Neither Seen Nor Heard: The Absent Child in the Study of Religion[1]

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Only since the 1970s have gender analysis and critique played a central role in understanding and approaching what we designate as religion. Prior to this time, scholars

[1] I thank Ashley Geisendorfer for the opportunity to work together on related projects. As I was writing this article, she was doing her research and writing on the legal and religious status of children who die as a result of their parents' religious beliefs and practices for a Keck summer research project and, later, for her senior honors thesis. Her work enhanced mine greatly. Her senior thesis, titled "The Christian Science Child: Subjectivity and Social Marginalization," can be found in the DeWitt Wallace Library, Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota.

ignored women's social construction as other to men and their gender-specified practices; in short, their status as subjects worthy of study. Scholars otherwise viewed women only as extensions of the interests of men, essentially subordinated to them. This situation has changed so dramatically since the seventies that lack of consideration of gender difference where relevant to one's work is now considered questionable and fundamentally poor scholarship. Not so with children. Few scholars attend to the value, status, and role of children in religious contexts as bearers of an emerging religious agency,[2] theoretically relevant to the formation of adult identity and, equally importantly, to their own identities as children, in ways that may have something significant to say about the formation of religion (the general category), religions (the reified particular traditions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity) and the religious (a dimension of culture or an attribute of some kind of human behavior related to religion) as these interact with economics and politics.[3] Rather, scholars of theory and method in religion in general theorize children, if at all, almost exclusively as extensions of the interests of their parents and

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[2] Bonnie Miller-McLemore also uses the term "emerging agency" in a book written for laity, titled *In the Midst of Chaos* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

[3] There are works published on children and childhood as represented in specific traditions. See for example, Don S. Browning and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, eds., *Children and Childhood in American Religions* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2009), and Don S. Browning and Marcia J. Bunge, eds., *Children and Childhood in World Religions: Primary Sources and Texts* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2009). The former contains essays by scholars across American traditions that range from descriptive studies to cultural critique; the latter, as appears in the title, is a collection of primary texts from the so-called "axial" traditions. Neither theorizes at length the significance of children, childhood, or "the child" in relation to theory and method in the academic study of religion as a whole.

the State, as temporary but necessary way-stations to adulthood.[4] This omission has serious implications for the study of religion.

This lack of attention to children as religious agents, constructed as others to adults, and to the role of "the child"[5] in discursive religious practices, as in the earlier case of women, arises conceptually in part due to limited assumptions and models regarding human agency. In addition, lack of attention to the adult/child binary and the role it plays in the production and performance of the man/woman binary reflects an insufficient conception of gender difference, most especially in religious contexts. Lack of consideration in part arises historically in tandem with the European colonization of children in general, along with women in general, peasants, members of the urban underclasses, people of non-European or mixed descent, and animals—a socio-political process that has been ongoing at least since the sixteenth century. This neglect is presently grounded in economic shifts that shape the value that urban societies attach to children today.

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[4] The "Introduction" to *Children and Childhood in American Religions* addresses this issue at length and notes that whereas anthropologists do include children as religious subjects as a necessary part of their research, they tend to restrict their research to local populations rather than addressing the so-called major or axial traditions (9). I note further that making this very distinction between major, world, or axial traditions and local ones is itself beset with theoretical and methodological problems that have serious ethical implications for the study of religion (for example, a history of colonialism out of which the categories emerge, see David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

[5] Hereinafter I will not embed *child* in quotations. I do so here to emphasize that the concept while often used in the courts in respect to particular children is also used as reification as if there were a universal or universalizable child. "Child" and its cognates are variable terms, necessarily contextualized to grasp specific meaning, and may refer to all humans who have not reached puberty, to all humans ranging from birth to legal majority, to the offspring of parents no matter what the age, and metaphorically to the offspring of deities no matter what the age, and so on.

In regard to theory, then, children, childhood, and the child remain largely unexamined as concepts with histories that play ongoing discursive roles in cultural construction, concepts that reciprocate with adulthood, adults and the adult in a variety of contexts, especially religious ones, to reflect and produce power interests and arrangements. In short, children constitute, metaphorically speaking, a relatively unexplored terrain in social production. I propose to examine here both the conceptual limitations and some of the economic conditions that currently render children neither seen nor heard for the most part in the academic study of religion.

A word of caution is in order at the onset, however. While critique of theoretical assumptions has extraordinary ethical, legal, and theological implications, I will not seek to resolve ethical, legal, and theological dilemmas posed on the ground for how we as scholars and practitioners conceive of children.[6]

Instead I will focus on the theoretical assumptions and the conceptual underpinnings of the discipline as a whole. The study of religion, by virtue of ignoring the relevance of childhood and children in their right, misses important issues concerning the role of religion in the production of human identity and agency. To the extent that children are neglected as proper subjects, themselves agents of a sort and persons in their own right, the adults studied remain abstracted from their full historical context, not sufficiently entangled in contexts of power or economic exchange. Viewed as autonomous and often independent of cultural constructions of

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[6] For an example of theological work, see virtually all the publications of Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, but initially *Let The Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003). For an example of legal study, see Martha Minow, "Child Endangerment, Parental Sacrifice: A Reading of the Binding of Isaac," in Julia E. Hanigsberg and Sara Ruddick, eds., *Mother Troubles: Rethinking Contemporary Maternal Dilemmas* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

adulthood in relation to childhood, adults become simply individuals who use reason to contract relationships without regard to significant historical circumstances, including religious ones, that produced them (one of those unintended consequences of, among other things, a covenant model emerging from the Protestant Reformation). The very notion of what constitutes religious discipline and practice is thus flawed, and this deficit has implications for the nature and status of belief or attitude as central to religion. The concept religion once again defaults to worldview, reflecting as usual a Protestant Christian bias, albeit in secularized form.[7]

There are additional problems that result from the neglect of attention to children. However children are constructed in whatever context during whatever period of history, the adult/child distinction forms a binary of social, cultural, political, and economic significance, a binary that is heavily marked by religious phenomena: rituals that register birth, first menses, arrival as an adult; symbol systems that depend on narratives involving childhood; ethical teachings regarding the proper treatment of children taught in religious contexts, just to name a few examples. Lack of attention to this binary, especially from the starting point of the "child," again renders the academic study of religion incomplete and lacking in richness.

