Theologies of Childhood and the Children of War

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Over the past decade, theologies of children and childhood have expanded dramatically,

with any number of new books, conferences, and networks forming to shape and advance the

topic.[1] The literature is impressive both in terms of its growth and its substance. Thoughtful

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[1] The literature in the area is growing rapidly and the following list hardly exhausts it but hopefully is representative. For heuristic reasons alone, I've tried to group it into some general categories—undoubtedly in ways that the various authors would suggest misplace books. Thus, projects in **constructive theology** include Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing Way for Grace* (Morehouse, 2009); Pamela Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Abingdon, 2000); David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Pilgrim, 2005); Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona, and Paul Stockley (eds.), *Understanding God's Heart for Children: Toward a Biblical Framework* (Authentic Books/World Vision, 2007); Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (Chalice, 2005); Bonnie J. Miller-

theologians are giving serious and sustained attention to questions like, "How are we to think theologically about children and how might those thoughts shape the way we engage children and allow them to engage us in the contexts in which they live?"

This paper asks that very same question, but does so in a context not much discussed in the literature: that of children in contexts of war. The literature on children in war, too, is voluminous and, sadly, only growing as children globally continue to be caught up in contexts of war. Indeed, on the tenth anniversary of the U.N.'s release of the results of Graca Machel's study, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children,* the estimate is that roughly one billion persons under the age of eighteen live in countries or territories affected by armed conflict.[2,3]

McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (Jossey-Bass, 2003); Mary Doyle Roche, *Children, Consumerism, and the Common* Good (Lexington, 2009); Angela Shier-Jones, *Children of God: Toward a Theology of Childhood* (Epworth, 2007); and John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Georgetown UP, 2010). Projects in **biblical and historical theology** would include Patrick McKinley Brennan (ed.), *The Vocation of the Child* (Eerdman's, 2008); Don S. Browning and Marcia J. Bunge, *Children and Childhood in World Religions: Primary Sources and Texts* (Rutgers UP, 2009); Marcia J. Bunge, Terence Fretheim, and Beverly Gaventa (eds.), *The Child in the Bible* (Eerdman's, 2008); Marcia J. Bunge (ed.), *The Child in Christian Thought* (Eerdman's, 2001). Beyond these books, there are a growing number of networks and websites that focus on the theology of children and childhood (not to mention projects like the Child Theology Movement, which tries to do theology from the perspective of childen and a wide range of books and articles on childen's spirituality).

[2] The number of children in the world is, itself, a contested issue. The current CIA World Factbook, for instance, states that roughly 27% of a global population of 6.8 billion people are under the age of 15 (1.84 billion); expanding that age range to those 19 and under yields a total of 36% of the world's population (2.4 billion); in researching the question, I came across numbers as low as 1.5 billion and as high as 3.3 billion, though that latter number was likely a misreading of the statistic that half the world's population is under the age of 30. Though part of the variance is due to the difficulty of getting accurate numbers for global population and ages, the far larger difficulty is in defining when childhood ends—a definition that is notably contextual, with ages varying from as young as 13 to as high as 18 (as is the case in the U.N.'s *Convention for the Rights of the Child*.) For purposes of this paper, I will hold to the CIA World Factbook numbers.

With regard to the number of children affected by armed conflict, the *Machel Study 10-Year Strategic Review: Children and Conflict in a Changing World* states:

Attention to this statistic highlights a peculiar lacuna within theologies of childhood: the relative lack of sustained and explicit attention to the children of war in these theologies.[4] If we take the figure of 2 billion as a broad estimate of the number of children in the world, then to say that roughly 1 billion children live in countries or territories affected by armed conflict is to say that a full half of those persons under consideration by theologies of children and childhood live

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The scale and scope of armed conflict globally can be measured in different ways. Among these are simply counting the number of conflicts based on a set of parameters, . . . estimating the number of people affected or killed, or accounting for other types of human costs. These costs include deaths due to malnutrition and disease, psychological and social harm, damage to property and loss of livelihoods. . . Globally, just over 1 billion children under the age of 18 live in countries or territories affected by armed conflict—almost one sixth of the total world population. Of these, approximately 300 million are under the age of five. In 2006, an estimated 18.1 million children were among populations living with the effects of displacement. Within that group were an estimated 5.8 million refugee children and 8.8 million internally displaced children. *(Machel Study 10-Year Strategic Review: Children and Conflict in a Changing World* [United Nations Children's Fund, 2009], 19.)

