



## Review

**Anne Richards and Peter Privett (editors),**

***Through the Eyes of a Child:***

***New Insights in Theology from a Child's Perspective***

**(Church House Publishing, 2009). 336 pages. £19.99**

Reviewer: Steve Dixon

[096884445@chester.ac.uk](mailto:096884445@chester.ac.uk)

Commissioned to mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations Year of the Child, this collection of essays (the titles of which are indicated in bold type) begins by surveying changes

in our society's response to the question *what is a child?* Nigel Asbridge of *The Children's Society* reminds readers that what "child" meant to the society that received Jesus' injunction to "become like a child" would have been very different to what the term signifies today; and, indeed, that what the word meant to a 50 year-old contemporary reader of this book during her own childhood is not how it is understood today, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Familiar markers are laid: the changes in family structure; childbearing as a "lifestyle choice" in some sections of society, with a resultant decline in the number of children; the ending of economic productivity among the young; and loss of agency due to the prolonging of childhood and overprotection. The Church is challenged to respond to the "child" of today, not to some romanticised image from previous centuries, nor an image drawn from the childhood memories of today's "elders."

A consideration of the *nakedness and vulnerability* of the child follows, reminding adults of their own vulnerability and of how important this is for their humanity, and for trust and closeness to God. Mission theologian Anne Richards notes the vulnerability and nakedness of the Christ child; and, in the context of a society that is fearful and deeply suspicious of adult relations with children, she offers challenging reflections on children's enjoyment of nakedness, the importance of flesh to flesh experience between infant and mother, and a child's need for the comfort of a caring adult's touch.

Keith White, of the Child Theology Movement, explores the possibility that children can be a theological resource, noting that a child's sensory approach is lacking in adult theologies of *creation* and commending children's "hands on," involved approach to appreciation, together with their playful creativity and concern for the environment. He suggests that children relate to

the world “at the level of ontology rather than epistemology” (p. 57); that their creativity for the sake of it may give an insight into the original creation; and that their leadership in issues of global stewardship is an area in which they can express their agency and give practical expression to the prophecy of Isaiah 11.

Rebecca Nye, a consultant on children’s *spirituality* and researcher for Godly Play UK, gives examples of children’s behaviours exhibiting a natural spiritual response that has generally not received attention from theologians through the centuries. The underestimation of children’s spiritual capacities has persisted even in comparatively recent educational approaches, but the everyday, integrated and non-verbal approaches that children bring could, Nye suggests, provide a model for adult spiritual nurture.

Godly Play – the Montessori inspired, experiential approach to Christian nurture developed by Jerome Berryman – is mentioned by Nye as a way of working with children’s spirituality; and psychologist Joanna Collicutt draws on her experience of a Godly Play session on the parable of the sower to consider ways of sharing the *word* with children. This essay itself provides an example of the way that insights drawn from children can lead adults to new perspectives on their practices.

One child’s insight about paradise, recounted by Godly Play trainer Peter Privett, was that it is a place for *play*. The potential of play for developing relationships, and for imaginative exploration of alternative realities, are amongst the positive features he highlights. He warns, however, against manipulative “pseudo-play” with children, and notes that adults need to empty

their baggage for a play relationship with children to work. Although there was an outpouring in the 1970s, Privett notes a current lack of playful theology.

The report of group interviews with a broad age range of children on the subject of *sin*, conducted by chaplain Emma Percy, leads the collection into a series of directly theological issues. Although the children were clear that sin was universal, the interviews produced little judgmentalism or sense of God's wrath and showed that children were confident of God's qualities of understanding and forgiveness. These findings were seen to raise questions about the Church's teaching on the consequences of humanity's darker side.

However, working from experience and using intuition and imagination, another group of children saw *forgiveness* between people as dependent on some form of restitution. They also saw some things as unforgivable by God. Diocesan children's adviser Sandra Millar notes the challenges that these insights pose to current adult perceptions.

