



Children and Political Representation: The Challenge of the Gift

John Wall

Rutgers University

johnwall@camden.rutgers.edu

Political representation is a centerpiece of modern democratic societies. Having the right to influence public policies and lawmakers has been one of the most important bases particularly for the social and economic advancement of historically marginalized groups like women and minorities. Yet, in all corners of the globe, children and youth rarely wield a great deal of direct political power. This paper asks what it might mean for the third of humanity under eighteen years of age to gain genuine representation in political life. It does so from the point of view of

political and Christian ethics, and builds on advances in the field of childhood studies around children's agency, voices, rights, and citizenship. It also takes an approach that I have elsewhere called *childism* – a term meant in analogy to feminism, womanism, and environmentalism – that asks, not just how to extend adult rights to children, but how rights themselves should be restructured in light of children's experiences.¹ From this angle, political representation should not be grounded in the traditional adult-centric expression of autonomous interests or hegemonic struggles for power, but rather in responsiveness to lived experiences of difference, or, theologically, the welcoming of Creation's ever new gifts.

Movements for Children's Representation Today

Children have exercised political power throughout history in any number of ways, whether as royalty or nobility, revolutionary fighters, members of labor movements, civil rights activists, protestors, organizers, and much more. In the past two decades, however, especially since the near universal ratification of the United Nations' 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), children have started to make strides into direct political representation of more systematic kinds. Such movements have in effect challenged the standard belief from modern democratic theory – constructed by political thinkers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant – that children belong the private sphere of the home alone because of their supposed incapacity for public autonomy and reason. Recent advances in

¹ John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010); "Childhood Studies, Hermeneutics, and Theological Ethics," *Journal of Religion* 86/4 (October 2006): 523-548; and "Human Rights in Light of Childhood," *International Journal of Children's Rights* 16/4 (October 2008): 523-543.

children's representation can be described along an axis from their relatively less to their relatively more direct expressions.

Toward the somewhat less direct end of the spectrum have been various efforts by local and national governments to establish ways of reaching beyond adults speaking on behalf of children to hearing children's own political voices. Of course, government agencies have long "represented" children in some sense: such as by funding their education, protecting free speech rights, or prosecuting abuse. And governments have long been impacted by children, children's advocates, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) taking stands for children's interests. But there have now arisen a number of historically unique initiatives to include the actual voices of children themselves in processes of government decision-making.

For example, in 2001 New Zealand developed an Agenda for Children based upon an ambitious national consultative process in which children were asked about their political concerns and desires.² In 2003, South Africa launched the Children in Action (Dikwankwetla) project to include children in parliamentary hearings and public debates.³ The Israeli Knesset now regularly invites children to participate in its child-related committees.⁴ The government of

² M. Brown and J. McCormack, "Placing Children on the Political Agenda: New Zealand's Agenda for Children," in Jim Goddard, Sally McNamee, Adrian James, and Allison James, eds., *The Politics of Childhood: International Perspectives, Contemporary Developments* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

³ Lucy Jamieson and Wanjiru Mukoma, "Dikwankwetla – Children in Action: Children's Participation in the Law Reform Process in South Africa," in Barry Percy-Smith and Nigel Thomas, eds., *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁴ Asher Ben Arieh and Yifat Boyer, "Citizenship and Childhood: The State of Affairs in Israel," *Childhood* 12/1 (2005): 50.

Rwanda holds a National Summit for Children and Youth every year around a particular theme.⁵ Since 2004, the UK has employed four Children's Commissioners (one each for England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) whose job includes raising children's issues concerning legislation and policy.⁶ In 2009, the Kazakhstan government worked with UNICEF to organize a political consultative process with youth aged ten to twenty-four called a National Adolescents and Youth Forum.⁷ These are but a few of many examples of children being given at least some level of their own direct voice in governance.

Rather more directly, at least thirty countries around the world have established children's parliaments. These are sometimes national and sometimes within cities, schools, or villages. Countries with children's parliaments include India, Norway, Germany, Slovenia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Nigeria, Congo, Burkina Faso, Liberia, New Zealand, the UK, and Scotland, and there is also a Children's United Parliament of the World.⁸ Many children's parliaments,

⁵ Kirrily Pells, "No One Ever Listens to Us': Challenging Obstacles to the Participation of Children and Young People in Rwanda," in Percy-Smith and Thomas, eds., *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation*, 196-203.

⁶ Jen Williams and Rhian Croke, "Institutional Support for the UNCRC's 'Citizen Child'," in Antonella Invernizzi and Jane Williams, eds., *Children and Citizenship* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), pp. 184-87.

⁷ Ravi Karkara and Sultan Khudaibergenov, "National Adolescents and Youth Forum Held in Kazakhstan," at www.unicef.kz (2009).

