



**Playing with Pictures of Paradox:  
Children and Christology in Søren Kierkegaard and *Godly Play***

Mark Lloyd Taylor  
Alissabeth Newton

[MLTaylor@seattleu.edu](mailto:MLTaylor@seattleu.edu)

Responding to a question about greatness in the kingdom of God raised by his adult followers, if not an argument concerning which one of those adults was the greatest, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke recount that Jesus placed a little child in their midst and said something like: “whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me...for the least among you all is the greatest” (Luke 9:46-48; see Matthew 18:1-5 and Mark 9:33-37). In Matthew’s

account, Jesus goes so far as to tell his adult listeners that they must “change and become like children” in order to “enter the kingdom of heaven” (18:3). Questions radiate out from this scene and these sayings: What does Jesus make of children? What do children make of Jesus? What happens when Jesus places a child amidst a circle of adults? What happens when an adult places an image of Jesus Christ in front of a child? While the gospel pericope of Jesus and the little child has long invited theological reflection, in recent decades it has become a primary text for theologians seeking to understand and learn from the special relationship between children and the human experience of God.<sup>1</sup> These theologians argue that if adults allow and encourage children to be children within Christian communities (and eschew re-forming or de-forming them according to adult inclinations), then children can mediate the grace of a participatory, nonverbal knowing of God, which, in turn, will advance the church’s mission of creating and maintaining an alternative to the haste and superficiality, dominance and exclusion, consumerism and violence of the surrounding culture.

This essay places in your midst the writings of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) and the teaching of *Godly Play*, a contemporary Montessori-based program of Christian religious formation created by Jerome W. Berryman concurrent with other efforts at “child theology.”

---

1. Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001); Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2002); Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); O. M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005); David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005); Martin E. Marty, *The Mystery of the Child (Religion, Marriage, Family)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007); Angela Shier-Jones, ed., *Children of God: Toward a Theology of Childhood* (Peterborough [UK]: Epworth Press, 2007); Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008); Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Jesus Loves the Little Children? An Exercise in the Use of Scripture,” *Journal of Childhood and Religion* 1, no. 7 (2010): 1-35; David M. Csinos, “Four Ways of Knowing God: Exploring Children’s Spiritual Styles,” *Journal of Childhood and Religion*, 1, no. 8 (2010): 1-32. We will have much to say about Jerome W. Berryman’s contribution to child theology in a moment.

Kierkegaard and Berryman advance crisscrossing claims concerning the capacity of children to appropriate Jesus Christ. We shall exposit these two renderings of children and Christology; engage them in dialogue around the topic of paradox: specifically, the paradoxical character of Jesus' parables, Jesus and the status quo, and the interrelationship between Jesus' life, his death, and his resurrection; then draw some conclusions. Stories of children encountering a picture of the crucified Christ, one from Kierkegaard, the other from *Godly Play*, anchor our discussion.

But you may already be wondering why we would bring a nineteenth century Danish writer together with a twenty-first century educational project.

*Why us?* As a professor (Mark Taylor) and a student (Alissa Newton) in a graduate school of theology and ministry we revel in the work and busy ourselves with the play of professional theologizing. Moreover, young children happen to be prominent in our personal lives right now. Alissa has two daughters aged eleven months and two and a half years. Mark's three grandsons range in age from five years (almost) to five months.

*Why Godly Play?* Berryman's work is rich, expansive, and well-grounded. The *Godly Play* curriculum currently comprises eight volumes.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Berryman has articulated its theoretical basis and pedagogical method.<sup>3</sup> A not-for-profit foundation provides training and accreditation for instructors, research into the practice of *Godly Play*, and guidelines for the visual and tactile materials used in lessons.<sup>4</sup> Berryman applies his work with *Godly Play* to the

---

2. Jerome W. Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, 8 vols. (Denver, CO: Morehouse Education Resources, 2003-2011).

3. Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) and *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Denver, CO: Morehouse Education Resources, 2009).

4. The Godly Play Foundation: [www.godlyplayfoundation.org](http://www.godlyplayfoundation.org) (accessed August 6, 2012).

wider conversation about child theology in a recent book, *Children and the Theologians*.<sup>5</sup> We have both had the privilege of teaching *Godly Play* to the children of an Episcopal parish; Mark over the past two program years, Alissa for four years – much of that time directing children’s formation activities at the church. For us as Anglicans, *Godly Play* interweaves the drama of embodied, catholic sacramental action and the disciplined, protestant attunement to Scripture. As moderns, *Godly Play* puts us more deeply in touch with elemental forms of human experience such as oral storytelling. As adults, *Godly Play* recasts our Christian faith, clearing out some of the clutter, making it more tangible and more nimble, altogether wonderful and wonder-filled. Insights and practices from *Godly Play* now permeate our theological and pastoral work with adults as well; from preaching (both of us) to congregational development training and consulting in our diocese (Alissa) and shaping a workshop for the formation coordinators and liturgical consultants assigned to our school by its ecclesial partners (Mark).

*Why Kierkegaard?* We have both devoted intellectual and spiritual energies to studying, understanding, and assessing Kierkegaard; Alissa over the past two academic years, Mark for almost three decades. Diverging from some other interpreters, we approach Kierkegaard as a Christian religious writer and yet also attend to the literary body of his work using postmodernist tactics. As feminists, we read both with and against the grain of Kierkegaard’s texts in their performance of sexual difference and gender relations, while striving not to forget his liturgical and spiritual setting within nineteenth century Danish Lutheranism. This present work on children and Christology builds upon and extends our theological, literary, feminist, and ecclesial

---

5. Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2009).

hermeneutic.<sup>6</sup> In any case, Kierkegaard is a classic writer in the western philosophical and religious canon. So, even if only as the putative father of existentialism, he casts a long shadow across the cultural values and assumptions impacting the children we help raise and form in Christian faith, their parents and their communities. Third, child theology encourages being open to children, an “expecting” of children, in spheres of life that traditionally exclude or ignore their *human* experience and meaning-making activities.<sup>7</sup> We hope to foster this openness to children within the adult centered world of academic scholarship, where Kierkegaard has usually been located. Finally, our conjunction of Kierkegaard and *Godly Play* responds to an invitation Berryman issues in his recent book. There he traces attitudes toward children across the history of Christian theology, from Jesus and Paul, through Augustine and Pelagius, Anselm and Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards, Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, to contemporary theologians of childhood such as Marcia J. Bunge and Bonnie Miller-McLemore. Likening his historical survey to a game, Berryman says: “The summaries of the theologians are starting points for reflection, not endpoints....History overflows the limitations of this book, so readers are invited to add more ‘game pieces’ as the years of play go by.”<sup>8</sup> One purpose of our

---

6. See, for example: Mark Lloyd Taylor, “Ordeal and Repetition in Kierkegaard’s Treatment of Abraham and Job,” in *Foundations of Kierkegaard’s Vision of Community: Religion, Ethics, and Politics in Kierkegaard*, ed. George B. Connell and C. Stephen Evans (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1992), 33-53; “Almost Earnestness? Autobiographical Reading, Feminist Re-Reading, and Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 175-202; “A Well-Considered Occasion: Kierkegaard and the Wedding Ceremony Prescribed by the 1830 Danish *Altar Book*,” in *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 10 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), 245-288; and “The Hermit Emerges Victorious: Contempt for Women in Kierkegaard’s Attack upon the (Male) Ecclesiastical Establishment,” in *“The Moment” and Late Writings*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 23 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 199-238.

7. Natalie K. Watson, “Expecting or On Being Open to Children,” in *Children of God*, ed. Angela Shier-Jones, 1-20.

8. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians*, 201-3.

essay is to add Søren Kierkegaard to the game Berryman initiates. For although, like most theologians, Kierkegaard may often have other things on his mind than children, he does pay significant and sustained attention to childhood, more, perhaps, than many of the thinkers Berryman himself surveys. A memorable story exemplifies Kierkegaard's interest in children.

### **Face to Face with an Image of the Crucified Christ**

In his book, *Practice in Christianity*, the Kierkegaardian pseudonym Anti-Climacus recounts a child's very first encounter with an image of the crucifixion.<sup>9</sup>

An adult plays with a young child, showing him a series of cards with pictures printed on them. The first card depicts the emperor Napoleon, wearing the look of a leader on his face, riding a snorting steed, ordering thousands of soldiers "Forward!" over the mountains to victory in battle. The storyteller talks to the child a little about Napoleon, who he was and what he did. Next comes a picture of William Tell: dressed as a hunter, grasping his bow, looking straight ahead steadily but with concern. The adult narrates the story of William Tell, that he was intent upon hitting the apple on his beloved son's head with an arrow without injuring him. These pictures delight the child. The adult displays several others and continues to talk about heroic men. (Anti-Climacus does not specify further. We imagine a picture of the great poet Goethe followed by one of the acclaimed Scandinavian sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen.) But then the adult reveals a jarringly different image on a card he has deliberately placed among the others. It portrays the crucified Christ.

---

9. Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 20 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 174-179.

At first, the child simply fails to understand this final picture. Why is the man hanging on such a tree? The adult explains that it is a cross and to hang upon it means to be crucified, the most painful and disgraceful death penalty that could be imposed in the man's country – one reserved only for the most flagrant criminals. The child feels uncomfortable. How could it occur to the adult to put such an ugly picture among the lovely ones: a criminal next to all those heroes? So different is the picture of the crucified that, in the words of an old ballad, all the other pictures turn their backs on it.<sup>10</sup> But who was he, what did he do, asks the child? The adult says: this is the savior of the world, and proceeds to tell in detail the story of Jesus Christ. The crucified one was love, he explains; the most loving person who ever lived, who lived for only one thing – to love and help people, above all the sick and sorrowful and suffering. Eventually, however, even the few followers close to the man betrayed him and denied him. Everyone else insulted and mocked him, then nailed him to the cross. The crowd cheered for a notorious robber, that he be freed; while they shouted “Crucify! Crucify!” at the loving one.

According to Anti-Climacus, the story of the suffering of the crucified one has such a profound impact that the child forgets the other pictures and ignores what the adult goes on to say about Christ's rising from the dead, ascending to heaven, and entering into glory at God's right hand. As the child grows up, his response to this picture develops as well: from initial amazement that God did not rain fire down from heaven to prevent the death of the loving one, or, his death having come to pass, that the earth did not open up to swallow the ungodly killers; to fantasies of weapons and the child himself visiting deadly revenge upon those who hung the

---

10. Kierkegaard loved folk songs and tales and refers to them over and over again in his books. The ballad mentioned here is that of Agnes and the merman; see Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 391, note 42.

man on the tree; later, an adolescent desire to struggle against the human race that could crucify love; finally arriving at an adult willingness to suffer as Christ suffered in the world.

That a second pseudonym, H.H., in an earlier book, *Two Ethical-Religious Essays*, relates a similar tale about a child's encounter with the crucifixion testifies to the sway this theme exerted over Kierkegaard's imagination.<sup>11</sup> In the case of H.H., the story turns out to be autobiographical. The pseudonym admits that he had been strictly brought up in the Christian religion, so much so that even as a child he was old like an old man. Unlike other children, H.H. heard little about the baby Jesus and the angels of Christmas. Instead, his one and only impression of Jesus Christ involved a picture of the crucified one. Motivated by love, year after year, he felt drawn to resemble the crucified ever more closely in his own life, insofar as a person can resemble Christ. But then a doubt arose in his mind: whether a human being "has the right to let himself be put to death for the truth."<sup>12</sup> The attempt to answer this question forms the content of H.H.'s first essay.

Deeper still, comments by Kierkegaard in his journals and papers echo H.H. and Anti-Climacus so distinctly that we might begin to suspect the story of a child face to face with the crucifixion traces back to young Søren's own experience. Quoting Goethe, Kierkegaard describes his early life as "half child's play, half God at heart."<sup>13</sup> He alludes to frightful torments as a child; not merely having been raised by a severe, old man (Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard

---

11. Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ethical-Religious Essays*, in *Without Authority*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 18 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 55-73.

12. *Ibid.*, 57.

13. Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong, Edna H. Hong, and Gregor Malantschuk, 6 vols. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978), vol. 5, p. 136 [entry 5412].



was fifty-six years old when Søren was born), but with the misfortune of never really being a child himself, born, instead, already an old man.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, Kierkegaard claims in one journal entry that his life was wrapped up in (exhausted by?) the thought of the crowds who spit upon Jesus Christ at his crucifixion, that it was to this idea and to the person of the suffering Christ that he, Søren, was pre-pledged, or pre-engaged, even in childhood.<sup>15</sup>

### **Kierkegaard, Children, and Christology**

Whatever its autobiographical roots, the story of a child confronted with the crucified Christ needs to be placed in the context of two primary, yet divergent, views of children assumed by Kierkegaard's authorial personae across his career as a writer. But first some orientation to that authorship itself.

