



## Review

**Jerome W. Berryman,**  
***Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace***  
**(New York: Morehouse, 2009). 276 pages. \$35.**

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Though the theological study of children has come a long way in recent years, it still occupies a sequestered realm within larger theological inquiry. While no church leader or theologian today can fail to consider issues of gender, race, ethnicity, or culture, the same cannot be said for age. Jerome Berryman's *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace*

takes a major step toward including children in how the very basics of theology are done. This step is to show that both real children and ideas of childhood have consistently influenced thought and practice in one way or another throughout Christian history, and that they can and should do so in creative ways again today. Berryman, the famed inventor of the children's spiritual practice of godly play, now extends his wisdom and experience concerning children into a deeply contemplative argument that children are sacramental "means of grace."

The great majority of *Children and the Theologians* is a patient guide through the lives and writings of at least twenty-five important historical theologians. The reader is led chapter by chapter through the gospels, early theology, Latin theology, the Reformation, early modernity, late modernity, and today. Each chapter opens with the discussion of a work or works of art. Theologians include those with better known ideas on children such as Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Karl Rahner; and some less often thought about in relation to children such as Irenaeus, Anselm, Richard Hooker, Blaise Pascal, and Rowan Williams. We learn, for example, that Horace Bushnell had three children, one of whom described him as a playful father who "would occasionally electrify the children by taking a flying leap over their heads," and whose *Christian Nurture* strongly affirms that "natural actions like feeding, bathing, and play hold potential religious significance for children" (151-52). Unfortunately, despite Berryman's apology for it, there are no female theologians, even though he could have included Christine de Pisan, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, and others. What is most novel is Berryman's careful attention to theologians' personal

and historical contexts. If at times the history becomes tangential, it always returns to childhood eventually and usually with surprising insights.

This history reveals what Berryman calls three *de facto* theologies of children that he labels high, low, and indifferent. A high view “respects children and what they can teach us about mature spirituality”; a low view “sees children as getting in the way of adults”; and an indifferent view “pays them no mind for the moment because of other concerns” (8-9). All three run throughout Christianity, sometimes within the same theologian. This range of approaches begins in the gospel stories of Jesus, which include low aspects in which Jesus exhorts abandoning children for discipleship, high aspects such as calling children the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and indifferent aspects in which real children are simply not considered, such as throughout the gospel of John.

A final historical chapter surveys six contemporary theologians of childhood: Marcia Bunge, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Joyce Ann Mercer, David Jensen, Kristin Herzog, and Martin Marty. This chapter offers only the most cursory of glimpses into each view. It is light on historical analysis, including about feminism, changing families, and children’s rights. All the theologians are United States Protestants and, despite coming later to the field, the two men receive more space than the four women. Nevertheless, the chapter does provide those who may not be familiar with it a taste of how new conversations are forming.

The volume’s concluding chapter makes Berryman’s own constructive proposal. He argues that children teach the church about grace: that God’s free gift to humanity is one of energy, playfulness, and creativity. As the book’s subtitle suggests, the historical discussions

above were “clearing the way for grace” that is now explicated. Berryman’s godly play is an apt resource, because it is a method of religious education that invites children into the central stories of the Christian tradition, and through their own experiences and creativity. He also draws upon evolutionary attachment theory, neuroscience, Erik Erikson’s generativity, and Mihaly Csikskentmihalyi’s psychology of flow. The upshot is that children bring into the world a special “intensity” and “unity” of grace in the form of “God’s creative power” and “continuously overflowing energy” (232). Most innovatively, Berryman translates this grace into seven practical “sacraments”: baptism, communion, confirmation, ordination, matrimony, reconciliation, and anointing. For example, the sacrament of baptism means both “that God adopts us as his children” and “that the children also bless the congregation” (245). In a broader sense, children are the ones who keep alive the grace and image of God over the church’s history.

If a criticism can be made of this book, it is that in an odd way children themselves remain rather abstract and even essentialized. Children appear to be a “means of grace” largely for adults, being filled with grace already themselves, and so they become objects more than subjects in their own right. An example of this adult gaze is the book’s final exhortation: “What if *you* were remembered by the children of your church as the person who is always glad to see them?” (256). This reader wondered whether such intensity and unity of energy captures the experience of children themselves. The sociology and anthropology of childhood studies would suggest that children’s experiences are just as diverse as adults, and their agency and voices as culturally and theologically constructed. In this regard, it seems especially problematic to locate

children's grace in their "silence" (15-16). Is it not potentially exclusionary, as for other groups in history, to be held in such ethereal esteem?

Nevertheless, *Children and the Theologians* sparkles with Berryman's deep playfulness and is a major step both for those who have followed his work over the years and those who are new to it. It does what it says the church should do: be graceful and creative. Church leaders, theologians, and anyone who cares about children will find here the persistently surprising challenge to become more childlike in growing toward God.