⁸ Yves Cabannes, "Children and Young People Build a Participatory Democracy in Latin American Cities," *Children, Youth and Environments* 15/2 (2005): 185-210; Jayashri Karkar and Blanka Mendoza, "Bolivia's Children's Parliament: Bringing Participation to the National Stage," *Children, Youth and Environments* 15/2 (2005): 227-44; Stefanie Conrad, "Children as Active Citizens: Addressing Discrimination against Children's Engagement in Political and Civil Society Processes," Plan International, plan-international.org, September 2009; Sara L. Austin, "Children's Participation in Citizenship and Governance," in Percy-Smith and Thomas, eds., *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation*, 245-53; "Children's United Parliament of the World" at www.childrensstate.net.

especially in wealthier nations, are oriented more toward children's education than toward their actual exercise of power. Some favor select groups of children such as older children, those with a particular interest in politics, the middle classes, or those who happen to attend a participating organization or school.⁹

However, many children's parliaments enable children to exercise quite a high degree of actual political decision-making. One of the first children's parliaments, set up in the 1990s in village schools in Rajasthan, India, involves children aged six to fourteen electing child representatives who have gone on to shape educational policy for their schools, dismiss poor teachers, and bring to their districts much needed services and utilities.¹⁰ In Bolivia, the national government created a children's parliament in 2004 whose representatives make regular formal recommendations about laws and policies to the adult national assembly.¹¹ Some of the more local children's parliaments, such as in the city of Barra Mansa in Brazil, have extensive powers over children's issues and control parts of the city budget.¹² It is often in poorer communities, where children are already more directly involved in labor and society, that children's parliaments find greater opportunities for influencing law.

⁹ Alan Turkie, "More than Crumbs from the Table: A Critique of Youth Parliaments as Models of Representation for Marginalised Young People," in Percy-Smith and Thomas, eds., *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation*, 262-69.

¹⁰ Mary John, *Children's Rights and Power: Charging Up for a New Century* (New York: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2003), 235-39; and Ahsa Bajpai, *Child Rights in India: Law, Policy, and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 469.

¹¹ Jayashri Sarkar and Blanka Mendoza, "Bolivia's Children's Parliament: Bringing Participation to the National Stage," *Children, Youth and Environments* 15/2 (2005): 227-44

¹² Yves Cabannes, "Children and Young People Build a Participatory Democracy in Latin American Cities," *Children, Youth and Environments* 15/2 (2005): 191.

Perhaps at the most direct end of the spectrum are movements to give children the right to vote. Some have pointed to Article 21 of the United Nations' founding 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaims that "everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives" and with "universal and equal suffrage." The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child does not explicitly mention children's right to vote (or any other right to direct political representation). However, it does affirm in Article 12 that every child has the right to "express [their] views freely" and "be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child." The right "to be heard" is not the same as voting but could arguably imply it.

A growing number of scholars and activists have begun to press for greater children's suffrage. As long ago as 1975, John Holt argued that, instead of just lowering the voting age, there should be "the right to vote for people of any age," to be exercised, whether child or adult, solely on the basis of whether one wishes to take part in public affairs.¹³ More recently, the culture studies theorist Bob Franklin has argued that all children should have the right to vote because it is the cornerstone of "the right to be a citizen."¹⁴ Voting should not be predicated on rationality, he claims, because rationality is itself politically difficult to define and even irrational adults are allowed to vote. Rather, it should be extended to children because this would "give higher priority and emphasis to policies relating to youth affairs than at present."¹⁵

¹³ John Holt, *Escape from Childhood* (New York: Penguin, 1975).

¹⁴ Bob Franklin, "Children's Political Rights," in Bob Franklin, ed., *The Rights of Children* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46. See also Duncan Lindsey, "Why Children Should Have a Vote," www.childwelfare.com/Kids/kidsvote.htm, 2010.

Furthermore, children themselves have actively sought the right to vote. A German youth organization called KRÄTZÄ has for several years fought for universal suffrage.¹⁶ The German government is considering a bill with cross-party support to provide the vote to each citizen at birth, to be used by a parent until the child claims it.¹⁷ Bosnia-Herzegovina, Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua, and the British Channel Islands recently lowered the voting age to sixteen (as well as Germany and Israel for local elections), and East Timor, Indonesia, Seychelles, and Sudan to seventeen.¹⁸ An English organization has convinced the national government to study lowering the voting age to sixteen across the board.¹⁹ In the United States, a lower voting age is part of the agenda of the child-run National Youth Rights Association.²⁰ Several US states have proposed lowering voting ages to anything from twelve to seventeen, most famously in California where a bill was ultimately defeated in 2004 to permit a quarter vote at fourteen and a half vote at sixteen.²¹

These are but a few examples of what could be called a broad worldwide shift in the direction of children's more direct political representation. Much like in the beginnings of similar

¹⁶ KRÄTZÄ 2009, www.kraetzae.de.

¹⁷ Harry de Quetteville, "Germany Plans to Give Vote to Babies," *The Telegraph*, telegraph.co.uk, July 9, 2008.

¹⁸ Greg Hurst, "Ministers Contemplate Lowering the Voting Age to 16," *The Times*, February 14, 2003.

¹⁹ Children's Rights Alliance for England, www.crae.org.uk/protecting/democratic.html, 2010.

²⁰ National Youth Rights Association, www.youthrights.org.

²¹ Elizabeth F. Cohen, "Neither Seen Nor Heard: Children's Citizenship in Contemporary Democracies," *Citizenship Studies* 9/2 (2005): 221–240; Bobby Caina Calvan, "Californians Consider Granting 14-Year-Olds the Right to Vote," *Boston Globe*, April 25, 2004.

political movements for other historically disempowered groups, this shift is slight, little known, and piecemeal. It is sometimes difficult to tell when children are actually exercising power rather than merely being incorporated into adult agendas. What is more, there is little leadership in it from religious organizations. In fact, the loudest religious voices tend to support children's containment within the family and to oppose their fuller participation in larger political rights, including in the United States where conservative Christians are the primary cause of remaining the only country besides Somalia not to have ratified the CRC.

