



Review

**Mary Elizabeth Moore and Almeda M. Wright, eds.,
Children, Youth, and Spirituality in a Troubling World
(St. Louis: Chalice, 2008).**

Reviewer: Richard W. Voelz
richvoelz@gmail.com

In the face of the innumerable forces that “trouble” young people, the authors of *Children, Youth, and Spirituality in a Troubling World* envision various ways to “choose life for the sake of young people, drawing upon the life-giving elements of religion and culture, and critiquing that which thwarts life” (2). This collection of essays grows out of the authors’

participation in a session dedicated to children and youth at the 2002 meeting of the Association of Practical Theology, and a writing component of a three-year focus on young people of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University. All seventeen essays (inclusive of the introduction and conclusion) are deeply reflective and well-researched, led by some of the most trusted guides in the field of childhood, youth, and practical theology. At the same time, readers are introduced to the voices of some new scholar-practitioners. The result is a composition that is extensive in scope while maintaining a unified focus.

Mary Elizabeth Moore's introduction sets the stage for the volume. She helpfully defines terms and raises preliminary questions that initiate readers from various fields into a common working vocabulary. For example, while spirituality might have a strictly individual and devotional connotation for some readers, Moore expands the boundaries of this term to indicate a type of spiritual disposition that "critiques, resists, and re-forms our troubling world" (4). Additionally, Moore ties together the efforts of authors who come from different disciplinary perspectives, defining practical theology as "the study of God and the world by engaged reflection on action (past or present) and reflection for the sake of action (future practice)" (5).

The remaining chapters are divided into two parts: (1) The Young in a Troubling World and (2) Choosing Life in a Troubling World. Part One (chapters 1-6) describes various ways in which children and youth encounter the broad-ranging term "trouble." These categories of trouble are intentionally contextual and avoid essentializing forms of discourse that disregard difference. While each scenario is localized, the authors write in such a way that the implications of their reflections might bear fruit in broader contexts. The arenas where the

authors suggest children and youth encounter trouble include: the intersection of public policy and ecclesial communities (Smith), public discourse and the religious academy (Miller-McLemore), the marketplace and media (Turpin), peer and familial experiences (Nishioka and Mercer), and the complex religious and political environment of post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina (Thomas). Each essay offers thick descriptions of the difficulties youth face through a number of qualitative methods such as (in no particular order): personal reflection, interview, case study, ethnography, narrative reflection, and literature review.

Even if not asked formally, the individual essays raise pertinent questions about the death-dealing forces young people encounter, as well as adults' roles in those experiences. Luther E. Smith asks pointedly, "Why are so few churches involved with these challenges [poverty, healthcare, education, crime, violence]? Is this the result of deficient theologies and ecclesiologies? Are churches intimidated by the complexities of influencing public policy? Do churches fear these children and their circumstances?" (14). Bonnie Miller-McLemore inquires how public discourse on children and religion might be done "not only more fully but also more carefully, with special sensitivity to the adult proclivity to misuse children and the study of children for some other purpose" (32). Katherine Turpin asks why, as a parent, it is so difficult to resist the influences of commodification, racism, and classism found in children's culture and how best to contend with the powerful commercial forces to which children are consistently exposed (45). Exploring the nature of the "boy code," Rodger Nishioka identifies its perception and extent among North American teens, and asks how young men might go about "forg[ing] a whole, healthy identity given the weight of the boy code" (75). Using fiction and clinical

pastoral experience, Joyce Ann Mercer reflects on how “the subtle influences of gender and culture reveal powerful influences and challenges for young girls faced with father-loss” (79). Joshua Thomas identifies how the tremendous ethnic and religious violence young Serbs, Croats, and Bosniacs experienced in the early 1990s was mediated by faith and often enabled them to engage in significant acts of interreligious dialogue and peace-building.

These preliminary essays invite readers to imagine the kinds of forces at work in the world that impinge upon the flourishing of children and youth. Their incisive practical theological analyses and attention to the contextual complexity of these situations helps overcome the temptation to shallow finger-pointing at political structures, the economy, and media. Their careful work helps us see that no kind of trouble is monolithic in the way it affects children and youth, nor are the responses they suggest universally applicable to different contexts. With critical acumen and realistic hopefulness, each author describes the trouble they see, then draws on the capacity of children and youth to engage and resist and/or suggests courses of action adults can take to guide communities toward change.

Part Two (chapters 7-15) shifts the focus of the discourse by investigating the ways that young people can and do work, alongside caring adults, to achieve flourishing in the midst of death-dealing realities. The essays in this section answer the question of where life and hope can be found among children and youth. As with Part One, the stages on which these essays are set are wonderfully diverse, extending well beyond traditional confines of ecclesial youth and children’s ministry settings. Mary Elizabeth Moore frames this section with a chapter that outlines the hopeful yearnings of young people, which “represent the eschatological presence of

God” (118), and places the onus on various types of youth ministry to engage those yearnings with utmost respect.

The remaining essays of Part Two are indebted to the recent discussion of “practice” and “practices” as it relates to faith.¹ The language of practices swims just beneath the surface for most, but rises more prominently in Almeda Wright’s discussion of testimony (189-190). As a whole, the essays pay close attention to individual contexts in which practices, like testimony (Wright) or community organizing (Johnson), help the yearnings Moore describes meet hope, possibility, and life amidst trouble.