Søren Kierkegaard never married and never had children of his own. He was engaged to Regine Olsen, but broke off the engagement after a year, a month, and a day. Søren Kierkegaard never really held a job, even though he possessed the requisite education and formation to enter two different professions. He could have become either a university professor of theology or a pastor in the Danish Lutheran Church. He chose not to pursue an academic appointment. He chose not to seek ordination.

---

14. Ibid., vol. 6, pp. 84, 136, 123-4 [entries 6298, 6379, 6355]. Despite this self-assessment, Kierkegaard was well-liked by his younger relations, specifically for his adult playfulness with them as children. See the reminiscences of his niece, Henriette Lund, and nephew, Troels Frederik Troels-Lund, in Bruce H. Kimmse, ed., *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 150-92.

15. Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 6, pp. 145-7 [entry 6389]. The difficulty with Kierkegaard's journals and papers involves sorting out what might be labeled "autobiography" and what constitutes sketches for "fictional" anecdotes and tales. And, of course, every autobiography is itself the creative, "fictive," telling of one's life story, rather than some kind of objective videotape.

Instead, instead of marrying Regine, instead of taking up a profession, and living mostly on wealth he inherited from his father, Kierkegaard poured himself into a staggeringly intense, productive, and meteoric twelve year career as an author, collapsing in the street at the age of forty-two on the way home from the bank after withdrawing the last of his inheritance. He entered a hospital and died there a few weeks later. About the meaning of his authorship, Kierkegaard obsesses constantly, viewing it as everything from a kind of penance for his sins (maybe those of his father, too) to a divine calling as a Christian missionary to an ostensibly Christian nation and culture.

Kierkegaard's literary output totals some forty books published over those twelve years. Some of the books are quite brief – little pamphlets, really. Others are prodigiously long. A half a dozen exceed three hundred pages in length, each. The longest falls a single page short of eight hundred in modern English translation. Many of their title pages – especially the shorter and more explicitly religious ones – bear the name S. Kierkegaard as author. But a dozen books appear under a riotous collection of pseudonyms: Hilarius Bookbinder, Nicholas Notabene, Inter et Inter, first Johannes Climacus, then, later on, Anti-Climacus, who we met above. Earnestness and jest collide. One Vigilius Haufniensis (the watchman of Copenhagen) writes an erudite treatise on original sin, while a book called *Repetition* comes from the pen of Constantin Constantius. A pseudonymous author writes a six hundred page postscript to an original work of just a hundred pages. Another book consists solely of eight prefaces (nine counting the book's own), because the pseudonym's wife refuses to allow him to disrupt their domestic routine by writing a complete book.

Kierkegaard's authorship spans diverse literary genres: pieces that can only be described as fiction (novels and novellas); reviews of other contemporary literature (a novel, a play, the oeuvre of a prominent stage actress); an assemblage of witty, pathos-filled aphorisms; essays and addresses on everything from Mozart's operas to the silhouettes of three women deceived by their male lovers; religious discourses, even sermons, touching on biblical texts (Genesis through the gospels of Matthew and Luke to the letters of James and Peter) and biblical themes (love of neighbor, the thorn in the flesh), as well as on other edifying and Christian topics (inner strength and victory in God; care and joy; confession, marriage, burial; the Lord's Supper). The very first book in the authorship, a huge two-volume work called *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, epitomizes this maze of complexities.<sup>16</sup> Edited by Victor Eremita (the victorious hermit), *Either/Or* contains the papers of two different authors, "A" and "B," whose manuscripts Eremita claims to have discovered by accident in a secret compartment behind a hidden panel of an old desk purchased at a second hand shop. A's variegated collection of aesthetic pieces makes up volume one of *Either/Or*, the "either"; except that, mirroring Eremita's reticence, A disavows being the author of its final and longest component, the diary of a seducer named Johannes, claiming instead merely to have edited it. Volume two, the "or," consists of two massive, didactic letters from B (a Judge named William), addressed to A, written on lined legal paper, telling the younger man to get serious with his life and stop playing around. The adequacy of the Judge's ethical standpoint, as well as the very binary construct of either/or, however, are called into question by a country pastor's sermon with which the second volume of *Either/Or* ends. The

---

16. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Parts I and II*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vols. 3 and 4 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

sermon extols the good news that in relation to God we human beings are all always in the wrong.

But why pseudonyms? Why, more broadly, such a curious, convoluted authorship? Many scholars have wrestled with these intriguing, maddening questions for many years. For the purposes of this essay on children and Christology, we need make only one broad, central claim. Pseudonymity was not designed to hide Kierkegaard's ultimate responsibility for the books. Everyone in Denmark knew (almost) immediately that they belonged to him. Indeed, the name S. Kierkegaard appears on the title pages of many of the pseudonymous writings as editor. Rather, the obliqueness and complex intertextuality of Kierkegaard's authorship relate essentially to the topics he takes up. Kierkegaard seems to have believed that truth, existential truth, truth concerning human life, human values, human meaning, could not be communicated objectively and directly by one person to another, transferred from one person's mind and heart to another's. On the contrary, existential truth must be engaged, enacted, subjectively or personally, with intentionality and passion, by each human being in the living of her life. The most a writer or a teacher (a parent?) can do is to offer the student or reader (child?) possibilities, life options he might then try on for himself. So, Kierkegaard creates pseudonyms, fictional characters, with their own life views – be they aesthetic, ethical, or religious – which they embody and for which they speak each in their own distinctive voice, independent of whether Søren Kierkegaard himself actually believed such things or lived them out. The goal of this game is for the reader, having weighed the insights and inadequacies of both a Johannes the Seducer and a Judge William, to come to some decision about how she will now live.

With the important exception of a series of polemical newspaper articles and tracts from the last year of his life savagely attacking the Danish church, its clergy and bishops, a non-dogmatic, non-directive stance also characterizes the works signed S. Kierkegaard. Like the pseudonymous books, they invite an active, participatory response from the reader, whether in edifying discourses on patience which require the reader to discover and practice that very virtue in order to work through Kierkegaard's texts,<sup>17</sup> or communion discourses about the women in the gospels who anoint Jesus and whose stories Kierkegaard uses to query the reader, gently, concerning his need for shelter and nurture as she comes forward to receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the sacrament of the altar.<sup>18</sup>

Such an attitude toward truth might be called Socratic or maieutic – the philosopher as midwife whose questioning assists the disciple in giving birth to himself existentially.<sup>19</sup> We contend that Kierkegaard's open-ended authorship anticipates Montessori educational principles, generally, and Berryman's *Godly Play*, in particular. In an "open" classroom, the teacher does not tell the child what to think or who to be. She strives, rather, to create a safe and boundaried,

---

17. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 5 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 159-75, 181-203.

18. Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 135-44, 145-60, 161-88. For a discussion of these discourses and their gospel women, see Mark Lloyd Taylor, "Practice in Authority: The Apostolic Women of Søren Kierkegaard's Writings," in *Anthropology and Authority: Essays on Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Poul Houe, Gordon D. Marino, and Sven Hakon Rossel (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 85-98.

19. Kierkegaard himself appeals to Socrates throughout his life, beginning with his master's thesis (we would call it a doctoral dissertation) published before *Either/Or* and the launch of the authorship, all the way to the end with a piece entitled "My Task," which lay on his desk ready for publication when he fell ill, entered the hospital, and died. See: Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); and "*The Moment*" and *Late Writings*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 23 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 340-7.

while rich and challenging environment, in which children make their own meaning, learn for themselves, and grow.

We recall one of the most fascinating and least well-known of Berryman's theologians, the fifteenth century cardinal Nicholas of Cusa. Berryman reports being attracted to Cusanus less because of what he has to say about children directly, than by what he accomplishes indirectly. When Nicholas of Cusa "speaks of God to adults he invites them to play as if they were children."<sup>20</sup> For Cusanus viewed God as the ultimate paradox, the coincidence of opposites, never to be resolved, always inviting a human response. He understood the human search for truth to mix seriousness and play (*docta ignorantia*: learned ignorance) and emphasized divine potentiality over actuality (God as *posse ipsum*: possibility itself). We would apply the following words by Berryman about Nicholas of Cusa to Søren Kierkegaard: "God... must be experienced nonverbally and personally, which is a kind of knowing children are quite comfortable with."<sup>21</sup> And, "He attempted to catch his readers by surprise by his striking images and quirky language so they could be struck by wonder and move in spite of themselves toward becoming learnedly ignorant."<sup>22</sup> This leads us back to the two views of children Kierkegaard assumes (views Berryman might dub "high": "respect[ing] children and what they can teach us about adult spirituality"; and "low": "see[ing] children as getting in the way of adults who desire to be true disciples of Christ"<sup>23</sup>).

---

20. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians*, 84.

21. *Ibid.*, 82.

22. *Ibid.*, 82-3.

23. *Ibid.*, 8.

*High views of children.* On the one hand, a number of pseudonymous authors make positive or sympathetic use of children and children's experiences to advance their own arguments. "A," the aesthete in *Either/Or*, a childless bachelor, offers up a grab bag of observations concerning comic and tragic aspects of childhood. Weariness with adult life flows beneath the surface of his remarks. A longs to re-collect the immediacy of a child's experience, the vibrant colors of childhood that have faded for the adult.<sup>24</sup> He likes to talk with children because they have not yet been spoiled by what counts as adult rationality.<sup>25</sup> But there is no going back, and, even if there were, the dissatisfactions of childhood foreshadow those of adult life. Consider, A writes, that avoiding boredom is essential to a child's happiness – as long as they are having a good time, they behave; when they "become unmanageable even while playing," surely they are already bored.<sup>26</sup> Or consider a child watching his nursemaid walk across the room. He shouts for her, "Maren!" But when she comes over to him in all friendliness and solicitude, he looks at her askance and declares, "No, not this Maren, I want another one"; just like adults who call out to the world with their desires, only to decline what is freely offered, reaching instead for something else, something new.<sup>27</sup> How ironic that the first person a child names using spoken language, "Da-da," becomes responsible for inducting the child into the world of pain and refusal by way of the child's first "thrashings."<sup>28</sup> Language, adult language, lies surrounded on both sides by the music of the non-verbal; and yet, A claims, over against the

---

24. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part I, Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 3, p. 23.

25. *Ibid.*, 19.

26. *Ibid.*, 285.

27. *Ibid.*, 35.

28. *Ibid.*, 19.

infant's babblings, language constitutes genuinely human self-expression. If a child watches an adult suffer, the sorrow is greater, the quantitative aspect of the experience; when an adult observes a suffering child, the qualitative, the pain, predominates – because the child “is not sufficiently reflective” to bring sin and guilt into the equation as the adult does.<sup>29</sup> Another aesthete writes that the anticipations of the child resemble the recollections of old age: the two represent the happiest, and most helpless, periods of human life.<sup>30</sup> But the unhappiest person of all, A insists, is the adult who has no childhood to recollect, try as he might, because that “age passed him by without real meaning.”<sup>31</sup>

The pseudonymous author Judge William is a married man and a father. He appeals to his experiences of wife and children for legitimacy and illustrative material in arguing for the significance of an ethical life. His central point is that a person can learn the most important things in life as a child. The Judge tells a vivid story of one of his own earliest childhood memories.<sup>32</sup> Little William was five years old and sent to school. His very first assignment was to learn, by heart, the first ten lines of Balle's catechism (a religious reader frequently used in early nineteenth century Denmark) for the next day's class. Diligently, William applied himself to his work; reciting the lines for his sister before going to bed, then rising early the next morning to practice some more. Looking back on that childhood incident, the Judge writes: “It seemed to me that heaven and earth would tumble down if I did not do my homework, and on the

---

29. Ibid., 148.

30. Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 11 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 10.

31. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part I*, 224-5.

32. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part II*, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 4, pp. 266-7.



other hand it seemed to me that if heaven and earth did tumble down this upheaval would in no way excuse me from doing what had once been set before me – doing my homework.”<sup>33</sup> He attributes his “whole ethical view of life,” maintained as an adult, to this indelible childhood impression that he “had but one duty, to do my homework.”<sup>34</sup>

Johannes *de silentio* extemporizes upon a man’s lifelong struggle to come to terms with the story in Genesis 22 of God tempting Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, a story the man heard as a child. He entertains four different endings to the biblical tale.<sup>35</sup> In the first, Abraham finds some solace in convincing Isaac that he, his father, was a monster, that the (near) killing was his idea, thereby shielding the son from the awful conclusion that God was the monster. In another, Abraham plunges into despair; in a third, Abraham lingers paralyzed, caught on the horns of a dilemma: how could it be a sin to offer God the very best one possesses, and yet, if his intent counts as sinful, then it must be unforgivable, for what more terrible sin could there be than to kill one’s child. In the fourth scenario, Isaac loses his faith in God as a result of the ordeal. *De silentio* spells out the moral of each alternative ending by way of variations on the theme of a mother weaning her child: happy the mother who did not require more drastic means to wean the child than disguising her breasts to make them look uninviting; happy the child who did not lose his mother completely, to death, only the permission to nurse; happy the mother who kept her child close despite their changed relationship; happy the child whose mother had stronger sustenance at hand to replace her milk. Although the man (*de silentio* himself?) forgot

---

33. Ibid., 267.

34. Ibid.

35. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, vol. 6 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 9-14.

everything else because of this story, and had as his one and only wish to accompany Abraham on his three-day journey to Mount Moriah, he discovers he understands it less and less the older he becomes. Anticipating Anti-Climacus and H.H. on the story of the crucifixion, Johannes *de silentio*'s book testifies to the existential persistence of biblical stories told to children. As we shall see, *Godly Play* shares this insight.

Johannes Climacus is a pivotal pseudonym. For a while, Kierkegaard toyed seriously with ending his career as a writer with Climacus' *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.<sup>36</sup> To that end, the book includes a long review by the pseudonym of the entire authorship from *Either/Or* to Climacus' own earlier book *Philosophical Fragments*, including the eighteen edifying discourses published in Kierkegaard's own name, which accompanied the pseudonymous books in little collections of twos, threes, and fours. In the review, Climacus holds up for particular praise Kierkegaard's ability to write about the significance of Jesus Christ's life and work without naming him directly. *Postscript* ends with "A First and Last Declaration," signed S. Kierkegaard, in which he acknowledges being the "author" of the pseudonymous books and offers a rationale for his pseudonymity. Of course, Kierkegaard changed his mind and kept writing for another nine years until his death. Even so, Climacus remains influential. He may be the last of the early pseudonyms, but then turns around and lends his name to the major pseudonym in the second portion of the authorship: Anti-Climacus. Not "anti-" in the sense of opposed to; rather, before, beyond, even higher than or above, "ante-," as in the First Commandment – "You shall have no other gods 'before' me." Both positive and negative views

---

36. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments,"* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 12 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

of children appear side-by-side in the pages of Climacus' *Postscript*. We shall take up the former here, the latter in a bit along with other dismissals of children in Kierkegaard's authorship.

The pseudonym owes the genesis of his philosophical and theological endeavors, in part, to a child. Climacus denies being a Christian, labeling himself instead a "humorist" who views Christianity from below, unable in his own life to rise to its ideal demands. But, humorously enough, he can claim a conversion experience: a clever, idle, and no longer so young man sits smoking cigars in a cafe in a public park one Sunday, when the thought strikes him that in an age when other thinkers make things easier and easier for people (above all the matter of becoming a Christian), he could benefit humankind by making them more difficult. This task receives urgency and focus two months later on another Sunday, in a second garden. Resting on a bench after a walk through a cemetery, Climacus overhears a conversation between an old man and a ten year old boy, both in mourning clothes, beside a freshly covered grave – the grave of the old man's son and the boy's father. The grandfather remarks that although the ten year old no longer has a father, has no one to cling to except an old man anxious to depart this world, there remains, nevertheless, "a God in heaven after whom all fatherliness on earth is called,...[and] one name in which there [is] salvation, the name of Jesus Christ."<sup>37</sup> The old man laments that his son, the ten year old's father, had abandoned such robust Christian faith in favor of a new fangled wisdom that promised even greater certainty than the old faith, but turned out to be only a mirage, a "sham eternity in which a mortal cannot live, but in which, if he steadily stares into it, he will lose his faith."<sup>38</sup> The grandfather leads his grandson to the grave and makes him swear – by his

---

37. Ibid., 237.

38. Ibid., 238.

dead father, by the old man's gray hair, by the solemnity of the graveyard, by the name of God and of Jesus Christ – that he will not succumb to the same deception.

Climacus calls this “the most heartrending scene I have ever witnessed”: that an old man would speak this way to a child; that he could only confide his anxiety about his son's salvation to a ten year old; that the grandfather wanted to save the grandson from making an eternal error as an adult, but could neither presume the requisite maturity of understanding in the child, nor wait until the child had matured to issue his dire warning.<sup>39</sup> Climacus reads himself into the scene, at one moment as the adult buried in terror by his father, in the next as the child bound to the sacred promise, then comes to a momentous decision: “You are quite bored with life's diversions, bored with girls, whom you love only in passing; you must have something that can totally occupy your time. Here it is: find out where the misunderstanding between speculative thought and Christianity lies.”<sup>40</sup> And so, like a detective trying to solve a complicated criminal case, he sets out to debunk Hegelianism (=“modern speculative Christian thought”) in his inaugural book, *Philosophical Fragments*, and later in the *Postscript* to it. Climacus bases his investigation upon the premise that modern people “have entirely forgotten what it means to *exist* and what *inwardness* is.”<sup>41</sup> This requires, in turn, that Climacus communicate his discoveries through an indirect form, one that encourages his reader to learn about her own inwardness and existence through self-activity.<sup>42</sup>

---

39. Ibid., 238-9.

40. Ibid., 239, 240-1.

41. Ibid., 242.

42. Ibid., 242-51.

At the very end of *Postscript*, as the culmination of his efforts to make becoming a Christian more difficult by exposing ameliorative misunderstandings of central Christian categories, Climacus writes about Jesus Christ, children and childhood, Christian faith and the illusions of adult Danish Christians.<sup>43</sup> He wrestles with Jesus' response to his disciples rebuking those who brought children to him (Matthew 19), and Jesus' saying in Matthew 18 that adults must become like children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. According to Climacus, Jesus is not talking *to* children, nor is he talking literally *about* childhood or the capacities of children (whether advantages or shortcomings), and he certainly is not suggesting that children somehow have an easier time entering God's kingdom, perhaps because of their purported innocence or loveliness.<sup>44</sup> No, Climacus argues, Jesus uses children indirectly as a device to gain leverage on his disciples and thereby impress upon them the fact that faith involves something other than a natural human capacity for any and every *adult*. Climacus calls attention to the other things Jesus says on the topic of entering the kingdom of God in Matthew 19: easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle; requires leaving behind houses and lands, brothers and sisters, father and mother, wife and children; some have gone to the extreme of making themselves eunuchs for the kingdom – prompting the terrified disciples to ask, “Who then can be saved?”<sup>45</sup> Very good question! However difficult or costly or repugnant, Climacus reasons, it nevertheless remains humanly possible to renounce family and possessions, even to castrate

---

43. Ibid., 587-616.

44. Ibid., 593.

45. Ibid., 592.

oneself; but, literally, to become a little child again when one is an adult is utterly impossible.<sup>46</sup> Therein lies the paradox of faith. Then why would Jesus tell his disciples to leave the small children alone, not forbid them to come to him, and declare “for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven?” Because, Climacus answers, the disciples had become too proprietary concerning their close relationship with Jesus, within their closed inner circle, seeking to accrue some earthly, social advantage from their special access to Jesus.<sup>47</sup> To interpose small children, the most disadvantaged, the ultimate outsiders in that society, serves to distance the presumptuous twelve from Jesus, undercutting their sense of privilege and entitlement.

More directly appreciative comments about children can be found in Kierkegaard’s edifying and Christian discourses. Often he ranges children alongside other “lowly” ones, women, the poor, the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, to critique the religious inadequacies of elite, adult men. Kierkegaard refers to the lowly, children included, as “simple” (*eenfold* in Danish, literally one-fold, having just one aspect) – in contrast to the sagacious, even calculating or conniving (*klog*) businessman, paterfamilias, government bureaucrat, pastor or bishop who looks out only for his own advantage, but duplicitously hides this drive behind another aspect.

For example, in his one substantial treatment of Jesus’ birth, Kierkegaard takes up the gospel reading appointed in the Lutheran church of his day for the Sunday after Christmas (Luke 2:33-40), although his primary focus is not the baby Jesus himself but the aged woman Anna in the Jerusalem temple who witnesses Mary and Joseph present their forty day old son to God and

---

46. Ibid., 593-4.

47. Ibid., 594.

offer sacrifice for his mother's purification.<sup>48</sup> Kierkegaard defends Anna's right to bear the title prophet, despite its usual assignation to men alone, and likens her importance to that of the Magi or wise men who witnessed the star shining over the cradle. Above all, Kierkegaard commends Anna to his readers as a model of "expectancy," that despite the untimely loss of her husband, her own barrenness and the social approbation of a childless widow in her culture, in humility and patience she is truly expecting, expectant, pregnant with the fulfillment of life that is God. In another discourse, Kierkegaard employs the understanding, welcome, and love a child receives from his father, one fully attuned to whether the child comes happy or weeping or troubled and depressed, to indicate the qualitatively superior understanding, welcome, and love shown by God to the human being, such that by comparison even the best human father remains but "a stepfather, a shadow, a reflection, a simile, an image" of God's fatherliness.<sup>49</sup> Several times, he likens God's provision for the faithful to the nurture of a mother's milk.<sup>50</sup>

Kierkegaard refers to children frequently in *Works of Love*, a crucial book from his mid-career (after Climacus' *Postscript*, before the unveiling of Anti-Climacus): the importance of learning to spell before reading (illustrative of Christian self-denial); the Christian likened to a well-brought up child who minds her manners even when not being watched by parents (instilled with God's love to go out into the world on one's own and love others); human educators and God as educator.<sup>51</sup> He illustrates all three members of the Apostle Paul's triad, faith, hope, and

---

48. Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 202-26.

49. *Ibid.*, 100.

50. *Ibid.*, 129, 263-4.

51. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 16 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 133, 189-90, 377.

love, using children; saying, for instance, that hope is childlike in its openness to possibility, and comparing the loving person to a child who does not see evil, even though living among a group of thieves.<sup>52</sup> With the latter, Kierkegaard sounds one of his favorite edifying themes, that love hides a multitude of sins.<sup>53</sup> And in a moving piece on “the work of love in recollecting one who is dead,” Kierkegaard’s core analogy is that between the love of parents for their children and the love of the living for the deceased.<sup>54</sup> He remarks that these are both the freest, most faithful, most unselfish forms of human love, and that the one who seems to be helpless (the child, the dead) can nonetheless compel love from the more powerful (the parent, the living).

*Low views of children.* On the other hand, Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus, as well as Kierkegaard in his final polemical articles, insist that children can neither comprehend nor make use of the decisive Christian category: the paradox of Jesus Christ, the one who stands as a sign of contradiction in the incognito of a lowly, suffering servant, who cannot be recognized immediately or directly communicated by one person to another. While children may be drawn to the baby Jesus, the Three Kings, and all the toys and treats of a domestic Christmas celebration, they lack the consciousness of sin and thereby any motivation to imitate Christ by breaking with immediacy through self-denial and world renunciation. Climacus, Anti-Climacus, and Kierkegaard deploy this view of children’s religious incapacity in order to castigate the childish

---

52. Ibid., 250-3 and 285-7. For children and the topic of love *believing* all things without ever being deceived, see *ibid.*, 235-6.

53. In addition to Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 280-99, see *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 55-68, 69-78, and *Without Authority*, 179-88.

54. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 345-58.



Christianity of adults who complacently prefer bourgeois comfort to the offense and foolishness of Jesus Christ, even as they piously invoke his name.

Rudiments of such negative attitudes toward children appear already in Kierkegaard's edifying discourses. He writes of a child's inwardness and prayer life, for example, and while he never suggests that a child should pray in any other than a childlike fashion, Kierkegaard also thinks the child's spirituality falls short of an adult concept of and relationship to God.<sup>55</sup> A child credits all the pleasant things in life to God, and prays accordingly, but fails to see that painful eventualities also come from God, as the adult must learn to do. Similarly, a child bereaved of his father simply leaps over death and the spiritual challenge it poses, to rest in the fatherliness of God, convinced that the earthly father is with God in heaven. More ominously, Kierkegaard's employment of the simple or lowly as foils to the inadequacies of adult men tends to rebound negatively upon flowers and birds, women and children. We associate struggle, he posits, with men, not women and children. Indeed, women and children represent the very opposite of struggle. Conversely, we envision women and children in connection to prayer. When Kierkegaard presupposes this dichotomy in order to expound the edifying topic "one who prays aright struggles in prayer and is victorious," however, the result is a tangled skein of disapproval for stereotypical male (mis)behavior, which does entail recognition that something in the piety of lowly women and children should characterize an adult Christian man, and, at the same time, demarcation of women and children as deviations from the norm constituted by male existence.<sup>56</sup>

---

55. Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 384-7.