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[7] This is not a new insight. It goes back as far as Robert Bellah's positive view of this phenomena in "Civil Religion in America," *Daedelus*: *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96/1 (1967) 1-21. For a relatively more recent, more negative critique, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). See also Paula Cooey, *Willing the Good: Jesus, Dissent, and Desire* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

Conceptual Issues

A. Legal Models for Agency or Subjectivity

One way to capture the disappearance of children from view rather dramatically is to examine their ambiguous legal status in Western society, particularly in the United States, specifically with respect to cases involving a clash between religious practice and secular law (though this clash may also take the form of pitting free expression of religion against State establishment of religion). While court cases can hardly be said to cause religious scholars to fail to see children as religious agents or to consider the discursive role of children in the formation of religion and its formation of religious identity, court cases nevertheless reflect this absence rather startlingly. Cases directly involving children, cases that also specifically involve the practice of religion, serve as a limit example of how children become palpably absent except for their function as projection screens of the interests of their parents and the State.[8] The courts, like religious education in religious communities, the media, and the market, flag the making of religion, religions, and the religious "on the ground" so to speak, processes on which scholars often build with lack of sufficient awareness and critique. As such these cases reflect cultural attitudes that residually infest scholarly practices.

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[8] *Wisconsin* v. *Yoder* could be viewed as an exception though as I recall, no effort was made to ask the adolescent boy involved what his own understanding of the issues might be or his preferences. The case involved the removal of a fifteen-year-old Amish boy from mandatory public education on the grounds that it violated his (his parents actually) right to religious freedom; the Amish educate only to through roughly the eighth grade, and the values expressed in the public school system often conflict directly with Amish practices and belief. See *Wisconsin* v. *Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205, 243, 92 S.Ct. 1526, 32 L.Ed.2d 15 (1972) (Douglas, J., dissenting).

The subset on which I focus will be limited to cases prosecuting Christian Science parents whose children die as a result of the parents' rejection of conventional medical treatment. I have chosen this subset precisely because the cases pose serious legal and ethical dilemmas surrounding the significance of children in a religiously plural, variously secular society, because they represent the simultaneous centrality yet absence of children in the extreme and because they elicit extreme responses within the courtroom (as well as the wider culture). Let me repeat that it is not my aim here to address or resolve the highly complicated legal and ethical issues involved in such cases. I am a secularized Christian who supports State intervention under certain circumstances, notably the welfare of children placed at risk by the practices and other behavior of their parents.[9] I propose here only to look critically at the implications of this particular subset of such cases for the study of religion as an academic discipline.

Rather than proceed tortuously, case by case, I will simply summarize some of the issues involved that typify such cases and the analyses of legal scholars relevant to them. As tried, the cases have most often been argued in terms of parents' rights to free expression versus the State's right to act in place of the parent to intervene in behalf of the child where she is at risk. Missing throughout the dialogue of prosecution and defense is the possibility of the child as a religious

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[9] For my early views on the theological and ethical treatment of children in religion-state conflicts see *Family, Freedom, & Faith: Building Freedom Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996). I have since decided that I did not go far enough in affirming children, albeit always embedded in relations (just like the rest of us, I hasten to add) as persons apart from relations to adults, by which I mean as having worth apart from adult and State needs and interests, and I certainly did not go far enough in examining the power relations in which they are embedded as they play the quintessential other to adults.

agent with the right to be religious.[10] Because much of the controversy erupts over whose rights stand most in need of protection, a preliminary word on Constitutional rights is in order. The Constitution does not explicitly guarantee either rights for children or rights for parents to rear their children according to their specific religious or secular practices and worldviews. Quite the contrary. Two particular Supreme Court cases establish the State's right to override parental free exercise of religion by intervening on behalf of the children—*Davis* v. *Beason* (1890) and *Prince* v. *Massachusetts* (1944). The first case subordinates free exercise to criminal laws, and the second establishes the State's role as *parens patriae* with respect to children's health and employment. At the level of the individual state and specifically in regard to medical care, individual state law varies and within states is applied inconsistently from case to case.

Christian Science parents who opt for faith healing in lieu of conventional medicine whose children subsequently die have been particularly vulnerable to criminal charges ranging from child neglect to murder, as these laws come into conflict with state exemption laws. Parents often assume that religious exemption laws, that is, laws that exempt them from

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[10] For a summary of the most prominent cases, their decisions, and the full spectrum of the legal issues involved, see Janna C. Merrick, "Spiritual Healing, Sick Kids, and the Law: Inequities in the American Healthcare System," *American Journal of Law and Medicine*, Symposium: "Inequities in Healthcare" (2003) 269. Merrick argues for children's rights to conventional medical care on secular grounds, in short, for a child's right to be secular irrespective of a parent's religious identity. She does not argue for the child's right to be religious within the traditions of her parents. For an understanding of the issues involved from a Christian Science perspective, one that basically defends parents rights to raise there children according to there religious traditions, see Stephen Gottschalk, "Spiritual Healing on Trial: A Christian Scientist Reports," *Christian Century* (June 22-29, 1988) 602. **F**or a secularist attempt to address constructively the dilemmas involved from an ostensibly child-centered perspective, again where the child becomes only a religiously neutral child, see Ira C. Lupu**,** *University of Chicago Law Review*, 61:4 (Autumn 1994) 1317-1373.

prosecution for refusing conventional medical care, protect them. For the parents criminal charges of neglect, abuse, manslaughter, or second-degree murder are incomprehensible. Furthermore, their religious identities, if central and primary in their lives, give them no option except to provide faith healing if they are to be true to their own traditions. To do otherwise is go against the fundamental practices and tenets of their tradition in ways that put both their own eternal futures and those of their children at risk. From a Christian Science perspective, it is also to go against the best interests of their children, here understood by implication in terms of extension of their parents' religious identities.