Theorizing Children's Representation as Citizenship

Children's political movements are increasingly being accompanied by scholarship in childhood studies that is grappling with its deeper conceptual frameworks. The primary thrust of this new scholarship lies in asking in what senses children can be considered to possess genuine and full citizenship. Childhood shows that representational citizenship is in fact complex and contested. Most children are citizens in the technical sense of having a specific nationality (though many do not), while still having only second-class citizenship in reality. Childhood thus raises the question of how much being a citizen should also mean having a direct voice in political decision-making. There are three major ways in which the discussion of children's citizenship has attempted to provide children fuller political representation.

One approach is to argue that children's citizenship should be grounded in their equal capacities for political *participation*. Children should be treated as agents in public discourse with their own independent voices. This model goes back to the early childhood studies

movement of the 1980s that emphasizes how children are not just undeveloped adults or adults-in-the-making but “actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live.”²² This language is also used in what UNICEF calls the six “participation rights” of the CRC. These are, briefly: to be heard, freedom of expression, thought, and assembly, privacy, and access to information. Politically, participation means children “being active citizens, articulating their own values, perspectives, experiences and visions for the future, using these to inform and take action in their own right and, where necessary, contesting with those who have power over their lives.”²³

This model of participatory citizenship decisively breaks with the old modernistic notion, from John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, of children as dependents who need to be separated from public affairs into the private realm of the home.²⁴ It could be argued that it uses a more sophisticated conception of politics, not unlike in the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib, in which the fundamental grounds of political life is not individual autonomy but intersubjective dialogue. The ethical criterion, in Habermas’s words, is that “only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in

²² James, Alison and Alan Prout, “Introduction,” in James and Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, 2d ed. (New York: RoutledgeFarmer, 1997), 4.

²³ Barry Percy-Smith and Nigel Thomas, “Introduction,” in Percy-Smith and Thomas, eds., *A Handbook of Children and Young People’s Participation*, 3.

²⁴ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, from *The Works of John Locke*, New Edition, Vol. V (London: W. Sharpe and Son, 1823), 126-33; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Charles Frankel (New York: Hafner, 1947), I.2 and I.4.

their capacity *as participants in a practical discourse*.”²⁵ A similar kind of political theory is applied to children by Christian thinkers such as Kathleen and James McGinnis, who interpret Roman Catholic social justice theory as arguing that “we want (and the world needs) young people ... to be hopeful ... [and] to know through experience that, difficult though it is, change is possible, and that they can help bring about that change.”²⁶ This focus on participation and dialogue is also found in childhood studies’ advocacy for children’s political “voices,” which can be defined as their “commitment to *make known* their own ability to act on their own behalf, whether to ensure their own interests or to modify the world that surrounds them.”²⁷

At the same time, however, it can be argued that such perspectives do not adequately distinguish between participation and genuine power. Roger Hart has described seven possible levels of children’s political power through what he calls a “ladder of participation”: from lower rungs of manipulation, decoration, or tokenism, to higher rungs of being informed, being consulted, taking initiative, and, at the very top, sharing with adults in actual decision-making.²⁸

²⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990 [German original 1983]), 66 (Habermas’s emphasis); Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 179.

²⁶ Kathleen and James McGinnis, *Parenting for Peace and Justice: Ten Years Later* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 95.

²⁷ Peter B. Pufall and Richard P. Unsworth, “Introduction: The Imperative and the Process for Rethinking Childhood,” in Pufall and Unsworth, eds., *Rethinking Childhood* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 9 [my emphasis].

²⁸ Roger Hart, *Children’s Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care* (New York: UNICEF/Earthscan, 1997); see also a similar ladder in Harry Shier, “Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations,” *Children and Society* 15 (2001): 107-17.

For example, when interviewed, children in civic councils in the UK frequently complain that, while they get to be officially heard, they are skeptical that their voices actually make any difference.²⁹ It is easy to mistake having children participate with enabling children actually to influence political realities. Even in an ideal Habermasian discourse community, children would likely find themselves at a disadvantage in the exercise of power. Making a real political difference requires not only participating but also having the resources and experience to fight for one's own point of view in conflict with others. What is truly needed, in the words of Ruth Sinclair, is "to offer genuine participation to children that is not an add-on but an integral part of the way adults and organizations relate to children."³⁰

An alternative approach to children's citizenship has been to rethink citizenship itself around children's political *interdependency*. That is, all citizens, child and adult, are not just participatory agents but also, and at the very same time, mutually dependent on each other and on social systems. Marc Jans, for example, has argued for a "children-sized citizenship" which is "based on a continuous learning process in which children and adults are interdependent."³¹ Citizenship in general, on his view, should be understood as "a dynamic and continuous learning process" in which people of all ages and types come together to collectively "give meaning to

²⁹ Michael Wyness, "Regulating Participation: The Possibilities and Limits of Children and Young People's Councils," *Journal of Social Sciences* 9, Special Issue (2005).

³⁰ Ruth Sinclair, "Participation in Practice: Making it Meaningful, Effective and Sustainable," *Children and Society* 18 (2004): 116.

³¹ Marc Jans, "Children as Citizens: Towards a Contemporary Notion of Child Participation," *Childhood* 11/1 (2004): 40.

their environment.”³² Or as Tom Cockburn has put it, “both adults and children are socially interdependent” in that both possess at once citizenship’s “responsibilities and duties.”³³ Thus, for example, the above Agenda for Children in New Zealand has been described as “not tied to the efforts of an individual child asserting a claim, but rather emerges within a mutual interdependence, recognition and respect for children and their views and experiences.”³⁴ Such a model has also been applied by Barbara Bennett Woodhouse to children’s rights in general, by which, she claims, “illusions of autonomy, so dear to adult-centric schemes of rights, would dissolve, making room for the reality of dependency and interdependency.”³⁵

The advantage of this interdependency model is that it responds more fully to children’s own particular political experiences. It changes politics itself so as to include all citizens however relatively dependent or not on others. It includes what Christian ethicists might call both the agency and the vulnerability of all persons. It includes what the political theorist Charles Taylor has called the connections of individuals to “affiliations with some depth in time and commitment.”³⁶ Interdependent societies can just as fully include children as they can adults.