[3] "Countries or territories affected by armed conflict" is rather vague and diffused. For the most part, this means areas in which there have been more than 1000 battle deaths in a year (the definition of war) but it sometimes includes lower-intensity but consistent conflicts, down to 25 battle deaths in a year. Moreover, a country affected by armed conflict does not mean that the entire country is engaged in such a conflict; Russia has been engaged in armed conflict in the Caucuses, for example. However, even where there isn't armed conflict in a particular geographic area within a country, that country's engagement in armed conflict can have consequences for children in that country through, e.g., how national funds are allocated toward or away from services that benefit children and how the media portrays the conflict and its importance for the national psyche. For purposes of this paper, I have excluded children in the United States of America even though the U.S. is involved in two wars in the Middle East. I do this not because these wars (or U.S. children) don't count but because the U.S.'s economic and military power make analogies with other countries engaged in armed conflict difficult.

[4] The new book, *Children and Armed Conflict: Cross-Disciplinary Investigations* is helpful in this regard, but does not take up the matters in this paper because it does not develop connections between the experiences of/ research on children in contexts of armed conflict and the work of those writing on theologies of childhood. If anything, it reveals the need for research in the very areas this paper suggests. See Daniel Thomas Cook and John Wall, eds., *Children and Armed Conflict: Cross-Disciplinary Investigations* (New York: Palmgrave Macmillan, 2011). My thanks to John Wall for sharing early drafts of the outline and introduction of this book.

within the context of war—a context that is largely ignored in the writings.[5]   What might this

mean? What are its implications? And can attention to the children of war enrich theologies of

childhood? These are the driving questions of this paper.

Situating Theologies of Children and Childhood

That the existence of children went under-examined in, especially, twentieth century

Christian theology is worth noting.[6] Yet noting it has done little to shape a determinant or single

trajectory for development. The absence of such a trajectory, though, may be to the advantage of

theologies of childhood. Lacking a history of modern theological reflection on children, many of

the projects in constructive theology that attend specifically to children were, instead, shaped by

theological methods imported from elsewhere: communitarian approaches that note the impact

of modernity in shaping the inability of an "experiential-expressivist"[7] culture to address having

and raising children; feminist approaches that note the moral significance of examining life in the

"private spheres" where children live; liberationist approaches that attend to God's preferential

option for the least and most vulnerable; process approaches that explore spiritual development

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[5] The analogy to feminist criticisms of mid-20th Century theological anthropologies is almost too
easy here: by ignoring the contexts in which women live and work, theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr,
Paul Tillich, and others not only developed woefully misshapen visions of human nature but proposed
solutions to the problems of human existence that dramatically exacerbated those problems for half the
population.

[6] There are, of course, a few notable exceptions to this generalization, especially among
theologians who seemingly wrote about everything. See, e.g., Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of
Childhood," *Theological Investigations, vol. 8* (Herder & Herder, 1971); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics
III.4 §54.2,* G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, eds., (T. & T. Clark, 1961); or Hans Urs von Balthasar,
Unless You Become Like This Child (Ignatius Press, 1991).

[7] The term—by now familiar—is from George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and
Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Westminster Press, 1984).

within the contexts of evolving relationships, etc. Time will tell whether these constructive approaches will bear the kinds of fruit that feminist, liberationist, process, and other theologies have.

One of the goals of those writing theologies of childhood is to attend to the actual experiences of children in their particular contexts. This attention to children in their particularity—especially when motivated by concern for the welfare of children as the theologies of childhood certainly seem to be—is valuable. But in a world where half of those under consideration live in contexts of war, one would think that this attention to particularity would lead to far more attention to war than the theologies of childhood have thus far given. Why hasn't more attention been paid to the children of war?

Part of the answer to this question grows out of one of the more admirable traits of those writing theologies of childhood: their insistence that theologians have the responsibility of naming the particular social locations from which they write. This is due, in part, to shifts in scholarly temperament and methods wherein scholars are increasingly alert to the dangers of glossing over contexts and particularity and the importance of doing close readings of social locations to situate the scholar *vis-à-vis* his or her subject matter. For example, many of the writers discuss their own experiences as parents dealing children and use observations of their own children to illustrate or develop their arguments. The literature is stronger as a result.

But writing *from* a social location also reveals the perspectives *of* that social location. Since these writings come mostly from the developed world, the concerns about children that they highlight are, for the most part, the concerns of children in the developed world. Even exceptions to this rule (like Joyce Ann Mercer, who includes her experience of work in the

Philippines) still bring those concerns back into the context of the developed world. This is not

to say that they focus on the concerns of affluence; many of the theologians attend to a range of

issues, including poverty, hunger and homelessness, and all are attentive to at least some of the

concerns peculiar to children everywhere (peer pressure, abuse, health, etc.). Joyce Ann Mercer,

for instance, shapes her book around the problems facing children growing up in a consumerist

society and Pamela Couture is especially interested in the impact of poverty on children.[8] And,

to be clear, attention to these contexts is vital. No less than the position and status of the child in

a context of war, the position and status of the child in the developed world has been generally

under-examined, often unclear, and regularly destructive. The work of these theologians is

important and valuable.