Apparent contradiction between federal judicial practice and state law, as well as ambiguity surrounding state application, only reinforces confusion. The federal Supreme Court has tended to refuse to review cases, once state supreme courts determine them. By and large state supreme courts, as courts that hear appeals of the initial cases, avoid addressing them as conflicts within First Amendment or between the exercise of religious expression and the State as the precedents *Davis* v. *Beason* and *Prince* v. *Massachusetts* establish. The cases themselves are initially often defended on grounds of First Amendment free expression, while they are likewise prosecuted on grounds of State establishment—an argument in which the child who is the occasion for the trial has no role. Rather the focus is basically over the status of the religious rights of the adults being prosecuted as opposed by the religious rights of the rest of the adult population. The state supreme courts, usually the courts of last appeal, tend to focus on the rights of the parents to due process, thus avoiding ruling on the religious Constitutional issues altogether.

As one judge cautions in an appeal hearing on *Commonwealth* v. *David C. Twitchell*, "If there is a new trial, the judge should exercise great care that the religious beliefs of the Twitchells and other Christian Scientists are not implicitly or explicitly placed on trial. If the prosecution seeks to cross-examine a witness about church doctrine or his or her religious beliefs, on objection the judge should consider carefully the relevance of the evidence sought in relation to any prejudice that may result." N.17 (S-6115) This particular text is noteworthy not only for its avoidance of dealing with religious expression and establishment as such, but also for essentializing religion as primarily belief, a default assumption made by U.S. courts since the first religion case, *Reynolds* v. *the United States*, was tried in 1878. (Assumptions that separate practice and belief would not only be unthinkable to Christian Scientists, but to most non-secularized religious people around the world.) Regardless of judicial attempts to avoid bias in trying religious cases, troubling assumptions about religion (troubling to scholars at least) permeate judges' opinions and decisions.

Although issues of Due Process and the Fourteenth Amendment consume the appeals process, projections of both the parents' interests and the State's interests not surprisingly dominate initial court proceedings. Parents initially project their religious interests onto their children in the form of arguing for their parental rights to bring up their children according to their own traditions. From the parents' perspective, to conceive of their children as outside their own religious communities of discipline and practice is unthinkable.

State law, hence the State's interests, particularly at the more local level is ambiguous. Individual state law often comes into conflict internally or with federal legislation on faith

healing. Forty-four states presently exempt Christian Science parents from criminal charges for employing faith healing rather than conventional medicine, even as other legislation stipulates that parental refusal to seek medical care for any child that results in her death constitutes everything from neglect to manslaughter. Nevertheless, in light of Due Process and the Fourteenth Amendment, what began as a conflict over who has the right to determine the best interests of a child leads easily to a conflict over proper procedure in the treatment of the adults. An appeal easily shifts grounds to an argument over the parents' constitutional rights in regard to their prosecution.

The projection of the parents' interests onto the child and the ambiguity of state law notwithstanding, where the State does act in place of the parent on behalf of the child, the discourse constructs the child as the projection of the interests of the State. The court assumes that its secularity is value neutral (debatable at the very least). From this perspective the child becomes a morally and religiously neutral non-adult, absent not only because of death, but also because it is incapable of acting in its own behalf under any circumstances.[11] This assumption of neutrality has as its parallel an attribution of moral and religious innocence by some social scientists that shows up not only in assumptions underlying social scientific research on children and child rearing, but also in the testimony of experts when adults are tried for neglect or abuse and when children are tried for various criminal offenses. Neutrality or innocence denies the

[11] This view of children ironically conflicts with the prosecution of minors as adults for murder.

child agency, however emergent or dependent it may be.[12] In such cases the State, by virtue of its necessary secularity, cannot possibly consider the child as already marked by a religious identity and possessing, however incipiently, a religious agency. Rather the child's neutrality is actually its imposed secularity, its value that of a potential adult who may one day choose religiosity, largely understood as holding to a belief, a set of beliefs, or a worldview; for the moment the child can be considered only in terms of preserving its materiality, often of secondary importance to its religious community. That the notion of choosing a religion and the priority of material well-being belong to the disciplines, practices, and worldviews of secularism as informed by Protestantism, itself a construction rather than "natural," is never once considered by jurists, by the prosecution, by testifying experts, or by those legal and religious scholars who

[12] In the 1980s day care workers were convicted of child abuse in North Carolina and California based on children's testimony, cases later overturned on appeal. The issue of recovering childhood memories of abuse, whether from those who are still children or from adults, is a complicated, highly controversial one. For centuries children (like women) were excluded or discredited as witnesses in court. Once the testimony of children was actually admitted as valid in the courts on this country—a relatively recent phenomenon—the courts, particularly the prosecution, found it incomprehensible that they, with social workers, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, and parents, might actually be fabricating children's memories when eliciting testimony, or that children might on occasion not know what adults would consider to be the truth, or that children might even fabricate to garner adult approval or due to adult intimidation (albeit unintended). The courts went from centuries of discrediting children's testimony altogether to accepting it without question, no matter how outrageous the circumstances under which it was gained might have been, based on assumptions of childhood "natural" innocence. These cases were heavily entangled in ascribed religious behavior, for example, Satanism and Witchcraft. Empirical studies to date validate the existence of repressed memory and its recoverability (retrieval and reconstruction), as well as the fabrication of memory of abuse. The difference between recovery and fabrication depends heavily, not surprisingly, on the skill of the therapists and other experts (including prosecuting attorneys) involved and the procedures followed. For a recent review of the literature (one that is actually oriented to lay people, as well as extremely thorough and comprehensive from a scholarly perspective) go to Jim Hopper, "Recovered Memories of Sexual Abuse: Scientific Research and Scholarly Resources" at http://www.jimhopper.com/memory/, accessed February 5, 2010.