³² Ibid.

³³ Tom Cockburn, “Children and Citizenship in Britain: A Case for a Socially Interdependent Model of Citizenship,” *Childhood* 5 (1998): 113. See also Tom Cockburn, “Children as Participative Citizens: A Radical Pluralist Case for ‘Child-Friendly’ Public Communication,” *Journal of Social Sciences* Special Issue No. 9 (2005): 19-29.

³⁴ Robyn Fitzgerald, Anne Graham, Anne Smith, and Nicola Taylor, “Children’s Participation as a Struggle over Recognition: Exploring the Promise of Dialogue,” in Percy-Smith and Thomas, *A Handbook of Children and Young People’s Participation*, 300.

³⁵ Barbara Bennett Woodhouse in *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Tragedy of Children’s Rights from Ben Franklin to Lionel Tate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 309.

³⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 4, 513.

At the same time, it is not entirely clear that an interdependence model fully confronts the problem of children's power. It leaves open the question of who defines political structures in the first place, including what political relationships are most important, where scarce resources should be used, and how political life should be accessed. In other words, as in for example many of the children's parliaments described above, the entire political process is likely still to be framed and constructed by adults. Perhaps more than any other group, children would on the whole remain *more* dependent than adults for having others create political opportunities for them.

A third approach has consequently taken the more radical position that children will be included as full citizens only insofar as citizenship is redefined as the political inclusion of *difference*. Ruth Lister, for example, has used feminist scholarship to base children's citizenship on what she calls a "differentiated universalism" in which all members of a society, including especially those like children who are most marginalized from power, should be included in political life's "struggle for recognition."³⁷ Specifically, she claims, "our goal should be a universalism which stands in creative tension to diversity and difference and which challenges the divisions and exclusionary inequalities which can stem from diversity."³⁸ Similarly, Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha has argued for a feminist, anti-racist, non-classist, and transgendered theorization of children's citizenship as "difference-centered." Political life should be grounded

³⁷ Ruth Lister, "Why Citizenship: Where, When and How Children?" *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 8/2 (2007): 709, 715.

³⁸ Ruth Lister, "Citizenship: Towards a Feminist Analysis," *Feminist Review* 57 (1997): 39.

in “the right to participate differently in the social institutions and culture of the society.”³⁹

Against historical “adultist” oppression, she claims, political life needs to account for children’s “own lived reality” and “subjective experiences,” so that “childhood is acknowledged as an important stage in life without reference to adulthood as a norm or standard.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Nigel Thomas uses the social theories of Iris Marion Young and Pierre Bourdieu to suggest that, especially for children, “representation is most inclusive when it encourages marginalized groups to express their perspectives.”⁴¹ To be a citizen is neither to be independent nor interdependent but, rather, included as different.

These difference models tackle head on the elephant in the room of children’s dislocation from democratic power. They cut to the very heart of modern political theory, offering a fresh postmodern starting point built on political power’s deconstruction rather than consolidation. Political life is conceptualized along the “agonistic” lines formulated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe of a “struggle” or “conflict” among diverse projects, or what could be called “the multiplication of antagonisms and the construction of a plurality of spaces.”⁴² As Mouffe has put it in a criticism of Habermas, “the task for democratic theorists and politicians should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant ‘agonistic’ public sphere of contestation where different

³⁹ Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha, “A Difference-Centred Alternative to Theorization of Children’s Citizenship Rights,” *Citizenship Studies* 9/4 (2005): 375.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 375, 377, and 378.

⁴¹ Nigel Thomas, “Towards a Theory of Children’s Participation,” *International Journal of Children’s Rights* 15 (2007): 210.

⁴² Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2d ed. (New York: Verso, 2001), 192.

hegemonic political projects can be confronted.”⁴³ History has provided first-class citizenship only to the few and those with power do not give it up without a struggle. Genuinely inclusive citizenship requires that power be exercised ever more diversely and differently.

The drawback in the difference model, however, when it comes specifically to children, is that children should not, on the whole, have to struggle for political inclusion for themselves. This perspective accounts for difference, but not the specific difference that generally constitutes childhood: namely, its relative shortness of political experience. In other words, the difference approach does not account for what other approaches have identified as children’s political interdependency. The exercise of power can include children fully only when conflict is accompanied by aid and support. It should involve not only the negative undoing of hegemonic powers but also the positive construction of social relationships. In a pure struggle for power, the biggest losers will be children. For on the whole, by virtue of having spent less time in the world, children will be able to draw upon fewer economic resources, educational advantages, and political experiences.

Thinking about representational citizenship in light of childhood therefore leaves us with something of a dilemma. Is it possible to include children fully in political citizenship when part of the difference that makes children children lies in their relative political inexperience and dependency? What would it mean for political life truly to represent those whose difference consists precisely in having relatively less power to make a difference for themselves?

⁴³ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 3.

The Politics of the Gift

One way to address this conundrum is to draw upon, and critically reinterpret, political resources from religion. Religion need not be used as a direct political foundation to still be able to offer helpful political language, language which may require translation into secular terms but which in the process can also complicate established normative assumptions. In particular, religion may be well positioned to grasp what it means to exercise power within a situation of interdependency, since it often seeks to imagine the limits of human experience. Here I turn specifically to post-modern appropriations of Christian ethics of the gift. My goal is not to argue for a Christian foundation but simply to open up new terminological possibilities.