The combinations of locations and practices found in these chapters yield a colorful landscape of ministries. Karen Marie Yust recounts her interactions of reading and interpreting scripture alongside young women with histories of abuse and behavioral disorders at a residential treatment center. Veronice Miles moves inside the walls of the church on Sunday morning and advocates “meaning-full preaching,” which “invites adolescents to live the Gospel as members of a community committed to creating a world in which God’s *shalom* can become a reality” (138). Moving between the margins of church and neighborhood, Susanne Johnson proposes the powerful ways that youth community organizing sponsored by a holistic conception of spirituality can work to change communities. In considering identity formation, Claire Bischoff encourages imaginative practices by asking young people and adults to engage one another through story sharing, moving them in front of the television and other popular media to reflect on the theological narratives they tell, and opening a space for meditative practices.

¹ See, for instance, Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology : Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002).

Almeda Wright moves young people to the front of the church by advocating youth testimonies as a formative and transformative practice that overcomes forms of “voicelessness” and “silence” (183). Young people redeem anger and remain at center stage as they practice “sanctified rage” and “holy indignation” with Evelyn Parker’s revision of material previously seen in her book *Trouble Don’t Last Always: Emancipatory Hope among African American Adolescents* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003). In order to show the impact of an experimental practical theological pedagogy with the goal of youth empowerment, David White narrates the contours of the 3-year life course of the Youth Discipleship Project, and how its location and programming shifted by being responsive to participants, leadership, and contexts. Finally, Jennie S. Knight also reflects on her experience with the Youth Discipleship Project and advocates moving onto the ground of listening and discernment as a foundational practice for transformational youth ministries.

Wright’s concluding chapter pulls together some of the larger themes that run through the book. Rehearsing the movement of practical theology exemplified throughout, she articulates a call to action for adults that takes form in the categories of (1) attending *to* young people, (2) reflecting *for and with* young people, and (3) taking action *with and for* young people to forge life. These actions compose the contours of “life-giving praxis” form ministry with children and youth.

This volume is a valuable addition to the burgeoning literature of practical theological reflection on ministry with youth and children. Its attention to diverse contexts of ministry make for a volume that speaks to youth and children’s ministers, educators, public theologians, pastors,

clinical workers, activists, parents, and youth. Each of these groups will find in the book solid foundations for seeing their contexts in new ways and for reimagining their ministries with children and youth.

For that diverse audience, each essay is highly readable. None suffer from being weighted down with discipline-specific jargon or defense of research methods. At the same time, readers interested in a further layer of depth will find the essays' endnotes capable of suggesting resources that can move the conversation further. The book as a whole proves to be familiar with a range of relevant literatures. This includes being conversant with, but not overly dependent upon developmental literature/perspectives (or any other perspective for that matter). This kind of variety is refreshing and might help orient newcomers to multiple approaches.

Additionally, the research methods employed among the essays are varied, showing how practical theological research takes many forms, and the unique stances from which this kind of work can be done. The gathering together of these methods into one collection should not be taken for granted. Practical theological scholarship has taken a step forward with the approaches represented here. As a homiletician interested in youth (a field that has typically shied away from the type of reflection Miller-McLemore advocates), Veronice Miles and Almeda Wright's essays in particular have already enriched my own thinking about the intersection of preaching and youth.

In preparing students who are increasingly involved in numerous ministry contexts, the book would serve as an excellent classroom companion to many of the texts on youth and children that have entered the market over the past several years. Courses in congregational

studies, ethics and justice, and contextual theology could also benefit from this text. It will certainly be a guide for those seeking to be a source of life for young people in the coming years.

Some minor critique, however, is warranted. With the ground that these essays cover in a relatively short span, it is possible that this kind of edited volume sacrifices some depth for breadth. Two examples should suffice. Rodger Nishioka's essay might have benefited from some sustained theological reflection and specific suggestions for families and faith communities in dealing with the "boy code" as they encounter it. In Claire Bischoff's essay, it might have been helpful to more precisely define what she means by the relatively broad term "narrative," given its more recent history in theological studies, and for her to explore the possible limits of narrative as well.

This is not to suggest that these essays are thin, that they should contain tips and tricks, or that they should maintain an oversimplified, decontextualized problem-solution orientation. Some more reflection and guidance however, in these two specific instances and in other places throughout the book, would help flesh out the important work that these essays are doing.

Additionally, while the book helpfully addresses issues related to race, ethnicity, gender, class, as well as interfaith and global identities, the book might have benefited from some significant attention to LGBTQ issues. This omission is particularly acute in light of the recent nationwide "It Gets Better" campaign. How is it that adults and young people together forge life out of the death-dealing situations that many young LGBTQ people face from their peers, communities of faith, families, media, and beyond? Fortunately, the resources within the text

provide models that can fund practical theological reflection and life-giving praxis on this equally troublesome topic (as well as others that may arise in the future).

Despite these critiques, the book offers a picture of practical theological reflection that is capable of sustaining critical, hopeful, and dynamic ministries for, to, and with children and youth. Readers will no doubt be challenged to think within their own contexts and beyond, better equipped to face the prominent forces that stand in the way of a “habitus of loving and choosing life” (3).