56. *Ibid.*, 377-9.

In *Postscript*, Johannes Climacus expresses concern that his contemporaries have linked the social values of marriage, family, and career too closely with Christian faith. He says he does not know whether to laugh or weep over the man who confuses the infinite and the finite, the highest good and lesser goods, by tacking his “eternal happiness,” his relationship to God, on to the end of the list: good job, beautiful wife, health, social standing.<sup>57</sup> Climacus pokes fun at another man, “situated with a wife and children in a good living, cozily indoors,...a councilor of justice, a ‘serious man,’ who nevertheless wants to do something for his eternal happiness, provided the duties of his office and his wife and children permit it,” and comes to the grand decision to give ten dollars to the church.<sup>58</sup> In the unlikely event that a man might balk at the appropriateness of calling himself a Christian, the man’s wife would be ready with a reassuring response: “Hubby, darling, where did you ever pick up such a notion? How can you not be a Christian? You are Danish, aren’t you?...Don’t you tend to your work in the office as a good civil servant; aren’t you a good subject in a Christian nation, a Lutheran-Christian state? So of course you are a Christian.”<sup>59</sup>

Climacus also worries that the Lutheran practice of infant baptism might lead to the mistaken notion that childhood is the proper stage of life in which to become a Christian. His concern is not with the propriety of infant baptism per se; he grants its legitimacy as an anticipation of a way of belief and life the baptized child will take on himself as an adult.<sup>60</sup> The

---

57. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 391.

58. *Ibid.*, 395.

59. *Ibid.*, 50-1.

60. *Ibid.*, 595, 601-3.

problem, rather, is the nature of a child's religiosity, which Climacus labels "idyllic mythology."<sup>61</sup> While the religiousness of the child may serve as the "imaginative-inward basis for all later religiousness," it remains "universal" and "abstract," depends upon the "direct recognizability" of religious truths and realities, and orients itself toward all that is gentle, endearing, and heavenly.<sup>62</sup> And so, according to Climacus, what a child takes from Christianity is to live with the little baby Jesus, the angels, the three kings, the star in the night; to make the long journey, find refuge in the stable, see the heavens ever open to the earth – all this and peppernuts and Christmas decorations, too.<sup>63</sup> Climacus' intent is not to belittle the loveliness of childhood like some sort of Ebenezer Scrooge. In fact, he makes the striking comment, in light of what we have already heard from Anti-Climacus, H.H., and Kierkegaard's journals about children and the crucifixion, that "if a child is not allowed, as it ought to be, to play innocently with the most holy, if in its existence it is rigorously coerced into decisively Christian qualifications, such a child will suffer a great deal."<sup>64</sup> He calls such religious formation "rape," however well-intentioned by pious parents,<sup>65</sup> Instead, Climacus only wants to maintain that a child's Christianity is not essential Christianity. It is Christianity with the terror removed; all innocence without guilt, without the consciousness of sin and the refuge the sinner finds in Jesus Christ.<sup>66</sup>

---

61. Ibid., 591.

62. Ibid., 588, 600-1.

63. Ibid., 598-9.

64. Ibid., 601.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., 591-2, 598-9.

This represents no mere crotchet, for under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus Kierkegaard first articulates his mature Christology, one that remains in force until the end of his authorship. In *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus offers a sketch of Jesus Christ, indirectly, by way of a contrast to Socrates, and without ever employing the name Jesus Christ. Climacus zeroes in on the concept of “paradox,” specifically the “absolute paradox” of God coming to exist within time and space as a particular human being.<sup>67</sup> This paradoxical unity of divine and human, infinite and finite, is offensive or repulsive to human understanding, which cannot rationally grasp such a transcendent truth. Two human responses to the collision between the understanding and an incarnate God are possible, Climacus claims: a happy passion called *faith* which, without eliminating or solving the paradox theoretically, manages to live with it, appropriate it practically; and *offense*, an unhappy love, a refusal of the understanding to let go of its own deepest structures to embrace paradox.<sup>68</sup> Which is to say, the paradox, God-in-time, brings with itself and bestows on the person of faith the very condition of its being believed and lived out. Faith is not an incremental development of innate human capacities, but sheer gift, a qualitatively disjunctive in-breaking into the human person. It is precisely this complex of paradox, understanding, and either faith or offense that the Climacus of *Postscript* denies can be part of a child’s religious experience.

But when Climacus brings his negative view of children’s religious incapacity together with his Christology of absolute paradox, it is in order to castigate what he calls the “childish”

---

67. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, vol. 7 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 23-48.

68. *Ibid.*, 59-66, 49-54.

Christianity of adults. “In our day,” he writes, “when it looks as if one is actually a Christian as a week-old child,...Christ has been changed from the sign of offense into a friend of children à la Uncle Frank, Goodman [=characters in children’s books], or a teacher at a charity school.”<sup>69</sup> In place of the absolute paradox, the one who “became an offense to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks,” the God hidden so deeply in the form of a servant, as an incognito, “that no direct recognizability is possible,” Climacus’ contemporaries display Jesus Christ as the “divine child...the friendly figure with the kindly face,” visible immediately to all.<sup>70</sup> This childish orthodoxy misrepresents both Christ’s birth and death. The paradox is not that Jesus was born in humble circumstances, wrapped in rags, and laid in a manger, but that “God, the eternal has entered into time as an individual human being”; only for an immature conception of God would it be seen as more appropriate for God to be born as a king rather than a beggar.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Climacus thinks, emphasis should not be laid on the “frightfulness” of Christ’s suffering, that his “sensitive body” suffers so “enormously,” that one who was holy, pure, and guiltless had to suffer – all these are quantitative and comparative measures. The paradox is absolute and qualitative: Christ, God in human form, “entered into the world *in order to suffer*.”<sup>72</sup> The decisive Christian teaching about the absolute paradox of God in Jesus Christ thus entails a crucifixion of the human understanding and the death of all childish Christological notions.<sup>73</sup>

---

69. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 588.

70. *Ibid.*, 598-600.

71. *Ibid.*, 596.

72. *Ibid.*, 597

73. *Ibid.*, 600

It falls to the new and higher pseudonym Anti-Climacus to mount a full-fledged critique of marriage and family, women and children, in the name of a rigorous, ascetic form of Christianity. Genuine Christianity harbors “an uneasiness about marriage,” Anti-Climacus argues, and longs for at least one unmarried person “among its many married servants, someone who is single.”<sup>74</sup> The pseudonym refers to himself here, and so Anti-Climacus stands as a polar opposite to Judge William. With women, erotic love, and children “come all the weaker, softer elements in a person,” whereby a man “wants to coddle himself, whimper, have an easy life in the world, live in rather quiet enjoyment.”<sup>75</sup> This outlook endangers one striving “to serve Christianity in the stricter sense.”<sup>76</sup> Like Climacus before him, Anti-Climacus puts the tempting words of compromise in the mouth of a woman who seeks to talk her husband down from the precarious ledge of ascetic Christianity: “Why do you want to expose yourself to all those annoyances and efforts, and all that ingratitude and opposition? No, let us two enjoy life in coziness and comfort. After all, marriage, as the pastor says, is a state pleasing to God, indeed, the only state about which this is expressly said; it is not even said of the clerical order. One ought to marry. God requires nothing more or anything else of any human being. On the contrary, it is the highest.”<sup>77</sup> Siding with views expressed earlier in the authorship by Judge William, the woman dismisses any such teaching that would “tear a person out of the world,” away from

---

74. Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 117.

75. *Ibid.*

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*, 117-8.

children and wives, as the “invention of some sallow, grumbling misanthropic hermits who have no sense for the feminine” – or, we might add, for childhood.<sup>78</sup>

Anti-Climacus also advances the notions of paradox and offense conceptually. He distinguishes three “possibilities” of offense, that is, three aspects of the offensiveness of Jesus Christ. The first does not touch on his being God-in-time, but on the lesser paradox of an individual human being who comes into collision with the established order.<sup>79</sup> The second and third do involve the essential offense, Christ as the God-man: *loftiness* – that an individual human being speaks and acts as if he were God,<sup>80</sup> and *lowliness* – that the “one who passes himself off as God proves to be the lowly, poor, suffering, and finally powerless human being.”<sup>81</sup> Then Anti-Climacus provides a concise catalogue of the “categories” of essential offense. They include: the God-man as a sign of contradiction; the incognito, the unrecognizability of the form of a servant; the impossibility of direct communication on the part of Christ about his being God incarnate; to deny direct communication is to require faith; because the God-man poses the possibility of offense, he is also the object of faith.<sup>82</sup>

Anti-Climacus clothes this conceptual apparatus of paradox and offense in the imagery of the gospel. He remarks that although Jesus speaks words of invitation, “Come here to me, all you who labor and are burdened,” the person and the actions of the inviter cause all the sensible, solid citizens, and family men of Jesus’ day to halt, then flee in the opposite direction as fast as

---

78. Ibid.

79. Ibid., 85-94.

80. Ibid., 94-102.

81. Ibid., 102-20.

82. Ibid., 123-44.

they can, as if Jesus had said: “*Procul o procul este profani*” (=Away, away, o unclean ones).<sup>83</sup> To blame for their flight are Jesus’ origins: “the lowly man, born of a despised virgin, his father a carpenter”; his associates: “twelve poor disciples from the commonest class of people, for a long time an object of curiosity but later in the company only of sinners, tax collectors, lepers, and madmen, because merely to let oneself be helped by him meant to risk one’s honor, life, and goods, in any case exclusion from the synagogue”; the fact that he had no place on earth to lay his head; that he was scorned as a “seducer, deceiver, and blasphemer”; and that he, nevertheless, “claimed to be God (which literally amounts to pouring oil on fire).”<sup>84</sup> For its part, “everything called the established order, everything that had any power and influence, spitefully but cravenly and secretly laid the trap for him – into which he then walked.”<sup>85</sup>

Against the backdrop of this analysis, Anti-Climacus says flatly that “offense, in an eminent sense, does not exist for a child, hence Christianity does not actually exist for the child either.”<sup>86</sup> The child (or the childish adult) might entertain a fantasy about something high, holy, and pure, someone more exalted than all earthly kings, but this something or someone would still be only quantitatively grander than human power, falling qualitatively short of God, of Jesus Christ, “the paradox, absolutely the paradox” upon which the human “understanding must come to a standstill.”<sup>87</sup>

---

83. Ibid., 11, 23.

84. Ibid., 37, 41, 54.

85. Ibid., 55.

86. Ibid., 83.

87. Ibid., 82.



Despite this negative talk, two vestiges of a higher view of children linger in Anti-Climacus. First, in the “Moral” at the end of the first part of the book, Anti-Climacus answers his own question about what this all means. Each individual, inwardly, should humble himself and acknowledge the strict requirement for being a Christian, confess honestly before God where he stands in relation to the requirement, and accept the grace God offers to every imperfect person – that is, to every person. “And then nothing further,” Anti-Climacus says; “then, as for the rest, let him do his work and rejoice in it, love his wife and rejoice in her, joyfully bring up his children, love his fellow beings, rejoice in life. If anything more is required of him, God will surely let him understand and in that case will also help him further.”<sup>88</sup> Only with a consciousness of sin does a person show absolute respect for God’s requirements; and, paradoxically, at the very moment a person becomes conscious of being a sinner, “the essentially Christian transforms himself and is sheer leniency, grace, love, mercy.”<sup>89</sup>

Second, the story of a child encountering a picture of the crucified Christ with which we began the body of this essay occurs within a discussion of Jesus’ words “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself” (John 12:32).<sup>90</sup> Anti-Climacus believes his nineteenth century contemporaries would prefer to be drawn to the heights, the glories, of divinity, while ignoring Jesus in his suffering and abasement. But “when I am lifted up” in John’s gospel refers to the paradox that Jesus’ glorification is his crucifixion, and vice versa. Anti-Climacus posed his child as a thought experiment. What if a child, unspoiled by comfortable, complacent