There is a vast array of Christian ethical thinking on the meanings and purposes of political life, and it is as diverse as the conversation we have been following so far. The rise of European democracy itself owed much to Catholic canon law and Protestant affirmations of the individual as an image of God. In particular, over the past century, Christian thought has been integral to movements to rethink political participation from the perspectives of the marginalized, the poor, and the disempowered. To my knowledge, however, Christian ethicists have not systematically applied themselves to the question of the political representation of children. They have not, at least, played a significant role in the above conversation. Nor has the church been a particularly important player in children's global political movements. This absence of Christian voices stands in contrast with the interest shown in children in much of the Bible and the history of Christian thought.⁴⁴ This is a religion, after all, that began in the birth of a poor infant to an

⁴⁴ See Marcia Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); and Marcia Bunge, ed. *The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

oppressed people, and that includes core teachings about the blessedness of the meek and love for all as God's children.

The Christian ethics of the gift suggests a vital link between difference and interdependency. Each new human being brings their own distinctively new gifts to the world that the world in turn is called upon to give a new response. The phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur describes this moral cycle as an "economy of the gift." What he means is that one's own sense of having been given meaning and goodness ultimately from one's Creator (and not just from oneself) is also the moral basis for being obliged to give meaning and love to all God's creations, including especially other persons. As Ricoeur puts it, "Because [existence] has been given to you by God, give in turn."⁴⁵ One could describe this originary affirmation of humanity, in spite of its capacity for evil, as the experience shared by all humanity, including newborns, that ultimately the world can be given meaning. Ethically speaking, humanity's most primordial gift is to be able to have faith in the goodness and possibility of humanity.

The notion of humanity as gift makes possible, for example, a radically interdependent interpretation of the golden rule: Do to others as you would have them do to you.⁴⁶ If "others" here refers to autonomously independent individuals, then the golden rule is reduced to leaving one another alone: Do to others *only what* you would have them do to you. Or it can devolve into

⁴⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "Love and Justice," in *Radical Pluralism and Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion*, ed. Werner G. Jeanrond and Jennifer L. Rilke (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 198. See also my "The Economy of the Gift: Paul Ricoeur's Significance for Theological Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 29/2 (2001): 235-60.

⁴⁶ See Ricoeur, "Ethical and Theological Considerations on the Golden Rule," in Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 293-302.

mere reciprocity: Do to others *so that* they will do for you (or its negative counterpart, revenge: Do to others *what* they have done to you). That is, giving to others does not seek to create a more fully loving or human relation with them. Raising a child, for example, would be reduced on this conception to giving of oneself because one gets something back in return: whether an immediate sense of satisfaction or a long-term care-giver for when one gets old.

But if the “gift” here is of one’s own and others’ very being, then the golden rule really means: Do to others *with the same generosity* that you would have them do to you. This would allow one, as Jesus claims in Luke 6:27-31, to interpret the golden rule to include the radical command even to “love your enemies,” since enemies must also be treated as also gifts from God like oneself who deserve generosity and compassion. Thus, raising a child would involve giving oneself to one’s child, not just because she is part of oneself, but because she depends on the relation for bringing her own gifts to the world too. Such a love for others as gifts is not simply self-sacrificial, but at once self-giving and self-enriching. Bonnie Miller-McLemore has described raising children along similar lines as a “labor of love, evoking unique obligations, intimacies, and transformations because ... they are subjects in themselves capable of their own work, love, gifts, and contributions.”⁴⁷

This giftedness of human existence can be experienced particularly through children. Pamela Couture has described an ethics of giftedness in children’s family life, poverty, and social ecology. She argues that “in [children’s] care we experience grace, the movement of God in our

⁴⁷ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2003), 124.

lives that allows us to give and receive from others.”⁴⁸ In a more general sense, Couture claims, “our gratitude can never be adequate to the gift and the givers. Rather, the only way to express our gratitude is to pass it on to others.”⁴⁹ Children show how profoundly the gift of being in the world places each of us in one another’s care as well as making each of us responsible for caring for each other. As David Jensen has described it, “the vulnerability of children ... is a fact of the God-given relatedness into which all persons are born.”⁵⁰ Human beings are gifts to one another, not because of their rational autonomy, but because of their social interdependency.

Politically speaking, the concept of humanity as gift introduces the obligation to respond to experiences of difference. Each new human being in the world gives that world irreducibly new meaning. As soon as a person can create meaningful worlds for themselves, that person becomes a political participant who both gives and should be given political meaning. (I do not propose to solve the question here of whether this capacity arises at birth or beforehand). The gift of otherness makes everyone on the planet both different from everyone else yet interdependent with them. Each other is to be loved as a different other who brings to the world their own particular experiences, voices, and (in a word) gifts. As Kathleen Marshall and Paul Parvis have said, speaking more broadly of children’s rights, “children have rights because ... they are made in the image of the Word who took flesh in the womb of his mother and came into the world as a

⁴⁸ Pamela Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 13.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵⁰ David Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 49.

child himself.”⁵¹ That is, human rights depend, not on independence, but on embodied relationality. Or as Lisa Guenther puts it, “the emergence of this child demands a responsibility that it also makes possible, simply by showing its face.”⁵² Everyone is a gifted child who both brings new gifts to the world and is responsible for responding to the gifts of others.