write on such issues in support of the State's interests. In the case of faith healing, of course, it is precisely materiality that poses the problem; religious identity is often more a birthright or a matter of compulsion rather than choice. What must be preserved at all costs is the well being of the child's ascribed spirituality, taken for granted as in the child's best interest because it is taken for granted to be in the parents' or religious community's best interest.

Just as it is in the parents' best interest to sustain religious identity by projecting it onto the child, indeed it is unthinkable to do otherwise, it is in the State's best interest to discipline its citizens from childhood to view themselves as individuals whose loyalty to the State is not only primary, but given by birth. Patriotism of a sort is naturalized, while religion is one choice among many made by adults, a choice often defended as having been made on rational grounds, rationality denied children until the age of majority. Religion as choice further ironically reflects a distinctively Christian and capitalist history. Rooted in the history of Anabaptism, religion as choice made by adults migrates to the more mainstream denominations like the Southern Baptists, the largest denomination in the country. Religion as a matter of choice ultimately reflects both the commodification of religion and its rationalistic contractual quality as well, unintended but real consequences of religious history. It is a choice granted in a capitalist society dominated by a market place of ideas in respect to loyalties.

More to the point, however, religious identity with the agency it entails, is a choice that is taken seriously by the courts only when made by an adult, viewed as an autonomous rational

being, whose intentionality, subjected to rationality, is potentially universalizable.[13] Any ascription of a religious agency emerging from a context of dependency is altogether missing.[14] Any challenge to the notion that religious identity itself is reducible merely to choice goes unexamined. By the time such issues reach the courts the child in question, now dead, can no longer speak. Any siblings, however, now taken under the court's care, are denied voice as well. While such an ascription of agency, and with it any recognition this ascription entails that the category religious bears some resemblance to ethnicity in regard to the lack of choice involved, might make court cases even more complicated, never mind render the religion-secular binary the fiction that it is. It would also grant children, even the dead child, voice.[15] It would disrupt the parent-child binary or at least reformulate it as well. This disruption has important

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[13] This model is what I would call a Kantian model. Whether respect to the moral law or religion, Kant argued for an autonomous human agent, rational, free to choose rightly or wrongly (therefore legally or illegally), whose actions were ideally universalizable. I find this model to be male and Eurocentric—a human whose alleged universality masks a highly specific particularity. The model, nevertheless, continues to pervade legislatures, the court system (though courts do vary), and various other forms of absolutism. Interestingly enough, while Kant insisted on universalizing one's moral maxims and argued for a religion based on reason alone, he was humble in regard to what the self could know about itself (never itself in its totality) and quite clear that what the self could know included first and foremost that its will was conflicted over good and evil. In this respect he differs from many of his later appropriators. See *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Abbott Thomas Kingsmill (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002) and *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene & Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: TorchBooks, 1960).

[14] As noted before, both Geisendorfer and Miller-McLemore also uses this term. It is worth considering that we are always emerging agents in the sense of mutual interdependence and dependence on forces over which we have no control and that agency can be non-productive in a capitalist, characteristic of children, the elderly, and those who are in some sends "disabled."

[15] "Voice" is, of course, necessarily relative to age. The Twitchell child was two years old. Other children who have died were older, however, and had siblings as well. See *Commonwealth of Massachusetts* v. *David R. Twitchell*, 416 Mass. 114, 617 N.E. 2d 609 (1993).

implications for the academic study of religion. For example, to what extent do scholars of religion approach religious phenomena exclusively with reference to adults? What is ignored or missed about religious phenomena as a consequence? What role does the adult/child binary play in the production and performance of religion? How does the State's claim to the right to assume the role of *parens patriae* reinforce not only secularist authority over what constitutes religion, but contribute to the quasi-religious performances that authorize and maintain statism and nationalism?

One partial solution to the dilemmas raised by the absence of children in these court cases might be to conceptualize a richer view of agency that would acknowledge some degree of voice for children in the decision-making processes as the courts struggle to do justice to minority religious practices in this country. To think of agency as emerging over time (and, by the way, possibly diminishing as well), to consider it as open-ended and to some degree always located in dependencies of one kind or another—on economic circumstances, environmental contingencies, emotional relations, and so forth—shifts the model for both childhood and adult hood entirely and could render agency non-universalizable, given the variability of all the contingencies involved in agency's manifestation at any given point. Obviously age would be one such contingency. Certainly most two-year-olds are more dependent and less able to negotiate the other contingencies of their existence than most fifteen-year-olds. One is tempted then to conceptualize religious agency developmentally in terms of stages, but once again, conceptual problems emerge.