---

88. Ibid., 67.

89. Ibid.

90. Ibid., 147-262.

Christianity, encountered the lowly, abased Christ of the cross? Could such a child be drawn to Jesus, not repelled by him? And that was in fact the result of the experiment. For the child never forgot the crucified one, and grew his way through various stages in his love for Jesus: revenge, external struggle against the world, finally, a willingness to suffer inwardly as Christ suffered. Hence, Anti-Climacus the Christian ascetic has come back full circle to the aesthete of *Either/Or* and some of Kierkegaard's early edifying discourses with their positive view of what unspoiled children might offer spiritually to adults. Anti-Climacus concludes his story: "If the sight of the abased one *can* so move a person," as it moved the child and the apostles, "can it not so move you also," the reader of *Practice in Christianity*?<sup>91</sup> If it does move his readers, it "does not follow that you become an apostle – preposterous! – No, it means you become a Christian."<sup>92</sup>

Every shred of appreciation for women and children vanishes in Kierkegaard's final writings. His so-called attack upon Christendom was occasioned by the death of aged Bishop Jakob Peter Mynster, primate of the Danish church, friend and frequent house guest of Kierkegaard's father. Hans Lassen Martensen succeeded Mynster. Kierkegaard was just five years younger than Martensen and the two had been intellectual rivals. Ample material for a conflagration lay at hand in the critiques of contemporary Danish Christianity by the pseudonyms Climacus and Anti-Climacus. Martensen struck the match when he borrowed one of Kierkegaard's concepts, the "truth witness," in his eulogy at Mynster's funeral in February 1854. Martensen lauded Mynster as the latest link in a chain of authentic truth witnesses stretching back to the apostles and urged Danes to imitate Mynster's faith as it had been expressed in word and

---

91. Ibid., 178

92. Ibid.

live out in deed and truth. Kierkegaard immediately dashed off a pointed response, but sat on the piece until December. In it, he counters that Mynster's Christianity, when laid alongside the New Testament, "tones down, veils, suppresses, omits some of what is most decisively Christian, what is inconvenient for us human beings, what would make our lives strenuous, prevent us from enjoying our lives – this about dying to the world, about voluntary renunciation, about hating oneself, about suffering for the doctrine, etc."<sup>93</sup> Kierkegaard eventually published the article in a newspaper. It was followed promptly by twenty others, then a series of bespoke tracts, called *The Moment*, and published at Kierkegaard's own expense in the months preceding his death in November 1855.

The publication of a second edition of *Practice in Christianity* in the midst of the attack upon Christendom registers how much Kierkegaard's thought had narrowed and hardened. Although he reissued Anti-Climacus' book from 1850 unaltered as a "historical document," he insists that if it were to have first come out in 1855, there would have been major changes: no pseudonym, the book would have been by S. Kierkegaard; the thrice-repeated preface to the book's three parts, in which the many words concerning the ideal requirement of Christian faith are said to be spoken to Søren Kierkegaard alone, would be eliminated; gone as well would be the mitigating "Moral" to Part One discussed above (acknowledge the New Testament requirement, confess your distance from it, and go on loving your wife, raising your children, and so on, and if God has other demands, God will let you know).<sup>94</sup> Throughout his final articles

---

93. Søren Kierkegaard, *"The Moment" and Late Writings*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 23 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

94. *Ibid.*, 69-70.

and tracts, Kierkegaard uses and abuses women, their capacities, behavior, and experience as a primary emblem of the hopelessly compromised all-male leadership of the Danish church.<sup>95</sup> He portrays the men of the church, bishops and pastors alike, as *tempted by women* (tempted to abandon the New Testament demand for ascetic renunciation in favor of the “true happiness [that] resides only in the tender arms of a blameless wife”);<sup>96</sup> *sissified like women* (arrayed in clerical vestments that look like women’s dresses and, with the coquetry of a woman, desiring earthly and temporal advantage while pretending to resist); *colluding with women* (the midwives, to breed hordes of children who will require the services of the church); and *seducing other men as they were women* (deceiving young seminarians into thinking the way of Jesus Christ leads not to suffering and opposition in the world, but, instead to “an ample, secure, and in the course of the years increasing reward for his work, to a cozy domestic life in the bosom of his family, perhaps to make a career, perhaps even a brilliant career”).<sup>97</sup>

But as we have seen before, children are never far away from Kierkegaard’s comments about women. When he heaps ridicule and scorn on women, the contempt spills over and soaks children as well. Already in the second newspaper article of his attack, Kierkegaard claims that Martensen’s tribute to Mynster the truth witness is as ludicrous as “talk about a virgin with a flock of children.”<sup>98</sup> In a troubling, one off image, he likens the protection the Danish state offers to Christianity through its legal establishment to an obese woman who rolls over in bed and

---

95. For a detailed discussion of Kierkegaard’s contempt for women in his final writings, see Taylor, “The Hermit Emerges Victorious.”

96. Kierkegaard, *Late Writings*, 163-4.

97. *Ibid.*, 145.

98. *Ibid.*, 10-11.

smothers her baby with her own body.<sup>99</sup> More consequential to his core argument, Kierkegaard identifies the formula, or, rather, the “basic lie” constituting Christendom, as the view that one becomes a Christian as a child.<sup>100</sup> Just at the age when it would be possible for an individual to consider becoming a Christian in the New Testament sense, adulthood, he or she is deceived by the pastors into believing they are already too old. Then, convinced Christian faith must be commenced in childhood, such folk decide: “So I will now get married, have children—and they will become Christians.”<sup>101</sup> And these children, upon reaching adulthood, reason exactly as did “their Mr. Father and Mrs. Mother”; with no desire to become Christians themselves, but feeling a “real desire” to marry, this new generation “on behalf of Christianity climb[s] into the marriage bed—and [their] children, they will become Christians.”<sup>102</sup> For the formula to work, the clergy within Christendom must take special pains to collaborate with the women who facilitate successful human births. “Look closely,” Kierkegaard invites his readers, “and you will see that it is as I say. There is a secret understanding between every pastor and the midwives; they mutually understand that how the pastor stands with the midwives is extremely important to him, and they mutually understand they share a common livelihood.”<sup>103</sup>

Kierkegaard trots out various unflattering military and agricultural images to disparage the wildly successful collusion between pastors and midwives. Christianity in Christendom has become a veritable human breeding program whereby “battalions of fertile men and women are

---

99. Ibid., 158-9.

100. Ibid., 237-42.

101. Ibid., 237.

102. Ibid.

103. Ibid., 237-8.

brought together, . . . millions of children are produced,” “battalions and millions times millions of Christians,” as profuse and profligate as the pollen spewed forth by “millions of plants.”<sup>104</sup> The “prolific” pastors nurture the “propagation of the race” through “cattle shows, by prizes for those who can beget the most children.”<sup>105</sup> “[H]and in hand with the midwives,” the “cheerful, child-begetting, career-making, preacher-guild,” the pastors, labor at what has become in Christendom “true Christian earnestness.”<sup>106</sup> Even the income of “this essence of nonsense mantled in long gowns,” the pastor, not the midwife, is pegged to the breeding program, “set in proportion to the human activity of propagating the race and [so he] receives a fixed sum for each child.”<sup>107</sup>

Unlike Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard no longer seeks to conserve the church’s original intent with infant baptism. He satirizes the sacrament mercilessly. Imagine, he writes, a young man who has no religion, no opinion about religion, has never thought about God, and certainly never goes to church. While he may feel no need for religion, the young man does feel the need to become a father. So he marries and has a child, getting himself, “as they say, in hot water.”<sup>108</sup> In his new role as father, the young man “is compelled to have a religion, and it turns out he has the Evangelical Lutheran religion.”<sup>109</sup> Observe both the variety of female and juvenile figures inhabiting Kierkegaard’s description and the negative associations made with each.<sup>110</sup> Due to

---

104. Ibid., 172, 240, 180.

105. Ibid., 241.

106. Ibid., 242, 212, 186.

107. Ibid., 186.

108. Ibid., 229.

109. Ibid.

110. Ibid., 229-30, for the remainder of this paragraph, unless otherwise noted.

circumstances, a young man with no religion comes to be a Christian. First, “the mother got in a family way and then as a result the father got in a family way.” The pastor is notified; the midwife brings the baby, the “sweet little darling.” “A young lady coquettishly holds the baby’s bonnet”; other non-religious young men stand up as godparents. “A silk-clad pastor gracefully sprinkles water over the sweet little baby three times, gracefully dries his hands with a towel.” Mother, father, baby, pastor, sponsors, and witnesses all caught in a feminized ritual knitting together family, society, and church. Shockingly, Kierkegaard marvels, Christendom offers this tableau before God as baptism; the ceremony that consecrated the Savior of the world to his life’s task and later incorporated the (adult) disciples “into the communion of Christ’s death,” so that “dead to this life [they] promised to live as sacrificed ones in this world of lies and evil.” But Danish Lutheran pastors recognize that “their livelihood would never really amount to much” if this level of renunciation were required of their own flock and so, Kierkegaard completes his sketch, “these holy truth-witnesses invade the nurseries,” the realm of the midwives, and take advantage of “the sensitive moment when the mother is weak after coming through the suffering, and the father is—in hot water.” Such baptism marks the triumph of Christendom over New Testament Christianity, “a victory...most fittingly celebrated by a real eating and drinking club, a wild club with bacchants and bacchantes (pastors and midwives) at the head of the hilarity.”<sup>111</sup>

Kierkegaard takes up confirmation, Christendom’s backhanded acknowledgement that something essential is missing in infant baptism (an individual who can personally take promises upon themselves), under the rubric “Christian comedy or something worse.”<sup>112</sup> But he considers

---

111. Ibid., 238.

112. Ibid., 243-5.

confirmation “far more extreme nonsense than infant Baptism”; first, because the pastors extort sacred promises about eternity from young teenagers; second, because as an end product of the rite, the pastor issues a certificate “without which the boy or girl concerned cannot succeed in this life at all.” In Kierkegaard’s Denmark, a certificate of confirmation from the state Lutheran church functioned like a combination social security card and driver’s license in the contemporary United States – a sign of legal, majority status.

This ridicule of the sacraments and other sacramental actions of the church traces one of the most distinctive features of Kierkegaard’s final writings. Having extolled the language, structure, and theology of the church’s wedding ceremony ten years earlier, Kierkegaard now labels it “nonsense and abomination” – for the pastor of a Danish church, having taken an oath on the New Testament at his ordination, the New Testament which, in Kierkegaard’s opinion, privileges the celibate state, now blesses in God’s name what God opposes, because it is what human beings most want.<sup>113</sup> Far from mediating God’s grace, the sacraments and sacramentals serve “with the help of religion (which unfortunately is intended to bring about the very opposite) to glue families together more and more egotistically and to arrange family festivities, beautiful, glorious family festivities.”<sup>114</sup>

In the ninth and final installment of *The Moment* to be published in his lifetime, and so in his last published work, Kierkegaard indicts the pastors as “cannibals” of the “most abominable” sort.<sup>115</sup> One last time, women and children are inextricably woven into the fabric of his attack on

---

113. Ibid., 245-9. For more on Kierkegaard and the wedding ceremony, see Taylor, “A Well-Considered Occasion.”

114. Kierkegaard, *Late Writings*, 249.

115. Ibid., 321-2, for this entire paragraph.



the (male) ecclesiastical establishment. Simply put, New Testament Christianity is “the suffering truth”; Christ, the apostles, and authentic truth-witnesses, whom Kierkegaard calls the “glorious ones,” require only one thing from those who come later: “imitation.” The worldly wise nineteenth century pastor has no intention of suffering himself. As an alternative to imitation, he wonders if he might depict the sufferings of Christ, the apostles, and the martyrs in such a way, and so convert them into doctrine, that “a man who wishes to enjoy life could live on it, marry on it, beget children who are fed on it.” Would it be possible, he asks, “to turn the glorious ones into money, or, to eat them, to live with wife and children by eating them?” Truly a *Levebrød* (life-bread, livelihood) this cannibalism. But the pastors are hardly ordinary, old-fashioned cannibals, Kierkegaard maintains. Instead of being savages, they are university-educated men. Instead of eating their enemies, they eat their friends. Unlike the old cannibal who only rarely ate a little of his enemy after victory in battle, then returned to his customary food, the new cannibal’s practice is “well considered, ingeniously arranged, based on the assumption of not having anything else to live on for a whole lifetime, and that what one has to live on will be able to support a man and his family and will increase year after year.” Then follows what turns out to be Kierkegaard’s final (published) portrait of the pastor, the teacher of Christianity. One last time, the female and the juvenile figure prominently. “The pastor is cozily situated in his rural residence, and the prospect of promotion also beckons. His wife is plumpness personified, and his children no less so. And all this owing to: the sufferings of the glorious ones, to the Savior, the apostle, the truth-witness. It is on this that the pastor lives, this that he eats, this with which he, with joyful zest for

life, feeds his wife and children. He has these glorious ones in salt-meat barrels. Their cry: Follow me, follow me! is futile.”