Such a view must be carefully contrasted with some of the more unfortunate ways that children as “gifts” have been understood throughout the Christian tradition. It most especially does not mean that children are gifts from God *to* their parents: gifts, that is, who upon being given enter into their parents’ possession. This view of children as given possessions rests on the historically influential Aristotelian notion that children naturally “belong to” their parents as somehow “part of” them, until such a time as children can act on their own behalf.⁵³ The difficulty with this view is that it regards children as gifts only in the limited sense of dependent objects, lacking their own gifted agency. This view supports, for example, a sense of children as consumer products, existing to give satisfaction to adult desires. Miller-McLemore has argued in this connection that “if children are gift, wholly unearned, they are ours ‘only in trust,’” and this “limits adult power over them and forbids their use as a means to other ends.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Kathleen Marshall and Paul Parvis, *Honoring Children: The Human Rights of the Child in Christian Perspective* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 2004), 324.

⁵² Lisa Guenther, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 3.

⁵³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in Aristotle, *Introduction to Aristotle*, Second edition revised and enlarged, ed. Richard McKeon (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1947), VIII. 12, 1161b18-24, p. 527.

⁵⁴ Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 102. See also a similar critique of consumerism in Mary M. Doyle Roche, *Children, Consumerism, and the Common Good* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 85.

Another problematic conception in Christianity is an opposed one: children as gifts in the sense of being wholly pure and self-sufficient, sent by God to save the world from itself. As O.M. Bakke has shown, this view predominated in the early Christian church, prior to Augustine, and influenced theologies as diverse as those of Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom, the latter declaring childhood in typical fashion as “the height of true wisdom,” being “simple with understanding ... [and] pure from all the passions.”⁵⁵ Many of these early theologians took Jesus’ saying that “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” to mean that children are the world’s salvation.⁵⁶ Their simplicity, goodness, sexual purity, and innocence is God’s continuous gift of incarnation, started in Jesus and continued in each newborn. A highly sentimentalized view of children as gifts persists into modernity and today. For example, Friedrich Schleiermacher suggests in *Christmas Eve Dialogues* that children are “the pure revelation of the divine,” the true “gift” of an everlasting Christmas of “immediate union” with “the sacred sphere of nature.”⁵⁷ The problem here, politically speaking, is that children are ascribed such a pure moral agency that they can safely be ignored, especially insofar as they might depend on political support.

A more complex way of understanding children as gifts, closer to my own, is that of the Christian phenomenologist Trygve Wyller, who has argued that, “since givenness is there before

⁵⁵ Chrysostom, *Hom. in Mt. 62.4.*, in J-P Migne, ed., *Patrologia graeca* (Paris: 1844-64), cited in Bakke, 78.

⁵⁶ Matthew 18:3-5; see also Mark 9:33-37 and Luke 9:46-48.

⁵⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christmas Eve: Dialogues on the Incarnation* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon, 1990), 36, 39, 45, 55 and 62; and idem, *The Christian Household: A Sermonic Treatise* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 42, 69, and 82.

any cognitive reflection, any child has the right to be treated according to this givenness,” especially in “not [being] gifts to anyone.”⁵⁸ Children are neither gifted to their parents or society nor purely giving appearances of divinity. Rather, they give the more basic gift of remaking social relations anew. Their simple presence in the world means they make the ethical command to transform that world into new meaning. Children are gifts in the dynamic sense that they give something important and meaningful to others which others are thereby called upon to give a particular response in return. This view is not far off Hannah Arendt’s idea in *The Human Condition* of political “activity” as “natality”: “The new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something new, that is, of acting.”⁵⁹ Such a gift is the very grounds for the possibility of social and political participation.

A politics of the gift, as suggested by the perspective of phenomenology, can therefore find in children, not just an extension of what is more readily found in adults, but its first and most important expression. It is in childhood, indeed at birth, that one becomes a gift in the fully political sense. This sense is not static or individual but dynamic and relational. It means that all persons are uniquely different gifts to the world who thus demand that world’s giving them a full and distinctive response. The political imagination must endlessly transform itself in response to humanity’s great diversity of gifts.

⁵⁸ Trygve Wyller, “They Owe us Nothing: The Spirituality of Givenness and the Recognition of Children,” in Trygve Wyller and Usha Nayar, eds., *The Given Child: The Religions’ Contribution to Children’s Citizenship* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 183.

⁵⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9.

Representation as Responsiveness

How might this gifted perspective help us formulate a more child-inclusive concept of citizenship and in particular of political representation? The primary political obligation involves more than either a Habermasian participation in discourse or an agonistic struggle among differences for power. It involves more basically what could be called political responsiveness. I define political responsiveness as the use of power to account for the widest possible differences of lived experience.⁶⁰ A responsive system of political representation is one that realizes the diversity of constituents' political gifts. Power is a gift to representatives that should consequently respond to the gifts of those who give it. Both children and adults are politically represented to the extent that their differences are able to make a genuine political difference. Political representation is then less a matter of building consensus or fostering antagonism than of expanding responsiveness.

Such a notion of political responsiveness combines the elements of construction and deconstruction that are needed for the inclusion of children. Responding to constituents different gifts requires both constructing consensus and deconstructing power. These come together by reconstructing relations of interdependency in such a way that differences of experience make a transformative difference to the whole. As Richard Kearney has described it, ethical responsiveness involves an "openness to others" or "dialogue of self-and-other" that "wagers that it is still possible for us to struggle for a greater ... understanding of Others and, so doing, do

⁶⁰ For a fuller discussion of responsiveness, see John Wall, *Moral Creativity: Paul Ricoeur and the Poetics of Possibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 103-36.

them more justice.”⁶¹ A responsive self or society refuses to treat differences as utterly irreconcilable. At the same time, it refuses to subordinate differences to established power. Instead, it creates ever more diversified human relations. It strives for a genuine *e pluribus unum*: a whole continually reconstructed on the basis of difference.

