapses on the floor in a dead faint. The myth concludes with the moral that of all the beings ever created, nobody has ever got or will ever get the better of a baby.

The myth gets it right: there is no doubt about the power of a child or that the misguided desire of adults to “get the better of a baby” leads to forms of abuse both subtle and vicious. What is this power children possess? And what guidance do we receive from the Christian tradition as we attempt to understand both the nature of children and our responsibility to them?

An awareness of the dearth of serious theological reflection on children was the impetus for *The Child in Christian Thought*, a provocative and groundbreaking book edited by Marcia Bunge. Bunge is an associate professor of theology and humanities at Valparaiso University’s Christ College, and the book is part of a Lilly Endowment–sponsored project she directed from 1998 to 2000, the main purpose of which was “to strengthen contemporary reflection on children by critically examining ideas within the history of Christian thought about children and childhood.” The project brought together an intriguing community of scholars and encouraged them to make public presentations of their research, as well as to publish their findings as chapters of this book.

In her introduction Bunge notes the resurgence of interest in children occurring in a wide range of academic disciplines. Unfortunately, theological reflection has offered little to the debate. As was once the case with women’s experience, children’s experiences, worldview and psychology are not considered authoritative when constructing doctrine.

Equally problematic is the popularity of recent studies that highlight the religious roots of child abuse. A “poisonous pedagogy” within the Christian tradition “stresses the absolute obedience of children to parents, the sinful nature or depravity of children, and the need to ‘break their wills’ at a very early age with harsh physical punishment.” While Bunge never shies away from the very real connection between this pedagogy and the abuse and diminution of children, she even more adamantly proclaims that such an estimation of the tradition is not a “full account of past theological perspectives on children and our obligations to them.” The volume’s authors examine a variety of influential theologians and movements, including voices as separated by time as Augustine and the Black Women’s Club Movement, and explore scriptural perspectives on children.

Their research leads to Bunge’s conclusion that the Christian past offers a broad and diverse field of exploration for a theology of the child. She also finds that representatives of the Christian tradition articulate a varied assessment of the power of original sin in children. Some theologians “radically reinterpret or even reject the notion of original sin as something children inherit.” There is also no consistent relationship between the belief that original sin infects children and the endorsement of harsh punishment. Some theologians regard the presence of original sin as a reason to treat children humanely. Finally, Bunge concludes that there are theologians who have taken the obligations of parents, church and state toward children with the utmost seriousness; their work provides contemporary Christians with an endorsement for child advocacy.

The volume begins with an essay on children in the New Testament. Judith M. Gundry-Volf argues that a familiarity with New Testament traditions about children allows readers of the essays that follow to “assess the use of the New Testament tradition in the history of Christian thought: Which traditions have been ignored or de-emphasized? Which stressed? And how have they been adapted to new needs and purposes?” Gundry-Volf summarizes several teachings of Jesus that magnify the significance of children and affirm Jesus’ preferential option for children, whose social status he identifies with that of the poor, hungry and suffering: “Jesus blesses the children who are brought to him and teaches that the reign of God belongs to them.”

Not only has the reign of God arrived for children, but children themselves, according to Jesus, are “models of entering the reign of God.” This commendation is striking, asserts Gundry-Volf, for neither in Jewish literature nor in Greco-Roman

culture are children held in such esteem. Adults should receive the reign of God as a child by "relinquishing the Law-as-the-basis-for-entering-God's-reign and by asserting instead simple dependence on God's mercy. Entering the reign of God 'as a child' thus seems to involve both a certain status—actual dependence on God—*and* a corresponding quality—trust—that are both 'childlike.'" Jesus also heralds humility and particularly recommends this form of childlikeness for the great, especially church leaders, for they stand in the greatest danger of promoting their own self-worth at the expense of others. "The humility of the great thus consists particularly in their stooping humbly to serve children."

One of the most intriguing and undeveloped aspects of Gundry-Volf's interpretation of the New Testament is her thesis that the child "represents Jesus as a humble, suffering figure." The synoptic Gospels repeatedly show Jesus as identifying himself with children and entice us with the idea that whoever welcomes a child welcomes Jesus himself. The implications of all this suggest a profound change in social practice. As Gundry-Volf sees it, Jesus envisions a new "social world in part defined by and organized around children."