B. Developmental Models

In Jonathan Edwards' "A Faithful Narrative," Edwards records the development, so to speak, of one of his parishioners, little Phebe, a four-year-old whom he considers to be of exceptional piety. Edwards writes:

> About the latter end of April, or the beginning of May, 1735, [Phebe] was greatly affected by the talk of her brother, who had been hopefully converted a little before, at about eleven years of age, and then seriously talked to her about the great things of religion. Her parents did not know of it at the time, and were not wont, in the counsels they gave their children, particularly to direct themselves to her, by reason of her being so young, and as they supposed her not capable of understanding: but after her brother had talked to her, they observed her very earnestly to listen to the advice they gave the other children; and she was observed very constantly to retire several times a day, as was concluded for secret prayer; and grew more and more engaged in religion, and was more frequent in her closet; till at last she was wont to visit it five or six times a day: and was so engaged in it that nothing would at any time divert her from her stated closet exercises. Her mother observed and watched her, when such things occurred, as she thought most likely to divert her, either by putting it out of her thoughts, or otherwise engaging her inclinations, but could never observe her to fail. She mentioned some very remarkable instances.[16]

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[16] Jonathan Edwards, ed. C.C. Goen, "A Faithful Narrative," *The Great Awakening* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 199-205.

Edwards goes on to recount second-hand some of the "remarkable instances." These include, among others, Phebe's pressing concern with her salvation from sin, her acute sense of her own sinfulness, ultimately relieved by her experience of God's mercy and love, her future beyond her death, and her heightened sensitivity to the material needs of others (what Edwards, citing from 1 John 3:17, construes as "her uncommon degree of the spirit of charity," her exemplification of "bowels of compassion to the poor"). This last feature, namely Phebe's heightened sensitivity to poverty, manifests itself in her response when a poor neighbor's only cow is killed, rendering his family destitute. What one might describe as the deepening of her self-awareness and that of others is linked throughout the narrative to fairly stringent, self-imposed disciplines of prayer, bible study, and recitation of the catechism.

While one could and should read such texts critically in regard to the fact that this one is a parental account filtered through Edwards' own theological agenda, as shaped by and shaping the Great Awakening, I propose to come at it from a different angle. I think the case of little Phebe sheds critical light on the limitations of current appropriations of developmental psychology as a model for understanding religious development from childhood to maturity, the most prominent, influential, and widely received example of which is the work on faith development initiated by James Fowler and later expanded by others.[17]

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[17] There are developmental models other than Fowler's; however, Fowler's focuses specifically on religious development, though he rejects the term religion, and his has exerted the most influence on developmental psychology in the context of religion. For more recent examples of critiques of his model or paradigm, see Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Whither Children? Childhood in Religious Education," *The Journal of Religion* 86:3 (2006) 641-646; as well as *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 11:3 (2001) in its entirety but especially Heinz Stribe, "The Symposium on Faith Development Theory and the Modern Paradigm," 141-142 and John McDargh "Faith Development Theory and the Postmodern Problem of Foundations," 185-199.

Fowler developed his model in the late 1970s and early 1980s based on the work of Jean Piaget and the moral development theorist Lawrence Kohlberg. [18] Fowler eschews the word *religion*, preferring *faith*, which he views as a universal phenomenon; his point is to privilege faith, understood in terms of attitude and lived commitment, over institutional affiliation. From Fowler's perspective faith develops as a relative progression of six stages, beginning with early childhood and ideally, though rarely, culminating in a final stage characterized by the ability to universalize, that is, to be all inclusive. The progression from stage to stage is precipitated either by cognitive and affective development (the early stages) or by existential crises (the later stages). He categorizes the stages as intuitive-projective, mythic-literal, synthetic-conventional, individuative-reflective, conjunctive, and universalizing faith. He argues that most adults rest at the third stage, the synthetic-conventional, as characterized by orientation to external authorities and approval, as a conformist stage. At this stage late adolescents and adults have found a stable narrative that provides both identity and values. Adults remain in this stage unless jolted, usually in middle age, by existential crises that force them to question their governing ideologies and authorities. While he does consider child development in this context, he conceives children always in relation to progress toward adulthood as indicated in the titles of later work in this area, "Strength for the Journey: Early Childhood Development in Selfhood and Faith" and *Becoming an Adult, Becoming Christian*.[19] While maturation processes are an appropriate object

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[18] See James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

[19] The article is in *Faith Development in Early Childhood*, ed. Doris A. Blazer (Kansas City, Mo: Sheed and Ward, 1989), 1-36; and reprinted in *Becoming an Adult, Becoming Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

of study, focus on childhood and children as areas of study in their own right apart from any other consideration is noticeably lacking.

Fowler's schema, in my opinion, goes a long way in describing what may actually take place in the development of faith from childhood to adulthood for those who grow up in or convert to Protestant Christianity in the modern era or in Protestant-dominated cultures, though even in this context there are serious limitations to Fowler's formulations. Fowler claims, however, to be describing human interior development beyond this context in regard to tradition and time. He avers that faith, "is the most fundamental category in the human quest for relation to transcendence" (14), thus indicating no awareness of the historical specificity of the very categories faith and transcendence. His descriptions depend rather on universalizing a category, faith, that is quite specific not only in its origin, but in its present manifestations.[20] Overall theoretical implications notwithstanding, by making this distinction, Fowler sought wider, more ecumenical dialogue, a goal that he to some extent achieved.[21]

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[20] Indeed, to posit faith against religion reflects a theological legacy that began with Karl Barth. Though he acknowledged that human construction of religion assumed by anthropologists and sociologists, Barth sought to protect and privilege particularly Christian views of revelation and grace by placing them outside the purview of religion, so as to avoid the charge of human construction. His point was to distinguish living within a tradition as an adherent from the study of religious traditions. Fowler makes the same formal distinction, via H. Richard Niebuhr and universalizes what is historically a particularity of Christian traditions, namely, faith as a general human characteristic spirituality. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, vol. 1/2, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 280-361.