Political responsiveness is what Emmanuel Levinas calls an ethical responsibility.⁶² The term responsibility was largely confined to the private realm of the home by political thought in modernity. For Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, responsibility is defined as the opposite of public rights. Public life is the sphere of rationally independent individuals competing for their own interests and ideals, while private life is the sphere of emotionally dependent relationships based on shared goods. Hence the famous and still influential distinction often made between rights and responsibilities. But this separation is based on a false Cartesian dichotomy: between agency and passivity, subjectivity and objectivity, independence and dependence. If what is responded to is one another’s gifts, then responsibility can take on the more complex ethical meaning of making differences an actual difference. It can include requiring the body politic to respond to the fullest possible diversity of its citizen’s lives.

Such a view better represents children in politics in two ways. First, children may not always have as much autonomy or power as adults, but they are every bit as different or gifted as anyone else. If the purpose of political representation is to respond to greatest possible diversity of experiences, then it includes responding to children as much as it does to adults. Getting to be

⁶¹ Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 81, 232.

⁶² Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingus (Boston: Kluwer, 1981 [French original 1974]).

represented in the political sphere should not depend ultimately on how well one can publicly argue for one's interests or how effectively one can struggle against others for power. It should depend on how differently one experiences the public realm. Both children and adults are affected by political decisions and have their own political interests. But they succeed in gaining political representation only insofar as their distinctive experiences and voices make a difference to the exercise of political power.

Second, on this view, children can be conceptualized as not only responded to but also themselves politically responsible. That is, children should be treated as full human beings capable of giving their own political responses to others. This responsibility is relational and interdependent. It is not simply to give voice to one's own individual claims. Rather, it is to join with others in the human project of creating a more diversely inclusive life in common. On the whole, children's relative inexperience in political life means that they are relatively less responsible for responding to the full diversity of otherness around them. By the same token, those with greater age, resources, and power have political responsibilities of relatively wider scopes. But these are not separate species of political obligation; they are points along a single continuum. Some children have greater political experience in some areas than adults. Child soldiers have much to teach about war, seriously ill children about health resource allocation, and school aged children about priorities in education. And often children can prove more capable than adults of responding to others' suffering or lack of rights. Political responsibility – and hence the ability to share in the exercise political power – should not be determined by chronological age but by distinctiveness of experience.

In the end, political representation is best understood as the effort to respond to human difference, including among many differences the multiple differences of age. Both children and adults should be able to have their different experiences make a political difference. It is not just relatively independent and supposedly “rational” individuals who bring to society political gifts. Rather, every human being ought to be able to bring their own unique gifts, based on their particular experiences, to the creation of the political whole.

The Future of Children’s Representation

What might such a concept of political representation as responsiveness to differences or gifts look like in actual practices for children? Let us take our three kinds of example from above – government agencies, parliaments, and voting – and see how they could function in more child-inclusive ways.

Government agencies such as task forces, committees, and commissions have long been means for those in power to respond more fully to those they represent, whether children or adults. Merely being voted into office does not suffice for understanding and acting upon the diverse experiences of constituents. The particular issue raised here by children, however, is the extent to which historically underrepresented groups are able to make such agencies a real political difference. As Hart’s ladder of representation shows, governments can use these kinds of agencies to make an appearance of representation that in actuality covers over marginalized experiences or even manipulates them for dominant groups’ ends.

The goal of such agencies should be to provide a fuller response to a particular group's differences of experience. They should be phenomenologies of the citizenry: attempts to expand political horizons to include previously neglected lived realities. They should therefore pay special attention to groups that have been historically disempowered. In the case of children, this has to go beyond merely giving children an opportunity to participate. Nor can it be reduced to simply including children in political struggle. It should instead strive to make sure that the experiences of children are given a politically transformative response. Children should, in other words, be given the ability to give new meaning to political life. This might include children holding leadership positions in government agencies at all phases of initiation, deliberation, and implementation. But the goal, as with any government commission, is to represent a wider array of voices and experiences in changed laws and policy. This means that the test of government agency success is not, ultimately, whether all have been heard, but the extent to which the diversity of relevant experiences have transformed political power. Do the Children's Commissioners in the UK, for example, connect with children's distinctive concerns in such a way as to make a responsive difference to UK policies?

The church has a contribution to make here by advocating for the political gifts of otherwise disenfranchised groups. It has rich ethical languages to draw upon to interpret these gifts into social meaning. Churches' political roles should not be limited to advocating for their own particular interests. In this case, they treat democracy as an agonistic struggle for power, with the result that, whether they mean to or not, they bolster the positions of the powerful against the meek and in particular of adults over children. The more profoundly Christian

alternative is to fight for a political world that is welcoming of humanity's diversity of God-given gifts. This means helping to expand the social imagination to respond to the particular experiences of those who tend to be forgotten, to welcome the inclusion of those who tend to be silenced. Religious leaders would have an entirely legitimate role within government agencies were they to use their complex ethical resources to expand understanding of the human condition.