Children are mentioned rarely in the epistles and then only in relation to parents. The household codes in Colossians and Ephesians instruct children to obey their parents in all things. At first glance, the directive to obey parents may seem to contradict the teaching of Jesus. But a closer look at the Gospels, argues Gundry-Volf, "suggests that Jesus would have expected children to obey parents, unless it conflicted with the obligations of discipleship." It is significant that, unlike the Greco-Roman world, the epistles consistently place the command to obey in the larger context of one's relationship to the Lord. For example, Ephesians states, "Obey your parents in the Lord." It is one's obedience to the Lord, not one's submission to the power of the family patriarch, that inspires obedience to parents. "Parents stand alongside children under the Lord."

Gundry-Volf observes that in Colossians and Ephesians "children are subsumed . . . under the general category of fellow members of the community to be shown the compassion and care which each owes the other in imitation of Christ." When the household code begins with the command to "submit to one another in the fear of Christ!" it is not only adults who are being asked to submit to one another, but adults are being asked to submit themselves to children—an exhortation echoing Jesus' teaching that the great will be recognized by their service to children.

These essays make clear that the belief in original sin does not necessarily lead to an endorsement of physical punishment. Martha Stortz argues that though Augustine viewed infants as sinful, he opposed punishing them physically. Augustine describes infants as being in a state of “noninnocence,” neither completely innocent nor completely depraved, for while they are guilty they are not yet physically able to commit actual sins. To rebuke them or punish them for sin makes no sense, for they understand neither language nor accountability. Indeed, the adult who beats a child behaves as badly as the child being punished. Stortz applauds Augustine’s concept of a “graduated guilt for one’s actions” corresponding to one’s age. How does one move a child from a state of noninnocence to a state of growing accountability? The media for creating a new will and a new identity are baptism, good example and God’s grace and love.

Stortz allows “present knowledge to revise [Augustine’s] past judgments.” Augustine observed infants and concluded that they epitomized “the wretchedness of the human condition.” As participants in the essential sin spread to them by the semen of the father, infants dying prior to baptism are condemned. Stortz criticizes Augustine for “over theologizing and moralizing childhood.” Behaviors which Augustine took as proof of original sin would now be understood as developmentally appropriate. On a more optimistic and intriguing note, Stortz reminds us that Augustine defines conversion as a physical and experiential return to childhood. Had he incorporated the experience of conversion and the positive attributes of childhood into his theology, he might have presented us with a more balanced perspective.

The volume includes two additional studies on theologians who, although they hold quite pessimistic views on the nature of children, do not endorse physical discipline: the Reformer John Calvin and the 18th-century American Calvinist Jonathan Edwards. Barbara Pitkin writes that “Calvin himself appears not to have advocated the use of physical force in response to sin in children; though he recognized the need for parental discipline, his explicit remedies were baptism and education (albeit strict and structural) into faith and morality.”

Both Calvin, the theologian of “total depravity,” and Edwards, who preached to children about the agonies of hell and God’s wrath, appreciated the positive aspects of children. Yes, Calvin refers to children as a “seed of sin” hateful to God, but he also claims that “infants are gifts of God and examples to adults and can proclaim God’s goodness.” Pitkin reminds us of “Calvin’s claim that even nursing infants

glorify God” and his reference to infants as “mature defenders of the faith.” Pitkin’s most provocative query emerges from Calvin’s image of children as “mirrors of God’s grace.” She writes: “How might present attitudes toward children’s bodies (and especially the physical needs of poor children) be transformed and neglect and abuse of children challenged by taking seriously, with Calvin, the conviction that children bear in their very bodies the engraving of the divine covenant—that children’s bodies are, in a sense, sacraments?”