[21] H. Richard Niebuhr, as did Paul Tillich, appropriates the faith-religion distinction for different reasons, as a way to expand theological discussion into normally non-theological arenas by talking about scientific faith, secular faith, nationalism, and other forms of faith, belief, and practice beyond but including those found within religious traditions. Niebuhr also distinguished between faith (attitudinal) and belief (cognitive). Fowler was especially influenced by Niebuhr; see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).

In Fowler's case, residually Christian categories of faith and transcendence, as he uses them, depend on two troubling assumptions. He assumes the primacy of underlying attitude over ritual or any other form of religious discipline, and he considers psychological phenomena (the cognitive and affective) as sufficient to ascribing what he construes as spiritual development in isolation from any external impingement of economic, political, or, God forbid, religious forces. Furthermore, the category of universality, his ultimate ideal, while not specific to Protestant Christianity, is, as has been noted above, peculiarly modern and Western in some respects, and peculiar to elite forms of secular non-religious traditions in others. Unlike more traditional cultures, including Christian ones, or even the contemporary Protestant forms of situation ethics of a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, little if any room is left to negotiate with respect to, say, violence as a faithfully appropriate resistance to violence or violence as a faithful form of self-sacrifice, in relation to context; furthermore, there is no room for exceptions. Of universalizing faith, that is, the final stage of development, he writes:

> Persons described by stage six typically exhibit qualities that shake our usual criteria of normalcy. Their heedlessness to self-preservation and the vividness of their taste and feel for transcendent moral and religious actuality give their actions and words an extraordinary and often unpredictable quality. In their devotion to universalizing compassion they may offend our parochial perceptions of justice. In their penetration through the obsession with survival, security, and significance they threaten our measured standards of righteousness and goodness and prudence. Their enlarged visions of universal community disclose the partialness

> of our tribes and pseudo-species. And their leadership initiatives, often involving strategies of nonviolent suffering and ultimate respect for being, constitute affronts to our usual notions of relevance (200).

There is little critical awareness in his own construal here that the claim to universality might itself mask highly particular values (non-violent self-sacrifice as opposed to self-preservation associated with violence by implication; the Schleiermachian sense and taste for the transcendent without Schleiermacher's appreciation for its embeddedness in the finite; universal compassion in the abstract as opposed to local justice; risk as opposed to conventionality; inclusivity as opposed to tribalness; non-violent suffering as opposed "our usual notions of relevance"). His developmental schema do not recognize that these binaries, themselves socially constructed in particular historical contexts, pose oversimplified dilemmas and deployments of power (for examples, the use of a rhetoric of non-violence to avoid perhaps much-needed revolution or the gendered quality of self-sacrifice that keeps masculinized political and economic systems in place). This lack of self-critique reflects the very nature and practice of his appropriation of developmental psychology, which does not acknowledge sufficiently, if at all, the dependence of human development on and its entanglement in systems of power, nor does he acknowledge its own involvement as a discipline emerging out of such systems. Last but not least, while children are necessarily taken into account, Fowler gives no indication of the historically and economically variable and constructed nature of childhood, nor any awareness of his own political role in constructing childhood as a necessary "other" to the performance of healthy adulthood in contexts of faith. Children are, as in the view of the courts, way stations to

adulthood, rather than persons in some sense in their own right. Beyond observing their role in the progression to adulthood, there is little to be learned from them directly beyond the extent to which they are negotiating maturation.

Little Phebe and the reactions she elicits from adults stand in critical relation to such formulations. The narrative is rich in challenges, but I will focus only on two major ones—the significance of discipline in the production of religious phenomena and the importance of listening to children as subjects or agents possessing serious insight of benefit to scholars and other adults.

Edwards offers his narrative of Phebe's conversion as evidence of an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, his understanding of what came to be known as the Great Awakening and, from his perspective, evidence that the second coming of Christ would take place in the relatively near future, most likely in New England. Not unlike the court representatives and the Christian Science Parents who would follow him, Edwards certainly reflects his own theological agenda, projected as a common good, a common good shared to a certain extent with Fowler in that both see it in highly Christian terms, though Edwards does not mask them as universal. From Edwards' perspective, Phebe's conversion is likely genuine because her behavior exemplifies signs of truly religious affections and virtues, the greatest of which is the practice of Christian charity.[22] Allowing for the facts that the narrative includes second hand material from the parents and Edwards and that it indicates his own agenda, the narrative nevertheless challenges Fowler's understanding of religious development and tells us something about the significance of looking

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[22] Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1969); and *The Nature of True Virtue* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960).

to children as relative subjects and as meaningful objects of study. The adult responses to Phebe likewise reveal something about the adult/child binary and its relation to religious phenomena.

First, in regard to discipline, the transitions from stage to stage in Fowler's schema depend heavily upon what psychologists of child development at the time of his original research think children are cognitively capable of in terms of imaginative and conceptual function and so forth or, in later years, upon existential crisis.[23] Fowler most importantly does not take as central to his schema the religious habituation or discipline fostered within the family, precisely because he has rejected material religious ties in favor of an abstracted faith. He will later look more specifically as becoming Christian in relation to his developmental theory.)[24] Certainly Phebe is no doubt precocious. Both her parents and Edwards agree on this matter. What Edwards records but does not explore is the discipline of prayer (several times daily), catechism (recited every night at bed time), and regular Bible study that Phebe undertakes, her ritual behavior as she secludes herself in her closet for secret prayer, ultimately as much as six times a day, and the reinforcement, some might say the production, of a specifically evangelical value for experiences of conversion that she receives through her discussions with her brother, other siblings, her parents, and Edwards himself. Edwards reports that she initially weeps that she cannot find God, then persists in praying until she, with the aid of Christ, finds God. Her keen sense of her own sin and the bliss and relief she feels from experiencing grace are formulaic; they are the stuff of which classic conversions are made because everything in her environment is focused on producing such experiences, including Edwards' construal as narrative. While some might

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[23] Miller-McLemore also points this out in "Whither the Child?"