In a roughly representative sampling of eight significant texts on theologies of

childhood,[9] however, five gave no mention to the context of war, two made only very brief

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[8] I would also note that Couture has taken up important ethnographic work on children and conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. As with much ethnographic work, however, there remains a great deal of further analysis—theological and otherwise—to do. See Pamela D. Couture, "Victims, Perpetrators, or Moral Agents: Children and Youth Survivors of the War in the Democratic Republic of Congo," *Journal of Childhood and Religion* 2.2 (May, 2011). www.childhoodandreligion.com/JCR/Volume_2_(2011)_files/Couture%20May%202011.pdf. Accessed on October 23, 2011. Here, as elsewhere, Couture has taken up questions about the impact of war on children—as, especially, in Couture, *Child Poverty: Love, Justice, and Social Responsibility* (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2008), Chapter 9. But in these instances, Couture isn't so much building a theology of childhood around the experiences of children in war as arguing for the need to care for the children of war in light of a theology of childhood developed elsewhere.

[9] Brennan, Bunge, Couture (*Seeing Children, Seeing God)*, Mercer, Miller-McLemore, Ratcliff, and Richards and Privett. The Collier anthology is especially interesting in this regard in that it mentions children in war—though in passing and on its way to other points—even though it is, in several of its chapters, attentive to children in Africa. So, for instance, when it names the responsibilities for the church to take up in that context (including addressing poverty, education, and health), it does not name responsibilities for the church that spring directly from the context of war, even though war has significantly exacerbated these other problems in many African countries.

passing references to war, and only one (Jensen) addressed the topic in its own right—and then only for a page. Several at least passingly addressed violence more generally, but it was almost always connected to interpersonal violence such as abuse by family members.

Of course, lack of explicit attention to the context of war does not necessarily mean that the processes and thoughts given expression by those doing theologies of childhood are inapplicable to those contexts. And, undoubtedly, there will be continuities between current work and the work that might evolve from closer attention to the children of war.[10] But the work will not be the same. Too many studies from a wide range of disciplines have been done that explore the unique implications of large and systematically-shaped violence on people who live in affected areas—including on children—to make such an assumption.[11] Indeed, the volume of such literature is so large and its range and intended audiences are so great that it is surprising not to see more attention by theologians to children living within the context of war.

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[10] Including not only the work of Couture (see footnote 8), but, for instance, that of M. Jan Holton on the Lost Boys of Sudan (see, e.g., Holton, *Building the Resilient Community: Lessons from the Lost Boys of Sudan* [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011]).

[11] Other than the Machel study and its follow-up work, such studies include Donald Dunson, *Child, Victim, Soldier: The Loss of Innocence in Uganda* (Orbis, 2008), Phyllis Kilbourn (ed.), *Healing the Children of War* (MARC Publications, 1995); Heather MacLeod, "Holistic Care of Children in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies" in *Complex Humanitarian Emergencies: Lessons from Practitioners*, ed. by Mark Janz and Joann Slead (World Vision, 2000); Joy D. Osofsky (ed.), *Children in a Violent Society* (The Guilford Press, 1997); and P.W. Singer, "Caution: Children at War," *Parameters: The U.S. Army War College Quarterly* (Winter, 2001-02): 40-56. There are also numerous books about children involved in war, the best known of which are probably Ismael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007) and Dave Eggers, *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (Vintage, 2007). It is interesting, incidentally, that one of the most provocative and insightful movies to explore childhood, *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009) was also written by Eggers.

That theologies of childhood have paid so little attention to the children of war, then, reveals a hidden cost to an otherwise methodologically valuable decision: to self-consciously write from a particular social location will mean giving the most attention to children living in the very contexts in which the writers live. And, for the most part, the writers live in western, comparatively affluent, and politically stable societies. That is, they have made a conscious moral choice about the way they engage children and they have done so because doing so is how one produces good scholarly work. But there is a paradoxical and important cost that the writings, the movement, and, by extension, children now pay: half of those who, at least in principle, are under discussion go un- or dramatically under-regarded.

The absence of attention to children in modern theology is only one of the forces driving these theologies. At least to judge from the authors themselves, just as strong is the sense that theologians throughout history have been either far too negative or deeply naïve in their understanding of children. It is rare for an author not to spend several pages separating understandings about children from damaging doctrines of sin and equally damaging claims about innocence.[12] Repositioning children *vis-à-vis* Christian theology is an important project and, when done carefully, opens up possibilities for child theology to make unique contributions to the Christian tradition's larger theological project.