Amid this torrent of satire and venom, Kierkegaard introduces a new theoretical construct: “redoubling”; in Danish, *Fordoblelse*.<sup>116</sup> He uses it to differentiate, yet again, the ideal New Testament Christian from the actual Christians of nineteenth century Denmark. The New Testament Christian is “so solidly built that he can bear a redoubling within himself,” while contemporary Christians, “like half-timbered structures compared with a foundation wall [are] so loosely and weakly built,” that no redoubling is possible.<sup>117</sup> Redoubling consists of the capacity to maintain with one’s understanding something that is against the understanding, an offense, and then will it nevertheless. Christendom, however, has removed all offense and paradox from its version of Christian faith and replaced it with “probability, the direct,” in the process turning Christianity into its very opposite and siphoning off any need for redoubling.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, Kierkegaard writes, redoubling requires isolation on the part of the true Christian. The New Testament Christian loves God “in hatred of oneself and thereby of all other people, hating father, mother, one’s own child, wife, etc.” The Christian within Christendom “love[s] God in accordance with loving other human beings and being loved by them, always the others, including the crowd.”<sup>119</sup>

---

116. Ibid., 183-4.

117. Ibid., 183.

118. Ibid., 184.

119. Ibid.

Clearly, this idea has deep roots in Kierkegaard's view of truth, faith, and human existence. New in 1854-55 is the explicit claim that only adult men possess the capacity for redoubling. Women and children are not strongly enough built, intellectually and spiritually, to bear redoubling; hence, they can only be considered less than fully human. Remarkably, the introduction of *Fordoblelse* (redoubling) has altered the meaning of *eenfold* (simple). Here at the end of Kierkegaard's authorship, chronologically and theologically, the simple, the lowly, including children, who were once praised for their lack of worldly calculation and duplicity, have been recast as literally mono-fold, one dimensional, lacking the dialectical complexity of the adult man.

A long journal entry makes all this plain as day. We quote Kierkegaard at length to capture both his content and his tone.<sup>120</sup> Today, he begins,

Christianity simply does not exist.... The men – and that means the miserable weaklings and clods that are called men these days,... turn away from religion with a certain pride and egotism and say: Religion (Christianity) is something for women and children.

But the truth of the matter is that Christianity as it is found in the New Testament has such prodigious aims that, strictly speaking, it cannot be a religion for women, at most secondhand, and is impossible for children.

As a psychologist I maintain that no woman can endure a dialectical redoubling, and everything essentially Christian is inherently dialectical.

The essentially Christian task requires a man, it takes man's toughness and strength simply to be able to bear the pressure of the task.

A good which is identified by its hurting, a deliverance which is identified by its making me unhappy, a grace which is identified by suffering, etc. – all this,... no woman can bear, she will lose her mind if she is to be put under the tension of this strenuousness.

---

120. Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 4, pp. 581-4 [entry 5007]. See, also, vol. 2, pp. 139 and 149-50 [entries 1433 and 1447].

As far as children are concerned, it is sheer nonsense that they are supposed to be Christians.

A woman, and, above all, a child relate to things directly and breathe the air of directness and immediacy. If something is a good, well, then, it must be recognizable by its doing good; there is no use in forcing a woman (I will not even mention a child) into a good that hurts – it would break her....

In the New Testament is aimed at the man, religion is related to the man; woman participates in religion at second hand, through the man; she cannot herself endure a dialectic, but by seeing how the man feels the weight of the task she gets an impression of something more than the immediate pure and simple; the child shifts for himself until his time comes. To want to pour true Christianity into a child (if it were at all possible, for the child's nature makes it impossible to appropriate this) is just as crude as wanting to pour brandy into a child (which happens too often), because the parents drink brandy, and the sweet lassie has to have it as well as her parents.

Kierkegaard's rant continues:

But, as stated, Christendom has gotten everything transposed over into the immediate and direct – and therefore, quite right, 'the child' has become the measure of what it is to be Christian! Christendom does not seem to be at all aware that all this about 'the child' has raised an ironic problem, a question that has been kindly answered, the problem of what we shall do with the child, can the child become a Christian – a question to which the New Testament gives no answer since it is assumed that the Christian does not get married. Christendom's enrichment of Christianity with all this great and profound learning about children, the Christianity of children, the baptism of children, their faith, etc., is [highly] ironical....[By] means of the child Christianity was turned upside-down, became exactly the opposite of what it is in the New Testament, got to be sugar candy for children, even to the point that the kind of men we have nowadays were right in turning away from it and regarding it as something that was only for women and children, something which disgusts a man just like gossip, chit-chat, and the temperature in the nursery.

To recapitulate, high and low views of children emerge across Kierkegaard's authorship, although the trajectory is from higher to lower. We can now be even more specific and assert that

his authorial personae adopt the following four stances: 1) children have much to offer spiritually for as simple and lowly they are unspoiled by negative patterns of adult thinking and being, especially duplicitous self-interest; 2) rigorous, paradoxical Christianity should not be forced upon children – instead, they should be allowed to play with the holy in their own way; 3) children cannot grasp or make use of the crucifixion of Christ, because they lack the capacity for inward, existential redoubling; 4) nevertheless, if an adult exposes the essential paradox of Jesus Christ to a child, it will leave an indelible mark.

Berryman concludes his historical account of children among the Christian theologians by likening his vignettes to a deck of playing cards, laid out from Jesus to the twenty-first century, one theologian on each card, along with a phrase summarizing their contribution to the conversation; for example, Origen: Children are symbolic of something else; Abelard: Children are a bother; John Bunyan: Children need to be left behind for the adult's spiritual journey; Horace Bushnell: Children know a higher kind of play; Rowan Williams: Children are in danger of becoming "lost icons." We hereby add a card depicting Søren Kierkegaard to Berryman's game with this caption: Children's play with the holy cannot encompass the paradox of Jesus Christ.

### **Children and Christology in Godly Play**

With *Godly Play*, Episcopal priest and Montessori educator Berryman has produced a curriculum more like group spiritual direction for children than traditional Sunday School. The

---

121. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians*, 201-3.

theological base for the program assumes the full humanity of children, but without objectifying them or ascribing to them greater inherent virtue than adults. Instead, *Godly Play* recognizes children as *both* the most vulnerable and often most neglected among us *and* whole human beings with the full capacity to experience the Divine. They may even possess significant advantages over adults when it comes to wondering, to entering into mystery. According to Berryman, *Godly Play* seeks to provide a place for children to discover their own authentic experience of God and gradually, with adult assistance, “to learn the art of how to identify this experience and express, refine, name, value, and wonder about it in the most appropriate language and action.”<sup>121</sup> Re-reading the same gospel texts Kierkegaard engages, especially Matthew 18 and 19 (and parallels), Berryman aims to de-marginalize the role of children within Christian community. He follows Jesus in intentionally positioning them as parables, means of grace, even sacraments of a sort. In its structure, *Godly Play* strives to do something countercultural – to create space where children are situated as central, important, and valid. Neither the church nor society at large usually sends these messages to or about children.

The *Godly Play* curriculum revolves around three groups of lessons: 1) sacred story; 2) liturgical action; and 3) parable. Utilizing three dimensional objects – Noah’s ark, the temple, a desert box full of sand – the first group relates central biblical stories, such as creation and flood, exodus and exile, the twelve disciples and the Apostle Paul, the Ten Best Ways (=the Ten Commandments) and the Holy Trinity. Emphasis in these stories falls on the people of God, including the great family of Abraham and Sarah, the prophets with their scrolls, and the

---

121. Ibid., 7.

communion of saints (one saint singled out for each month of the secular calendar to allow children to connect their lives, their birth months, with the saints – each saint accompanied by her or his own token: a clover for St. Patrick, a hazelnut for Julian of Norwich). The liturgical action stories simultaneously recount Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, connect Jesus and the people of God to the church’s celebration of the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, and trace and retrace the circle of the church year. The most explicit Christology in *Godly Play* emerges from the Advent lessons that prepare for Christmas, a Lenten series called “Faces of Easter,” and “Knowing Jesus in a New Way,” a cycle for the Easter season culminating in the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. These lessons all employ wooden plaques with images affixed to, or printed upon, them. The third group of lessons embodies and enacts some of the parables Jesus told (the Good Samaritan and the Sower, the Great Pearl and the Mustard Seed), using simple figures of men and women, birds, a road, a sheepfold, and so on, cut out of felt, cardboard, or laminated paper. The foundational “Parable of the Good Shepherd” merges a parable from the synoptic gospels, one of Jesus’ “I am” statements in the gospel of John, and the imagery of Psalm 23.

Both core and enrichment presentations are provided for each of the three groups of *Godly Play* lessons. For example, a rabbinic parable concerning a deep well and a parable about the making and passing along of parables from generation to generation of God’s people enrich the telling of the core parables of Jesus. Core lessons get taught over the course of a single year, then repeated in subsequent years, so that over time they become woven into the fabric of a child’s life, the same stories encountered repeatedly as the child moves through different developmental stages. This exploits and regularizes Kierkegaard’s insight into the potential

lifelong impact of biblical and religious stories and images introduced to children, even as Berryman intentionally subdivides childhood into three distinct moments: three to five years old, six to eight, and nine to twelve. It is important to consider not just the content and methodology of the curriculum, but also the observed behavior and responses of children who participate in *Godly Play*. We will draw on our own teaching experience as we proceed.

The shape of a *Godly Play* session derives from both the classic ordo of Christian worship and Montessori educational theory and praxis. Children and an adult storyteller *gather* and sit together in a circle on the floor. Ideally, a second adult serves as door person, safeguarding the threshold between *Godly Play* space, time, and dynamics and those which operate outside the room. Once ready, the children hear a lesson presented by the storyteller, engage the story verbally as a group, often through wondering questions (such as, “I wonder which part of the story you liked best?” or “I wonder which part of the story was about you?”), then respond individually through art, by revisiting the materials of that day’s story or working with another story in the room. This corresponds to the *word* aspect of Christian worship on the Lord’s Day. Next, paralleling the eucharistic *meal*, the adults and children share a “feast” of snacks and open-ended conversation around the circle, praying first over the fruit, crackers, cheese, and water. Finally, the storyteller offers each child a warm blessing and *sends* them out to parents, parish community, and the wider world.

*Godly Play* teachers interact respectfully with children and remain mindful of the responsibility of adults in the room to protect child-oriented space. They take conscious physical and linguistic steps to diminish the power differential between themselves and the children.



Whenever possible, *Godly Play* limits the number of adults in the room to just two, something that must be carefully explained to some parents and others in the parish. The storyteller and the door person do their best to stay vertically on the same level as the children. Some trainings instruct adults to imagine an invisible ceiling above the head of the tallest child and then situate themselves under that ceiling throughout the session – remaining seated on the floor when not moving around the room and avoiding standing up to talk to each other over the heads of the children. In the language they use, *Godly Play* teachers choose open responses that name or describe what they see in and with the children, rather than evaluate them or their work. “Lots of silver and gold paint on your building”; instead of “Good job!” or “You are a great painter!” Similarly, *Godly Play* privileges empowering responses to classroom accidents and disruptions – emphasizing the child’s ability to make choices and solve problems. When something spills, “That’s not a big deal. Do you know where the paper towels are kept?” Or, when a child has trouble sitting still in the circle or remaining quiet during the story: “This is not fair; look at all these children who are listening. They are ready. You need to be ready, too. Let’s try again.”

