



Review

**Martin E. Marty,
The Mystery of the Child
(Eerdmans, 2007). 257 pages. \$24.**

Reviewer: Jennifer Baker-Trinity
jbakertrinity@mac.com

“Wonder. Children know it best.” In 1999, Christian historian and theologian Martin Marty served as commentator for a hymn festival celebrating the Lutheran chorale. Marty found it fitting to begin this celebration of the chorale with brief comments on wonder, noting wonder’s natural relationship to childhood as well as to the chorale.

Often one regards the concept of wonder and its corollary mystery as problems: “I wonder why the faucet is leaking. Let’s figure it out and fix it.” Or “Thank God that mystery has been solved.” Here wonder and mystery lurk as temporary problems begging for permanent solutions. Wonder and mystery, though ever-present dimensions of God and humanity, can be diminished by the ever-present desire to control and to solve.

In his demanding and far-reaching book, *The Mystery of the Child*, Martin Marty branches out into a new direction: the wonder and mystery of the child. The work is part of the Religion, Marriage, and Family series located at the Center for the Study of Law and Religion in the School of Law at Emory University. Marty’s book contributes to this series by theologically examining children in our society from a Christian perspective, while also welcoming Jewish, Muslim, and Humanist contributions.

Marty presents his thesis clearly and succinctly on page one: “The provision of care for children will proceed on a radically revised and improved basis if instead of seeing the child first as a problem faced with a complex of problems, we see her as mystery surrounded by mystery.” Throughout the book, Marty draws on poets, philosophers, theologians, and scientists to draw the reader into a wonder whose aim is not solution, but receptiveness.

The author suggests a wide audience for his work, what he terms “providers of care.” As Marty thoughtfully examines what he means by care and providence, he widens the net of what the culture typically assumes as providers of care, namely parents, to include teachers, lawmakers, clergy, coaches, artists and others. He moves ahead and explores in great depth what he means by wonder and mystery. Marty’s signature broad scope paired with clarity and pointed research fills the remaining pages.

The book’s nine chapters could be divided into two parts followed by an indispensable postscript. Chapters one through six urge the reader to reconsider what is meant by care, control, mystery, and wonder as they relate to the child. Marty rightly points out that the abundance of

books about children filling the local Barnes and Nobles or Borders rarely regards the child as mystery, unless one regards mystery in a way he does not, as something solved as a detective solves a crime.

Marty, assisted by the wisdom of Jerome Miller, Gabriel Marcel, and Karl Rahner among others, calls the reader to be wary of control as the starting point for our relationships with children. By no means does Marty advocate an “anything goes” naïve wonder in which providers of care relinquish any kind of discipline or responsibility. Yet he sternly warns of the dangers inherent in understanding children fundamentally as intruders over whom we exercise control. Rather their interruptions into our lives point to the truth and gift of life beyond human control.

Christian scholars and church workers may be most nourished by Marty’s in-depth treatment of God as mystery as this relates to the child as mystery. At the center of this discourse, Marty addresses Jesus’ words as recorded in Matthew’s Gospel: “unless you change and become like children.” The call to change and become like children is anything but a sentimental quote to be embroidered on wall hanging or painted in a Sunday school room. Drawing on the work of French novelist Georges Bernanos, Marty opens up the radical change: “considering the child as mystery surrounded by mystery does mean moving into “another world to live in” than the one dominated by problems and control.” Taking Marty seriously means thorough reconsideration of how children are viewed and welcomed in the Christian community.

The first half of the book culminates in a chapter entitled, “Wonder in the Provision of Care.” If one were to read one segment of his book, this segment gets at the heart of Marty’s thesis. Under the heading, “Enriching the Provision of Care: Fifteen resources of Wonder,” Marty comments upon the work of Karl Rahner in an extended conversation. Fifteen statements about children are paired with practical suggestions. While certainly not a step-by-step guide for dealing with children, these short statements get to the heart of what it means to embrace children as mystery, partners who illuminate our daily living.

The latter half of the book attempts to put the broad principles explored in the first half into a more specific context. Matters of culture (what many regard as “nature”) and gender (nurture) are treated as well as specific behavioral issues. Marty calls upon excerpts in the field to the point at which the reader may well become mired in citations and data. The in-depth look at gender issues and behavior address important issues, but may be better treated by specialists in these subjects.

Reading this book for the first time, this reviewer’s impulse was to eagerly hand the book to nearby parents and friends. Marty intends a broad audience that includes parents, yet many parents might be overwhelmed by Marty’s thorough treatment of the thesis. It behooves the best scholars in the field of childhood and religion to carefully study Marty’s work and present the central thesis in manners more readily embraced by parents across educational levels, classes and cultures.

Marty includes very few personal anecdotes from his own childhood or his years as parent and grandparent. Though fitting for this scholarly volume, parents that seek out the “A-Z” childcare manuals do find camaraderie in the stories of other parents, stories that provide a sense of solidarity in the adventure of providing care for children. Perhaps a book that merges the best of such manuals with the essence of Marty’s thesis would find a welcome home in church libraries.

A profound aspect of this work lies in Marty’s understanding that childhood is not a phase of life but instead a posture of openness and receptivity. The postscript, “The Abyss of Mystery,” treats the end of life not as a “second childhood” but by what Marty calls “childness.” By childness, Marty refers to a condition or quality, a state of receptivity to the gift of each new day and the wonders to behold. His quoting of Karl Rahner (in italics) prior to a personal afterword summarizes the plot of the book:

This child, and now in some appropriate ways an adult, is *receptive, responsive, amenable, simple, teachable, unspoiled; someone who is observed to be or who can acknowledge being relatively helpless, insignificant, unimposing, lacking status, dependent*. Yes, “of such is the kingdom of God.” This sequence of words summarizes the plot of this book because it illustrates something of the surprise, the imagination, the creativity, the wonder—yes, the mystery—of the child.

In the opening reflection of the 1999 hymn festival, Marty goes on to say: “Wonder. Lose it and you lose the ability to grasp the riches of what God is doing.” *The Mystery of the Child* welcomes the reader’s wonder at a life that does not move past childhood, but embraces the mystery of “childness” in young and old alike. One concludes the book with the sense that Marty has not given us all the answers, but like a child enthralled with the timeless game of hide-and-seek, we take delight in the seeking.