[24] See *Becoming and Adult, Becoming Christian.*

understand this as brainwashing, it is no more so than any other systems of discipline, habituation, and practice, whether found in the public schools, the Boy Scouts, or the military. That discipline itself, central to the transmission of tradition and to the production of faith and its transitions, including in some cases even the crises, lies outside Fowler's discussion.

Second, the disciplined behavior Phebe undergoes, particularly her habits of prayer and recitation of the catechism, precipitates what might be called an existential crisis, as much a crisis for Phebe's parents as for Phebe herself. Her parents are initially reluctant to take Phebe's piety seriously; her mother expresses concern about her behavior. At first her mother tries to distract her from her prayer: "Her mother observed her and watched her when such things occurred, as she thought most likely to divert her, either putting it [prayer] out of her thoughts, or otherwise engaging her inclinations; but never could observe her [Phebe] to fail" (199-200). Her mother reports an instance of Phebe's crying when she cannot find God, fearing that she is doomed to eternal life in Hell, an episode that ceased as Phebe experienced what she perceived as pleasure in God, articulated specifically in the language of the catechism, pleasure that leads to her finding God to her own satisfaction. Her elder siblings note the change in her demeanor and attitude as well. In short, her parents and siblings view Phebe as an exceptional child and are not quite sure what to do with her. The tone and structure of the narrative imply that her mother or both parents called in Edwards, their pastor, to determine the validity of Phebe's behavior and the transformation it appeared to evoke. Functionally speaking, turning to the pastor as authoritative in such matters would parallel putting the whole family in psychotherapy today, though for different ends with different results in respect to religion. To all the adults involved

her actions do not seem normal for a child her age. As Edwards observes, "When she is in a place of worship, she is very far from spending her time there as children her age are wont to do, but appears with an attention that is extraordinary for such a child" (202).

Toward the end of the narrative Edwards recounts Phebe's response to the killing of the poor neighbor's cow. It runs accordingly:

> She has discovered an uncommon degree of a spirit of charity; particularly on the following occasion. A poor man that lives in the woods had lately lost a cow that his family much depended on, and being at the house, he was relating his misfortune, and telling of the straits and difficulties they were reduced to by it. She took much notice of it, and it wrought exceedingly on her compassion; and after she had attentively heard him a while, she went away to her father who was in the shop, and entreated him to give the man a cow: and told him that the poor man *had no cow!* That the hunter or something else *had killed his cow!* and entreated him to give him one of theirs. Her father told her that they could not spare one. Then she entreated him to let him and his family come and live at his house; and had much more talk of the same nature…. (204-5, emphasis Edwards).

Her father's response to Phebe's continued entreaty goes unrecorded. Nevertheless, the narrative implies that he takes her seriously and accords her respect by his willingness to engage in "much more talk of the same nature" (205).

A striking feature of the narrative as a whole and of this section in particular is how much everyone involved pays attention to one another, including and most especially to the children.

This is no less true of Phebe attentiveness to the poor man's tale of woe than for the adults' attentiveness to Phebe (and, by the way to her siblings as well). Phebe's father takes her seriously even in his rejection of her proposal. (He responds that they do not have a cow to spare, not that what she has proposed is absurd and childish.) Edwards himself takes Phebe's concern as the *pièce de resistance* legitimating her transformation. To him it is the crowning sign that she has likely experienced saving grace, an outpouring of the Spirit (though strictly speaking, only God could know for sure from Edwards' perspective). The discipline appears to have worked. Theological considerations notwithstanding, Edwards listens to her, and not simply because she is precocious nor because her experience, as narrated by her parents or directly observed by him, evidences the coming Kingdom. From the text it is clear that Edwards has developed his own habits of being, chief among them, paying attention, for he takes quite seriously that Phebe's eleven-year-old brother may likewise have experienced salvation. What happens with and to children counts as much as in the realm of religious possibility as what happens with and to adults. That Phebe is precocious does not militate against attributing religious agency to her, as if she were an adult. Edwards' authority as pastor validates Phebe's behavior for her parents as well. Phebe has transcended the adult/child binary at least with respect to religion, not because she meets standards for adult behavior, standards set by adults, but because she, as a child, bears the fruits (to use the words of the apostle James, Edwards, and later William James) of one possessed by and possessing a particular quality of love cultivated, by the disciplines of her tradition. Indeed she excels in this domain.

The cow of a poor man has been killed. Phebe sees quite clearly that this harbors severe misfortune for the man and his family. As a child in a rural environment she undergoes a religious regime, partly self-imposed and ultimately culturally supported, a regime meant to cultivate certain affections that underpin and reflect particular ethical virtues and specific modes of experience and action, She has been disciplined in the broader sense of the term discipline to see and respond to the death of the cow the way she does. As a child in a rural environment who may become an economic resource at a relatively early age, she may also merit being taken more seriously by the adults surrounding her than the contemporary child of the suburban or ex-urban environment who will possibly remain a drain on economic resources through his twenties. Fowler's schema makes no allowances for such differences in context, period of history, or socio-economic measure of worth. Nor does Fowler indicate that adults might learn from children as subjects, should adults take children as subjects in their own right. In this respect Fowler does not differ from either the courts or the Christian Science parents, or for that matter, scholars who pose dilemmas exclusively in term of secularist right versus religious wrong.

Conclusion

In certain respects, it is finally all about the various responses to the killed cow and the possibility of children's religiously cultivated, keen sense of the significance of material loss. Phebe got what we as scholars (and likely parents) still often miss.[25]

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[25] As far as I know, no Edwards scholar or psychologist of religious development of religion or faith development has registered what it means for the poor man's family that his cow was killed, but Phebe did, as did Edwards by including it in the narrative.