Like Calvin, Edwards “emphasizes the sinful nature of children, [but] he also believes that they have rich spiritual lives . . . and he claims that Christ loved even the poorest, humblest child.” Catherine Brekus’s persuasive investigation of Edwards turns up no concrete evidence that he recommended physically disciplining children, contrary to the conclusions of several recent studies. Edwards leaves us with a complex heritage, what Brekus refers to as a “double image of children.” The same man who refers to children as “more hateful than vipers” also “used images of them to symbolize ideal piety.” The same man who terrorized children with hellfire sermons also wrote that “even the youngest children were fully human and could be genuinely touched by grace.” Edwards himself longed to become as a little child in his own relationship with God, to participate in the attributes of humility, innocence and tenderheartedness.

This volume does not ignore the communities in which the concept of original sin “plays a role in supporting the harsh and even brutal treatment of children.” Of particular note is Clarissa Atkinson’s essay on the work of the 17th-century French Jesuits and Ursuline missionaries among the Huron Indians in Canada. Not only did the Jesuits and Ursulines doubt the “full humanity” of indigenous people, but they were taken aback by their “horrifyingly mistaken views about many things—notable among these, the nature, education and discipline of children.” The missionaries respected the “wonderful affection” the Indians had for their children but were repulsed by their refusal to physically punish them. The Jesuits believed that the only hope for properly training the children was boarding schools. “Proper training” meant “subjection to the corporal punishment that was taken for granted in French homes and schools,” which the Jesuits accepted as a necessary and appropriate part of moral and intellectual training.

Atkinson points out that it was not the missionaries’ doctrine of original sin that alone authorized physical punishment. “[Their] teaching and practice . . . were rooted in a theological anthropology permeated by a dismal view of nature and of

‘natural man.’” The combination of this pessimistic anthropology, the very real fear of hell for themselves and others and cultural values supporting harsh discipline made for a dangerous combination for children.

An example of a theologian whose equally pessimistic anthropology engendered a more humane treatment of children is August Hermann Francke, an 18th-century German pietist. Bunge’s essay on Francke “shows that, when set within a rich theological context, original sin can provide a kind of positive, egalitarian framework of thought that opens a door to responding creatively and effectively to the needs of poor children.” The conviction that sin was the great equalizer enabled Francke to abandon the assumptions of his highly class-conscious setting and to work as a great advocate for poor children.

Francke’s often misunderstood concept of “breaking the self-will” of children functions within the context of other theological convictions. To “break the self-will” is to reorient the will “from inordinate self-love to love of God.” The only means for accomplishing this are God’s grace and God’s word. Bunge recalls the gentle images Francke uses to describe the Word’s work of breaking the self-will: “igniting a spark of true piety,” “implanting piety,” “instilling piety,” “awakening faith and love” and “giving space and room for the working of God’s grace.”

As instruments of the Word, Francke argued, parents and teachers should treat children in a loving, patient, tender and friendly manner. They should focus on the “sweetness of the gospel” and not the “harshness of the law.” “Gentleness and sweetness,” not “the rod,” will “bend [children’s] hearts toward the good.” Bunge indicates that Francke will allow the use of the rod as a last resort, for it can be beneficial to some children, and its use has a basis in scripture. Yet he asserts that it is better if corporal punishment is never used, for it “drives children to hate their teachers and parents, causes them to perform good actions only out of fear, and even creates in them an aversion to ‘true piety.’”

The complexity of the Christian past is further exemplified by theologians “who interpret or even reject the notion of original sin as something children inherit and who provide alternative perspectives on sin.” Rather than locating sin inherently in the nature of the child, some theologians “focus on unjust familial and social structures that can negatively influence children, while others emphasize that children have the potential for good and evil.” Margaret Bendroth, for example, acquaints us with the contribution of Horace Bushnell, whom she refers to as the

“quintessential American theologian of childhood.” Writing during the 19th century, Bushnell rejected negative assessments of children’s nature, believing that in the heart even of a newborn the seeds of faith reside.

Bendroth finds in Bushnell’s theology several themes worthy of a thoughtful retrieval, especially his emphasis on the moral efficacy of parents. Children do not “by nature” choose sin; rather, parental failings and unjust social structures negatively influence them. Bendroth interprets Bushnell as distributing the responsibility for sin in children more broadly across the family and society. “He saw salvation as a thoroughly intergenerational process, taught and transmitted through human interactions within the family.”