Several other characteristics distinguish a *Godly Play* lesson. When presenting the story of the three kings or wise men on the fourth Sunday of Advent, for instance, the adult storyteller is not in the center; nor are the children. Instead, the materials that prompt and carry the storyteller’s words are placed in the empty space within the circle: a purple plaque with an image of an Advent wreath and four candles, figurines of the Magi, the three dimensional model of Bethlehem with the “wild star” shining above, and a real candle which is ceremoniously lit and

whose light is enjoyed.<sup>122</sup> Once a lesson begins, the storyteller keeps her eyes on the materials within the circle, avoiding eye contact with the children until the time for group response to the story. This standard practice makes the lesson about the risen Christ's appearance to Thomas, which builds eye contact between storyteller and children into telling of the story itself, all the more powerful. After Thomas has fallen to his knees saying "My Lord and my God" in response to Jesus' invitation to touch him, the storyteller continues: "Jesus looked at him a long time. 'Do you believe because you have seen?' He then slowly looked around the whole circle [of apostles] ...." At this point, the storyteller looks up from the plaque showing Thomas and looks into the eyes of each child around the *Godly Play* circle, then back to the picture for Jesus' concluding words: "...and said, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.'"<sup>123</sup> *Godly Play's* distinctive wondering questions can elicit surprising responses from children, responses born out of profound personal appropriation of the biblical and theological content of the stories. Alissa notes that when invited to wonder if the sheep in the Parable of the Good Shepherd have names – a story that involves a sheep lost for a time and threatened by a wolf – children often suggest names similar to those of the participants around the circle. Once, Mark told the Parable of the Leaven to the six to eight years and asked: "I wonder if you have ever come close to something little that caused such a big change, I mean in your life?" A girl replied: "Human beings. We're so small, but with global warming we've caused big changes to the earth."

And there is the delicious mixture of jest and earnestness in the children's creative response to a lesson being called their "work" within the context of a program named *Godly*

---

122. Berryman, *Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 3, pp. 27-51.

123. *Ibid.*, vol. 8, p. 48.

“*Play.*” When the conversation initiated by the wondering questions or other devices has run its course, the storyteller asks each child in turn, “Do you know what you would like to make your work today?” Many children choose the same type of creative activity week in and week out: painting, building structures out of balsa wood, asking to get out the desert box and walk figurines through the sand. But children do improvise and innovate. The *Godly Play* story of St. Valentine describes the saint as a doctor who made soothing poultices out of herbs. When Mark told this story, and then asked a boy what he wanted to make his work, the boy immediately asked to use the mortar and pestle that are part of the materials for the lesson. The boy wanted to prepare some herbs for himself, so he got out paper and a fine-tipped green marker. This sparked a discussion about what kind of herbs would have grown in fourth century Rome. The boy knew of rosemary and basil and what they looked like. But he was unfamiliar with thyme (which elicited some word play with another boy in the class about “What time/thyme is it?” and “Do we have enough thyme/time?”). Mark described the herb and the child proceeded to draw several dozen tiny thyme leaves, cut them out with scissors, “grind” them in the mortar, and then anoint Mark’s closed eyelids as if he were the blind girl being treated by St. Valentine. Alissa has watched several children make explicit connections between the key symbols of separate stories during their work time, such as bringing together the three dimensional figurine of the risen Christ and the desert box where many of the stories of the people of God take place. As he placed the Christ figure in the sand, one child recited a central phrase from those other stories: “the desert is a dangerous place.”

A pair of rituals, one at the beginning and one at the end of a *Godly Play* lesson, reinforces these child-centric commitments and practices. Both take place at the threshold of the *Godly Play* classroom, in the liminal space occupied by baptism and the baptismal font in Christian lives and Christian worship spaces. First, the storyteller typically takes her seat on the floor of a classroom, alone, several minutes before the session begins. The children remain outside in the hallway with the door person getting ready, maybe reading quietly. One at a time, the door person introduces the children by name to the storyteller (“Simon is here”; “Beth is here”), who welcomes each child and invites them to sit with her in the growing circle. Second, after the feast has been finished, the storyteller thanks each child, again individually and by name, for coming that morning and participating in *Godly Play*. The storyteller pronounces some words of blessing –based perhaps on biblical or liturgical models – and extends her hands to the child, offering the opportunity for physical touch. The children may choose to take the adult’s hands, or not; either response is fine. Occasionally, the offer is met with the child initiating a hug. We have both been brought to tears by the strength and warmth of a child’s hug. Tears of: joy? gratitude for an unexpected gift? wonder at a shared experience? humility at being so honored by another human being?

Although *Godly Play* presumes what we would call a Christology of love, Berryman’s curriculum takes steps not to resolve the paradox of Jesus Christ, to elide, moralize, or explain away his countercultural difference. Instead, the stories present Jesus’ mission as turning everything “inside out and upside down.”<sup>124</sup> Preparing for Christmas, *Godly Play* children are

---

124. Ibid., vol. 4, p. 31.

invited to enter into the mystery of an unexpected sort of king without riches, houses, or armies, “the Child who will change everything” by loving people, rather than reinforce the comfort and complacency of the status quo.<sup>125</sup> A Lenten lesson about Jesus’ work also sounds the theme of transformation: “See? He has come close to this blind man; he is so close that he has touched the blind man’s eyes. When Jesus came close to people, *they changed*. They could see things they never could see before. They could do things they never could do before. They became well.”<sup>126</sup>

With an indirection Kierkegaard might applaud, *Godly Play* often abstains from using the name “Jesus” in its lessons, instead allowing the *how* of praxis to define the *what* or *who* of identity. Only the stories that pass along gospel accounts of his life repeat the name “Jesus” with any frequency, and even there, he is sometimes called simply “the baby” or “the boy.” Much more frequently, Berryman’s curriculum employs some other locution. The Holy Family story, which is repeated at the beginning of each new liturgical season, and the Advent lessons, refer to Jesus as “the baby.” The Good Shepherd and World Communion stories call him “the Good Shepherd.” Never naming him explicitly, the parable lessons introduce Jesus this way: “There was once someone who did such amazing things and said such wonderful things that people followed him”; often with this transition to the parable itself: “...they heard him speaking about a kingdom. It was not like the one they were in. It was not like any kingdom anyone had ever visited. It was not like any kingdom anyone had even heard about. So they had to ask him, ‘What is the kingdom of heaven like?’”<sup>127</sup> This restraint around the name of Jesus has the effect of

---

125. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 43.

126. Ibid., vol. 4, p. 55, our emphasis.

127. Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 82, 91, 99, 105, 112, 118.

inviting the children deeper into the elusive and mysterious presence of God, the ultimate goal of *Godly Play*. The child – proverbial in many church settings – who answers every question with an enthusiastic “Jesus!!” is absent from *Godly Play*. Berryman’s curriculum perceives Jesus as something of a parable, and so treats him that way, encouraging children to wonder, and also wander a bit, daring them to discover the good shepherd or someone who did and said amazing, wonderful things in unexpected places in their lives and in the world. Likewise, *Godly Play* shows a preference for the paradoxical eucharistic presence of Jesus Christ; real presence, but mysterious and elusive to the point of being an-iconic. “Here is the bread and wine of the Good Shepherd. Sometimes it seems like we need to have a little statue or something on the table to remind us that this is the table of the Good Shepherd, but the Good Shepherd is in the bread and the wine, so we don’t really need anything to remind us.”<sup>128</sup>

The materials accompanying the *Godly Play* parable lessons augment the sense of mystery and (Kierkegaardian) indirection. While the sacred story lessons have their buildings, rivers, and desert, and the liturgical action stories depend on two-dimensional pictures, the parables come in golden boxes. Before opening the box and bringing out the visuals related to the content of a particular parable (sheep, seeds, a pearl), the storyteller spends time musing on the parabolic form of communication itself. Parables are valuable, like gold. They resemble gifts, all boxed up. But they have lids which may initially bar entry. Similar to an image Kierkegaard uses to describe his authorship, the lesson called “Parable of Parables” employs a series of boxes nested within other boxes – each one of which must be opened in turn.<sup>129</sup> More Kierkegaardian

---

128. Ibid., vol. 4, p. 97.

129. Compare Berryman, *Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 3, pp. 121-6 and Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part I*, 8-9.

still is a Lenten lesson in which Jesus, the one who told parables, eventually realized he had to become a parable himself and so turned toward Jerusalem for the last time, to die.<sup>130</sup>

*Godly Play* neither shies away from the suffering of Christ, nor fixates upon it. Indeed, Berryman seems intent on interweaving life, death, and resurrection at every point in the curriculum. He prefigures Jesus' death during his infancy, sees the cross as enabling a new, unrestricted mode of presence, and depicts the congruence between the risen Christ and the baby Jesus. One lesson includes a description of the "wordless" baby looking up and seeing the cross on the faces of his parents, while the *Godly Play* storyteller traces a cross on an image of the Mother Mary and the Father Joseph.<sup>131</sup> Alissa has often seen children tracing crosses on their own faces as they experience this story. The Holy Family lesson ends: "Here is the little baby reaching out to give you a hug. He grew up to be a man and died on the cross. That is very sad, but it is also wonderful, in an Easter kind of way. Now he can reach out and give the whole world a hug. He is not just back then, in this place or that place. He is everywhere, in every time."<sup>132</sup> The lessons meant for the Easter season are based on the appearance stories from the gospels, but do not show the face of the risen Christ, rather the faces of his followers as their knowing Jesus in a new way expands and deepens, as they become Christ's risen body.<sup>133</sup>

We observe that the stories of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection call forth a deeper response from children than do, say, the Advent lessons preparing for the liturgical celebration of

---

130. Berryman, *Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 4, p. 56.

131. *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 35.

132. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 25.

133. *Ibid.*, vol. 8, pp. 34, 41, 48, 56, 64, 71, 78.

his birth. The Advent lessons focus primarily on waiting. They are magical because the storyteller and children light an additional candle each week, but do not get to see the baby until the very end of the fourth lesson. The main takeaways by children typically involve the donkey or the cow at the manger. How different their response to the Lenten lessons. Alissa remembers telling the final story to a group of three to five year olds and getting to the words “that afternoon, Jesus died.” She paused. The room became utterly quiet and completely still – an unusual occurrence when in the presence of ten young children. Finally, one of them whispered: “Why?” When wondering about which part of this story is most important, children often point to the image of the crucified Christ.

Our work with *Godly Play* thus calls into question the assumption by some of Kierkegaard’s authorial personae that children gravitate naturally, exclusively, to the story of Jesus’ birth, the baby, the angels – or even that they lack the capacity to appropriate the crucified Christ. But teaching Berryman’s curriculum does reinforce the contrary conviction, also ingredient in Kierkegaard’s authorship, that the story of Christ’s suffering and death can have a powerful impact on a child, even if she does not possess an adult understanding of crucifixion. In both its theological and practical components, *Godly Play* is keenly aware of something most parents also know – that life is not easy or comfortable for a child, no matter what sort of privilege or deprivation he is born into. Children do understand loss, sadness, even death. They recognize the importance of such negativities. What they lack is the language to process them as adults do (or fail to do!).



## **Faces of Crucifixion and Easter – You Cannot Pull Them Apart**

The seven-part series of lessons called “Faces of Easter” touches more directly and extensively on the person of Jesus Christ than any other portion of the *Godly Play* curriculum. It gathers up many of the themes from our foregoing discussion of the children and Christology in *Godly Play*. It also reprises and reframes Kierkegaard’s story of a child face to face with a picture of the crucified Christ.

“Faces of Easter” is designed for use during the season of Lent culminating with Holy Week and Easter. It tells the story of Jesus from his birth, through his life, to his death on the cross, and, beyond, to his on-going presence as risen from the dead. The teaching of “Faces of Easter” centers around showing children a series of plaques with pictures on them. As the adult storyteller talks, she places each plaque down on the floor in turn on successive segments of an underlay, a long cloth strip, colored purple for Lent until the seventh segment, for Easter, which is white. The lessons build upon each other. The second lesson, for example, which displays the second plaque or “face” of Jesus, begins with a brief re-telling of the first lesson, from the first week, which has its own plaque. On the fourth week, the storyteller summarizes, in order, lessons one, two, and three, showing the children once again those first three plaques, before unrolling the fourth segment of the purple underlay, revealing the fourth plaque, and telling the story associated with it. And so on.

Visualize, now, an adult and a group of children seated in a circle on the floor of a *Godly Play* classroom to hear the seventh and final lesson in the “Faces of Easter” series.