Whatever the resolution to the ethical dilemma posed by the killed cow, the episode points to the economic assumptions and practices and their effects underlying models of subjectivity, whether exclusively adult or developmental and the role played by religious disciplines in producing and sustaining religious people according to such models.[26] Similarly with the Christian Science Court cases in regard to political and secularism assumptions definitive of secularism. In the first case, however, Phebe is both seen and heard, whereas in the second instance, children are ultimately neither seen nor heard beyond the projected interests of their parents and the State. A legal model precludes children, child bearing, child rearing, and any other child related concerns altogether from the calculus of religious subject (or for that matter, the moral subject) in all sense of the word subject. Its universality masks a masculinization that recalls early Gnostic models of the spiritual, sexually neutral androgyne, ironically the man that a women must become to achieve salvation, secular as well as religious.[27]

Fowler's developmental model takes age into consideration; nevertheless, like his teleology is geared to produce an ironic, masculinized sexuality masked by universalistic asexuality, defined as all-inclusiveness. Childhood and by implication womanhood insofar as women are defined by embeddedness in the particular are mere stopping points along the way. Though time is of the essence (we all need to seek and preferably reach stage six before we die, if possible), the model strangely neglects the quotidian and ritualized behaviors central to the

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[26] For an example of family relations and economics with attention to the implications for how children are regarded see Miller-McLemore, "Children, Chores, and Vocation: A Social and Theological Lacuna," in *The Vocation of the Child*, ed. Patrick McKinley Brennan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

[27] See, for example, *Gospel of Thomas* 114 in *The Nag Hammadi Library: Revised Edition*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 138.

disciplines that produce the affective, cognitive, and ethical features of character—the body, so to speak, the woman's work that is never done. The point is to produce the (Eurocentric male) adult, not to attend to the child or her mother.[28]

Finally both models fail to address the significance of history and the economic changes that play so central a role in producing this adult—from hunter-gatherer societies through agrarian ones to industrial ones to today's electronic age. Phebe, taken as an informant to be listened to, gets it. Her "bowels of compassion," Edwards' excellent choice of biblical metaphor, depend upon the interaction of religious discipline and the agrarian economy that inform Phebe's experience, in certain respects a more significant insight into the nature of religious phenomena than whether she might be a precocious stage three by Fowler's calculus.

We have yet to ask what kinds of socio-economic needs and technologies produce the adult/child binary. What role does religion play in the construction of this binary? How might

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[28] There is a further irony in Fowler's work. According to modern male-centered cultures mothers ideally love their children unconditionally at great self-sacrifice; they furthermore love indiscriminately their several children without respect to preferences or differences among them. This kind of love, once it is extended universally, vaguely resembles the ultimate stage of development for Fowler with one major exception, namely, that for Fowler it is abstracted from the material condition of being a parent. By contrast, ethical love, as I understand it, is grounded in its historical origins and ultimate practices in actual material conditions. It does not require that I love as a parent would love (though it may be the basic underlying condition for parental love). Nor does it necessitate by definition excluding myself from the "each and all" (quite the contrary if you genuinely love your neighbor as yourself). Rather, in my opinion ethical love requires indiscriminate respect (that is, not respect dependent on merit) in the form of willing the good for persons, understood as by definition in conceptual and material relations, whether or not they are specifically in relation to or with me. In other words, the final stage of faith development, as portrayed by Fowler, presupposes an ironically hierarchical arrangement between the one who achieves it and the others, both specific others and in the abstract, who constitute the all-included: the lover of all is at once abased before for all others in regard to self-sacrifice and at the same time superior in regard to his (usually) stage of development.

religious behavior undermine the binary historically and in the present? In different cultures according to different traditions? Within the same culture due to differing material circumstances? Beyond the disappearance of children's voice, what does it mean for the State to preempt religious authority in its exercise of this role (as exemplified by the Christian Science cases)? For example, how does the category "child," placed in opposition to the category "adult," sustain male defined power represented by masculinized structures by naturalizing "mother" and universalizing motherhood as the centrally defining character of "woman"? Most significantly, neither the legal model nor the developmental model addresses the issue of power implied in the register "adult" in relation to "child." Phebe belongs to a group called children or the "child," a group on which the category and group known as "adult" interactively depend. Materially speaking, adults may likewise depend on children either actually due to economic and multi-cultural circumstances, or emotionally for any number of possible reasons. This adult/ child binary at the very least conceptually plays a major role in the construction of gender difference, a role heavily determined by religious life and practice. It will continue to play this role so long as gender difference is constructed around actual and potential motherhood, that is, so long as woman and mother remain interchangeable terms imbricated in male centered and male dominated religious, political, economic, and social institutions and practices. By this logic, logic of sexual oppression, *there can be no woman without actual or potential child as her defining characteristic and thus no man to dominate her.*

In many respects we already know this, but we have yet to examine what this means by paying serious attention to children, by looking from what is currently the bottom up. We will

not look from this direction so long as we assume an adult model as the default model of study or that children are at best way stations to adulthood. I propose that the ascription of personhood to children, where agency is understood as emergent and embedded in power-laden dependencies and material contingencies, might allow us to listen to what children have to say as something from which we as scholars might learn. Recognizing that the ascription of personhood is itself a Western construction, I suggest that that it nevertheless garners a richer understanding of past traditions and present religious phenomena. Self-critical awareness that such an ascription is indeed a construction, one that is not one in favor in the culture at present, opens the scholar to the discursive practices surrounding children and secondarily the systems of power in which these practices are entangled in the production of adults and more specifically religious adults. Within this framework, we as scholars may raise questions as yet to be imagined.