Friedrich Schleiermacher, another 19th-century theologian, echoes Bushnell’s willingness to blame parents for the sins of their children. With precision and beauty Dawn DeVries outlines the tenets of Schleiermacher’s theology of the child. Schleiermacher asserts that it is the duty of parents to feed the “higher self-consciousness” in children. Born with as much potential for salvation as for sin but under the sway of the lower or sensual self-consciousness, children are dependent on parents, pastors and teachers to present and offer Christ to them. In the Christian home, parents are to so model Christ and the life of faith that children, through the attractive influence of the parents, will be drawn into their own experience of faith.

Schleiermacher extols childhood as a “pure revelation of the divine from which no conversion is necessary,” but he realized that “nature had also implanted the inclinations and proclivities that could lead to human destruction” and, therefore, never failed to emphasize the duty of adults to nurture children. Schleiermacher stands firm in the belief that the goal of nurturing the higher-consciousness is not achieved through rewards and punishments. “He denounces the use of corporal punishment with children. Discipline is not about punishment but about promoting an ordered life . . . But to exact compliance through fear of punishment only nurtures the lower self-consciousness, which naturally seeks to avoid painful experiences. Parents ought to instill in their children a love for the good, irrespective of rewards and punishments.”

Readers of this book will be surprised by the Christian tradition’s bounty of theological reflection on the obligations that parents, the church and the state owe to children. The theme of parenting as a vital calling and daunting spiritual discipline threads through most of the essays. Bunge recalls the early church father John

Chrysostom’s metaphor of parents as “artists” who sculpt statues. Through parenting, the image of God is restored in children, and children are formed into “wondrous statues for God.” Like so many other Christian writers, Chrysostom painstakingly outlines the specific obligations of parents to their children—reading the Bible to them, praying with them and acting as models of the Christian life for them.

Bunge notes the consistent attention that Reformation theologians paid to the obligations of parents to their children. She quotes Stephen Ozment, a Reformation historian, who contends that “never has the art of parenting been more highly praised and parental authority more wholeheartedly supported than in Reformation Europe.” Jane Strohl’s essay on Martin Luther accentuates the Reformers’ core commitment to the priesthood of all believers, a priesthood exercised in a wide variety of occupations. Rejected by Luther is the idea that some occupations, such as the priesthood or monasticism, are spiritually superior to others, such as parenting. In Luther’s words, “Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel. In short, there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal.”

Bunge observes that one of the positive contributions of this volume is the insistence that the responsibility for both the advent of faith and the development of the religious life be shifted from the congregation back to the family. “The family has the most potential of any institution for shaping the spiritual and moral lives of children.” As Bushnell summarized this idea, “Religion never thoroughly penetrates life until it becomes domestic.”

In the past few days, I have asked several people if they are familiar with any scriptural child-rearing advice. At some point in the conversation, they all utter the phrase “Spare the rod—spoil the child.” Mistakenly for them, but fortunately for the Bible, that statement on child-rearing is not a scriptural text. Yes, there are proverbs that recommend the rod, but *The Child in Christian Thought* displays a broader biblical theology opposed to violent forms of punishment. There is a Christian tradition appalled by the notion that punishment, rather than the grace-filled instruments of service, compassion, forgiveness and the sacraments, might be the means of creating obedience.

Jesus' vision of compassion, blessing and service of the poor is simultaneously a vision of compassion, blessing and service of children. Hospitality is the appropriate and constant motivation and guide for interactions with children, for children stand among us as stranger, as Other. The book makes clear the strong relationship between the physical abuse of children and the theoretical assumption that children are not quite fully human. Jesus' respect for the full humanity of children is recaptured by theologians like the contemporary Catholic Karl Rahner, who identifies children as fully human from birth and who refers to childhood itself as a "spiritually mature state." Above all, Bunge stresses that the care of and advocacy for children is an essential activity of Christian discipleship.

I closed this book with a haunting question that it doesn't deal with. What is the relationship between a theologian's position on corporal punishment and a theologian's doctrine of the atonement? After all, do not the most popular theories on the meaning of Jesus' death implicitly authorize the holy wrath of the father or the just torture and punishment of the son? Is it possible that the most oppressive parents find in the atonement a conscious or unconscious validation of the abuse of children for a greater good?