What about children's parliaments? Children's parliaments are only truly representative to the degree that they change government policies in response to children's particular experiences. Some parliaments show that it is possible to hold children's elections without making any actual difference to children's or adults' lives. Others show that, given the chance, children are able truly to transform whole political structures and imaginations. An argument can be made that children's parliaments create a protected space for children's concerns in much the same way as so separate juvenile justice systems. That is, children's specific differences of experience can be attended to without imposition of adult expectations. It is also the case, however, that marginalized groups have not historically gained power through separate legislative channels. There are no separate women's parliaments, minorities' parliaments, poor parliaments, or the like. This is because holding a separate parliament from the general parliament runs of risk of becoming merely tokenistic, placing a distance – however wide or narrow – between the electoral process and the actual exercise of power. The question should then be asked whether children are better included through separate children's parliaments or through representation in general parliaments which so far have been dominated by adults.

Either way, there needs to be a fundamental rethinking of the purpose of parliaments (or, in the United States, congresses) in the first place. The parliamentary process should be understood as an effort to respond politically to genuine human diversity. Insofar as any group's differences do not make an actual difference to power, the representational process has failed. This breadth of difference may become more expansive if parliamentarians included children. But it also the case that one of the specific differences of much of childhood is the need to spend large amounts of time in education, which could then potentially be violated by embarking on a full-time political career. If representation means political responsiveness, then representatives do not have to be of the same age, gender, ethnicity, and so as those they represent. However, since it is unlikely that children's gifts would be made use of without children actually sharing in power, children's voices should be heard as directly and fully in parliaments as possible. The point of parliaments, whether for children or for adults, is to engage in the continual transformation of power so that it is more expansively responsive to human experience.

The church could again serve a useful function by participating in the fuller democratic process. On some level, religious groups have a responsibility to democratic responsibility itself. Christians in particular should promote the inclusion of the political gifts of all. In the United States today, churches tend to become involved politically by fighting for their own special interests. Contrast this with the political work of figures like South Africa's Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu or the current Tibetan Buddhist Dalai Lama, whose missions involve speaking up for the marginalized and the silenced. As Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the

state ... the guide and the critic of the state.”⁶³ Churches are well positioned to remind parliamentary legislators of their duty to respond to the disempowered, including perhaps especially the youngest citizens, whose political gifts are most easily ignored.

This brings us to the contentious example of children’s voting. While voting does not solve all political problems, it does serve in most societies as the most powerful way to make one’s own political difference. Few adults would be willing to give up the right to vote. The traditional reason for not extending suffrage to children, as we have seen, is that voting is supposed to be an act of rational autonomy, relying on the individual’s fully developed capacity for independent political thought. Even the two newer perspectives above could easily exclude children. A discourse model suggests that voting is part of contributing to intersubjective argumentation, which especially younger children could be said to lack the understanding and experience to participate in. An agonistic model might on the surface seem more child-friendly, since it affirms the importance of difference as such. But if voting is part of the struggle of diverse constituencies for power, it places a special disadvantage on those less experienced in political action.

The simplest way to make politics more responsive to children is for children to have the right, insofar as they choose to exercise it, to be represented through the vote. Only then could political representatives be said to represent the full range of citizens, and not just the two thirds who happen to be men and women. Elected representatives use their own judgment when they exercise power; they are not beholden to their constituents’ every desire. Their job is to represent

⁶³ Quoted from *Episcopal Life*, April 2003, in Kristin Herzog, *Children and Our Global Future: Theological and Social Challenges* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 137.

all the members of a particular district as responsively as possible. Without children having the right to vote, representatives are still responsible toward children – just as before women’s voting they were still responsible toward women. But they will generally exercise this responsibility less completely and justly if children are not able to hold them directly to account.

Representatives will be less likely to succeed in their jobs as representatives. My own view is that the right to vote should not have to be earned by reaching a specific age, but rather, like in the German model above, should be given automatically upon birth, but exercised as an extra vote by a parent until each particular child claims it for her- or himself.

If children truly are a gift to the world, to be welcomed in their fullness and complexity, the church should play just as important a role in children’s suffrage as they sometimes did in women’s and minorities’ suffrage. Christianity does not ultimately base moral life on rational independence, but rather on the interdependency of human beings as gifts from God to one another. These gifts ought to be welcomed in all dimensions of moral existence: including personal values, family relations, communities, cultures, and politics. It is finally not sufficient for churches to advocate for children in politics by interpreting children’s gifts into the political realm on their behalf. Religious organizations can also help children to make a political difference for themselves. This difference would seem, ultimately, to rely on children being able to participate in electing political representatives.

Conclusion

Whatever the practical solutions may be, children call for basic transformations in the very meaning and purposes of political representation. The reality of the past century around the globe is that children have gained greater direct political decision-making power in practice than they should have done according to political theory. Truly all-inclusive political representation requires us to imagine an interdependent political world that is responsive to one another's experiential differences. It suggests that political life exists, not just to protect liberties or to negotiate power, but to respond to each other as transforming gifts to the whole.

Does a broader theory of representation mean that children should gain the same rights as adults in all spheres of life? No. The aim is not to treat children as little adults but to account for children's particular differences. Rights to political representation are so fundamental to societies that they should be enjoyed as widely as possible. Other rights such as to marriage, driving, purchasing alcohol, and paid labor can rightly be denied to children, or many children, insofar as their exercise would fail to account for children's differences. The same could be said for rights that children should uniquely enjoy, such as to a free education, universal health care, and never being sentenced to life in prison. Different groups can legitimately hold different rights, so long as those differences are justified by differences of experience. But political representation is one of the most basic rights of humanity, since it is the right to give shape to one's society's construction of rights in the first place. It is therefore necessary to reimagine political representation in light of children if it is to be truly representative.