Children's dependence leads to an early expectation that their needs will be met as a matter of course, as an act of *grace*, argues research Angela Shier-Jones. However, adults encourage children to become *independent* and to 'earn' what was previously unconditional through good behaviour, or to 'pay' for it with polite expressions of gratitude, thus possibly undermining an instinctive understanding of grace. Children's views of God's grace and generosity are shaped by their experience of these qualities in their carers, Shier-Jones observes.

John Pridmore, adding an essay to his extensive work on the theology of childhood, notes that Jesus took children into his arms without any preconditions and declared the Kingdom was theirs: he suggests that the sins from which children need *salvation* are not those they have

committed, but those perpetrated against them. Pridmore reminds readers of the original innocence attributed to children by some poets and theologians, and of the Gospel's insistence that the Kingdom belongs to children by virtue of what they are.

Adults try to shield children from *death*, but adults' greater cognitive and linguistic competences do not make them any better at dealing with death. Indeed, mission and spirituality writer John Drane and Christian clown Olive M. Fleming Drane recount that the instinctive comfort given to them as grieving adults by their young son was more effective than church interventions. The writers suggest that children's innate spirituality and the fact that they constantly deal with change may make them more adept at processing sorrow than adults.

Children's Advocate, Bishop Paul Butler, describes a study in which children explored the parable of the sheep and the goats through drawing and discussion. They saw no problem with the justice of *judgment* but had reservations about the finality and length of the punishment. They showed no fear of hell as a possible fate for themselves or anyone they knew.

Diocesan Director of Education, Howard Worsley gives a brief background description of *angels* as understood by adults and then describes work with children done by the Bible Story Project, using a Godly Play style to tell the story of Daniel in the lion's den. This approach produced children's reflections on angels that portrayed them as helpful and gave them characteristics matching the child's own gender. Worsley notes that angels feature little in Scripture but are frequently present in the creative worlds of fiction and hymns. Children's imaginative approaches are in tune with these worlds and allow them to be more comfortable than adults in talking about angels.

‘A’ level student Philip Fryar concludes the collection by reflecting on his own stories and poems, produced over a number of years, to demonstrate the development of his thinking on *heaven and hell* through his childhood. His reflections reveal the depth and complexity of his engagement with these issues. Discussing the influences that shaped his views he cites books and films for their impact on his imagination, and he perceives school and church negatively as fallible institutions that try to tell him what to think.

Each chapter in the book concludes with questions for reflection or discussion; and each cluster of chapters has some concluding multi-generational activities to aid reflection, contemplation, and wondering. The list of contributors is impressive – many are well-known names – and includes representatives from the children’s work advisers’ network, Godly Play, the Children’s Society and the Child Theology Movement, as well as from the worlds of psychology, theology, education, and ministry. All the essays are valuable additions to our understanding of theology inspired by the presence of children and the book as a whole provides a rich, varied and readable resource for those working in children’s ministry. The book also reminds theologians of the wealth of resources now being produced in the fields related to childhood and religion.

The one weakness of the collection, however, is its title. The contributors have varying success in looking “through the eyes of a child.” Despite copious references to and quotations from children’s experiences, explorations, and thoughts, most chapters retain a distinctly adult feel and perspective in their concerns, presentation, and interpretation: adults looking at children looking at God. And it is notable that when sin *was* viewed through the eyes of children, via group interview, and little judgmentalism was evident, this was interpreted in terms of

deficiencies in the adult Church's teaching rather than as a teaching for the Church from its children. Peter Privett, in his essay, notes the difficulty of catching play in words. There is perhaps a related difficulty in adults seeking to represent the views of children in words, or in any other way. One is left with the feeling that the book *Through the Eyes of a Child* remains to be created – one made up entirely of chapters like the last, in which a young person reflects on his or her own spiritual experience and development, unmediated by an adult gloss. Perhaps, after all, a book is not the best instrument with which to look through the eyes of a child, such that those who wish to be blessed by the insights of children should follow the example of these writers and spend significant time in children's company.