The storyteller unrolls the underlay toward the children, shows them the first plaque depicting the Mother Mary and the Father Joseph looking down upon the face of the baby Jesus, and talks briefly about “the Word [of God]...born a wordless child.”<sup>134</sup>

The second plaque shows a twelve year old boy surrounded by a group of men. The accompanying story relates how Mary and Joseph lost Jesus in the great city of Jerusalem, finding him at last in the Temple talking with the rabbis. “When [the boy] spoke, they listened, because he knew so much. When they talked, he listened, because he wanted to learn more.”<sup>135</sup>

Then follow summary re-tellings of the stories of Jesus’ baptism (how he “went down into the darkness and chaos of the water”);<sup>136</sup> his withdrawal across the river Jordan into the desert to learn more about who he was and what his work was going to be (Jesus replies to a voice he hears in the desert: “No. To be a real human being, we need more than bread....No. We do not need to test God....No. I am to be a king, but not that kind of king.”);<sup>137</sup> Jesus’ work of “coming close to people, especially the people no one else wanted to come close to,” and of telling parables;<sup>138</sup> and Jesus’ last week in Jerusalem (the storyteller must abbreviate, but mentions something from each day of that week: entry into Jerusalem, teaching in the Temple, conflict with the authorities, Passover meal with the disciples, and arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.<sup>139</sup> In the full telling of the sixth lesson, emphasis falls upon the Last Supper: “Jesus

---

134. Ibid., vol. 4, p. 35.

135. Ibid., 40.

136. Ibid., 45.

137. Ibid., 50-1.

138. Ibid., 55-6.

139. Ibid., 60-2.

took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he spoke and said something like ‘Whenever you break the bread like this and share it, I will be there.’ He also took a cup of wine, gave thanks to God for it, and said: ‘Whenever you share a cup of wine like this, I will be there.’ What was he talking about? He was always saying things like that. How could they know? Still, they did not forget, and later they would understand.”<sup>140</sup>) The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth plaques show, respectively: Jesus’ face, the wild hair of John the Baptist, and a dove; Jesus in conversation with the unseen tempter; Jesus’ thumbs touching the eyes of a blind man; and Jesus, eyes downcast, holding bread and a cup of wine.

Finally, the new and proper portion of the seventh lesson. The storyteller removes the seventh plaque from its tray – this time without unrolling the underlay further. She holds the plaque in her hands, showing the children a picture of the face of the crucified Christ and tells this story.<sup>141</sup> “The night was a confusing one. The next day, Jesus was taken outside the walls of the city and crucified. That afternoon, Jesus died. The sky grew dark.” The storyteller points to the dark sky on the plaque. “Jesus was taken down from the cross and buried in a cave. A great stone was rolled into the opening of the cave to close it like a door.”

“Saturday was so quiet you could almost hear the earth breathing. On Sunday, it was the women who had the courage to go to the tomb just to be close to Jesus. They wanted to remember, even if it was sad. When they came to the tomb, they found that the stone had been rolled back and the tomb was empty.”

---

140. Ibid., 61.

141. Ibid., 66-8.

“Jesus had died on the cross, but somehow he was still with them as he is with us, especially in the bread and the wine.”

While speaking the following words, the storyteller turns the seventh plaque slowly back and forth – only now revealing that it has a second image, another “face,” on its reverse side: the risen Christ holding out bread and wine. His gaze, unlike on the sixth plaque, is directed toward the children (the viewers). The storyteller shows first one side of the plaque, then the other. Eventually she turns it edgewise and tries to pull the two sides apart.

“When you look at this side (crucifixion), you know that the other side is there (Easter). When you look at this side (Easter), you know that this side (crucifixion) is there, and you cannot pull them apart. This is the Mystery of Easter, and that makes all the difference...”

“...and so the colors change.” The storyteller unrolls the last segment of the underlay, the white one, and sets the plaque down, risen Christ facing up.

After sitting back and enjoying the complete story, with all seven plaques laid out on the underlay, the storyteller begins to look puzzled. “Wait a minute. There’s something wrong.” She points to the line that the story makes. “Here’s the beginning...the middle...and the end. Look! If we have only this side, the story has an end...” She picks up the seventh plaque and turns it to the crucifixion side; “...but there is also this side.” The storyteller turns the plaque over to the Easter side. “The ending is also a beginning, so we can’t leave the story in a line. Let’s see what we can do.”

The storyteller plays with the arrangement of the plaques, setting the underlay aside. She tries several different configurations, until finally she forms a circle with the double-sided image

in the center, Easter side up. The storyteller leans back and concludes, “Now the story can go on forever.”

### Conclusions

The two-sided picture of the crucified Jesus and the risen Christ of bread and wine, shown to children in *Godly Play*, corrects the one-sided, ascetic Christology of suffering privileged by Climacus, Anti-Climacus, and Kierkegaard in his final writings. Far from turning their backs on the picture of the crucified one, in Berryman’s curriculum lessons about Jesus’ birth, boyhood, and adult life and work encircle the crucifixion. They anticipate the ending the cross marks, even as they promise a rebirth, a new beginning, through and beyond death, Jesus present with his followers today and every day, especially in the eucharistic feast. Our teaching of *Godly Play* convinces us that children can indeed bear redoubling and hold together the dialectic of crucifixion and Easter. Ultimately, in his Christology, Kierkegaard pulls crucifixion apart from Easter, as well as from the other faces of Jesus Christ.

The inseparability of crucified Christ and eucharistic Jesus for Berryman also accentuates the disappearance of both-and across the second half of Kierkegaard’s authorship and the collapse of his theological and spiritual resources around an ever more stark either/or: *either* New Testament faith in Jesus Christ, *or* women and children, marriage, family, community and church. We agree with Gordon Lathrop that sound Christian practice and belief require the juxtaposition of differing, even opposing, factors without the exclusion or diminishment of either one: *both* thanksgiving *and* lament, not *either/or*; both word and meal, death and resurrection,

the authorizing of liturgical rites in the book of Leviticus *side-by-side with* the critique of all liturgy in the speeches of the prophet Amos.<sup>142</sup> Within the context of our discussion of Kierkegaard and *Godly Play*, we would lift up *both* Johannes the Seducer *and* Judge William, not *either/or*; both Judge William and Anti-Climacus, edifying discourses and the attack upon the established church, aesthetic pleasure and ethical duty, ethical duty and religious paradox; baby Jesus and crucified one, figurine and golden box, story and feast, crucifixion *side-by-side with* Easter. Kierkegaard ends up relaxing such creative, life-giving tensions. His thought becomes less (not more) dialectical over time, and eventually settles on a single, mono-polar stance, one characterized by polemical critique and ascetic denial of self and world. Ironically, it is Kierkegaard the adult who fails to sustain the strenuous efforts required by redoubling as he pulls the both-ands apart.

And the double-sided picture from *Godly Play* shines light indirectly on an occluded eucharistic Christology in Kierkegaard, one he articulates without reference to children in those communion discourses featuring the gospel women who anoint Jesus and receive him as bodily sustenance and protection, not merely sign of offense. Kierkegaard can hardly be faulted for posing women, not children, as leading all adult Christians, male and female, to the foot of the altar and Jesus' body and blood. For in the polity of nineteenth century Danish Lutheranism, children were prohibited from receiving communion until they had been confirmed, usually as teenagers; Søren himself first received the Lord's Supper on April 25, 1828, the Friday following

---

142. See Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); and *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

his confirmation on Sunday, April 20, and two weeks before his fifteenth birthday.<sup>143</sup> Although Kierkegaard does occasionally position children alongside women and birds and flowers as means of grace in his writings, it would not, could not, immediately occur to him to deploy children as parables turning adult conventions upside down and inside out in connection with the Lord's Supper. We acknowledge the advantageous sacramental environment we inhabit in the Episcopal Church with its 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* (and supplements), where baptism comprises *full* Christian initiation and whereby, subject to parental consent and pastoral sensitivity, even babies are welcomed to Christ's feast. In the words of *Godly Play's* World Communion lesson: "Sometimes someone comes to read the very words of the Good Shepherd, and to give us the bread and the wine. Sometimes the people of the world come to this table and even the children come."<sup>144</sup> We grieve the impoverishment of churches, both in Kierkegaard's day and in our own, which exclude children from plenary participation in the sacred meal. Such exclusion deprives Christian communities of a concrete, living symbol that crucifixion and Easter need not be pulled apart. Conversely, the damage done by Kierkegaard's dubious assumption that children's play with the holy cannot encompass Jesus Christ in his suffering is compounded by the total absence of the risen Christ of bread and wine from children's lives. If crucifixion and Easter cannot be pulled apart, then to lack the face of Easter must lead to a corresponding distortion of the face of crucifixion.

---

143. For a detailed analysis of Kierkegaard's own participation in the sacrament of the eucharist throughout his life, based on parish records from the Cathedral of Our Lady in Copenhagen, see Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, "Die Ursprüngliche Unterbrechung: Søren Kierkegaard beim Abendmahl im Freitagsgottesdienst der Kopenhagener Frauenkirche," trans. Krista-Maria Deuser, in *Kierkegaard Studies: Yearbook 1996*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 315-88.

144. Berryman, *Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 4, p. 97.

We do not want to make of Søren Kierkegaard a straw man, however; we want to attend to his wisdom. And so we wonder if his words about the paradox of Jesus Christ might sharpen and deepen the discourse of *Godly Play* and child theology more broadly. Berryman and other thinkers who experiment with placing the child at the center of theological reflection contend that children have a different, perhaps greater, capacity for mystery than do adults with their propositional language and linear thought. We wonder if Kierkegaard's paradox, the passion-laded site where human beings learn of God as they learn from God – practically, not theoretically, by contradiction as much as by attraction – offers a different framework for understanding what it means for adults to become like children when seeking and entering into the mystery of God. What if we took Kierkegaard's diagnosis of an incapacity for redoubling as applying to *all* human beings and not just women and children? What if we heard his words about the offensiveness of Jesus Christ as confronting deeply ingrained habits of our social-political-economic understanding, pivoting toward the ethics of God's incarnation in our human flesh and away from its metaphysics? What if we envisioned his reminders about sin not in terms of a rupture interior to an individual, but this whole, beautiful world shot through with injustice? Then, paradox in Kierkegaard might be re-imagined as calling into question systems of exclusion and violence which dehumanize too many of the simple or lowly ones in the contemporary world – first and foremost the children of women of color. We wonder, in the light of such a theology of liberation, if we could reclaim for Kierkegaard one of his own self-descriptions – that he was a “corrective” to the established order of nineteenth century Denmark.<sup>145</sup> Maybe the gift of

---

145. See Søren Kierkegaard, *On My Work as an Author*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 22 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 18-9; and *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 331-3 [entries 707-11], vol. 6, pp. 188-9 [entry 6467].



Kierkegaard's low views of children, although a painful gift, lies in insisting that Jesus, the unexpected king, comes among us to turn inside out and upside down the most fundamental, most often taken for granted as to be rendered virtually invisible, structures governing our homes, our schools, our churches, our cities and towns, nations and multinational corporations,. Which causes us wonder how children (and adults) might best learn to play with and work toward social transformation?

Recall that Kierkegaard's last pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, places a picture of the crucified Christ before a lone child. "Faces of Easter," like all *Godly Play* stories, is told in the midst of a circle of children, a little community. The name of Kierkegaard's first pseudonym, Victor Eremita, proclaims the victory of a hermit, a childless, unmarried, adult man. We trace Kierkegaard's dismissal of children, his view of them as incomplete and less than fully human, incapable of being genuinely Christian, back to his underlying belief that to be authentically human one has to be alone. The individual man isolated from the crowd serves as the subject for the encounter with paradox, with the divine. Jesus Christ himself provides the prototype for this lone individual. Concomitantly, Kierkegaard sees the simple and lowly ones of the world, women, children, the poor, plants and animals, as less capable than men of individual survival. And in a way he is absolutely right: children cannot survive outside of community; they cannot make it on their own; their distinctive vulnerability rests in extreme reliance upon others. But what if we conceived children's powerlessness as a sign of blessing, not a deficiency? Kierkegaard tells many stories of lonely childhoods. *Godly Play* recasts childhood as a model for community building.

Mark showed up for his first Sunday as a *Godly Play* teacher having anxiously expended most of his adult energy preparing to tell the Advent I story of the prophets fully, correctly (=according to the written script!), and with deep spiritual impact on the children. He realized within the first five minutes that the greatest challenge and most nuanced artistry of *Godly Play* lies in building the circle of children and maintaining it for all. Likewise, in her years of *Godly Play* storytelling, Alissa has discovered that the most transformational lessons depend less on linguistic preparation and more on the capacity of all in the circle, adult and children, to get ready together and hold both story and each other with care and grace.

So, if the little community of a *Godly Play* circle does offer a corrective to individualism, then it addresses not just Kierkegaard's thought, but a culture sold on individualism – both our broad popular culture, as well as much of our theological culture – the individualism that dominates the world we adults and our children inhabit. The radical dependence of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ on the circle that holds his story echoes and incarnates the radical dependence of children upon parents and other adults. We wonder if Jesus' call to become like little children in order to enter the kingdom of God challenges us first and foremost with the transformative paradox of sitting in a circle, in community, with others.