Yet even as these theologies attempt to resituate children in Christian theology by making them real people, they regularly lapse into idealization. At least initially, such idealization isn't

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[12] Examples include Jensen, 4-8; Miller-McLemore, chs. 1-3; Mercer, 119ff; etc. For a good overview of the various ways children have been perceived, see John Wall, "Fallen Angels: A Contemporary Christian Ethical Ontology of Childhood," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 8.2 (Fall, 2004): 160-184.

so much a project of devolving children into Bosch-like demons or elevating them into Reubens-like angels as it is a product of the necessities of abstraction: contemporary scholars are attempting to say something about children generally, even when they are careful to locate their work in a particular context. Those to be included within the category of "child" include a wide range of ages and developmental abilities, geographic and racial/ethnic categories, class strata and relational identities. Sharing pertinent similarities, they all count within the category of "child," yet because they differ so widely from each other, the category must nonetheless function as an abstraction. This, in itself, presents problems no greater than those faced by any theologian who would write about "humanity," "women," "the oppressed," "Westerners," or any other category that groups persons according to pertinent characteristics.

Setting aside those descriptors of "child" that are so general as to do little work (e.g., under 18 years of age), how do the theologians of childhood describe children? What are the pertinent similarities shared by children around the world when they are viewed through theological lenses? What are the operative abstractions that these theologians rely upon? Later in the paper, I will discuss three generative abstractions common among the theologies of childhood: those having to do with vocation, vulnerability, and playfulness, arguing that attention to children in the context of war has the capacity to re-shape and deepen the descriptive and normative power of these abstractions.

First, though, I want to signal a danger that comes with abstractions; namely, that they become idealizations when abstractions about children and abstractions about God are conjoined. Idealizations, where they occur, repeat the very error that the theologians of childhood have urged us to resist.

Finding terms like "vulnerable" (Jensen), "gift" (Miller-McLemore), and "God-welcomers" (Mercer) useful in describing how adults might better see children, these theologians perpetuate the kind of doubled abstraction that becomes an idealization. First, they shape distinct theological affirmations about those terms by, e.g., identifying vulnerability as a central aspect of the immanent Trinity or hospitality as a central aspect of the economic one. Then, having identified the term with divine life, they turn children into exemplars of that life in this world. Thus, Jensen can suggest, "To proclaim the reign of God is to see the world through children's eyes, in which all human persons are recipients of God's grace, in which all persons are valued simply because they are."[13] Or Mercer can claim that children are "'double agents' in God's hospitality. Seen from one direction, children offer to the world a way to welcome God, through Christ's call to welcome children . . . [and] Seen from a different direction, children are those who personify the divine embrace and welcome that God has already offered to the world."[14,15]

To be clear: these authors make it quite clear in other passages of their books that they are attempting to get away from such projects of idealizations when thinking about children. It is simply very hard to do so, perhaps because, paradoxically, although children are among those closest to us and all of us have actually been children, it is probably harder to imagine oneself into the context of childhood than almost any other context of human existence. Through a

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[13] Jensen, 25.

[14] Mercer, 111.

[15] These authors have biblical precedent: in a favorite passage from the literature, Jesus says, ". . . Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." (Mark 10:14, NRSV). What it is about children that makes the kingdom of God belong to them goes unstated, but many Christians throughout history have been quite willing to fill in that particular blank.

change in situation or geography, we adults can become poor or imprisoned or minorities. And

while it is certainly much more difficult to become a different gender and becoming aged will

take time, we find that those of genders other than ours and the elderly generally can use the

languages we use, are alert to many of the same problems we think of as problems, and are more

likely to discern between which parts of the world to observe and which parts to ignore in ways

similar to our own processes of discernment. Children, though, do not yet use the language

adults do, think through problems the way adults do, or filter the world the way life experience

teaches adults to do so. This is neither to flatten out the diversity within human existence in nor

the complexity of human interactions that follows from it. It is, though, to give closer attention

to the fact that as a result of physiological, psychological, and cultural differences, children are

among the most "other" of any others we engage. Even more than the past, childhood is a

foreign country.[16] Idealization, then, is a likely by-product of the actual difficulty of thinking

theologically about children who are so near to us and yet so far removed from us.

Yet there are costs that come with such idealization, and they are especially noticeable

when one situates children within the contexts of war. On the one side, wars reinforce the

concerns that give rise to the idealizations: Children are especially vulnerable in war and remind

others of their own vulnerability. The need to see them as gifts becomes an especially pressing

alternative to seeing them—or anyone else, for that matter—as cannon-fodder or collateral

damage. And their willingness to continue to engage the world around them becomes an

especially important reminder about the possibilities for a brighter future to those whose worlds

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[16] To paraphrases Leslie P. Hartley's famous opening line from his 1953 book, *The Go-Between*: "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there" (NYRB Classics, 2002).

are caving in around them due to war. As *victims* in war, children are especially acute reminders of the horrors of war; as those who happen to inhabit places dealing with war, children can remind us of a world beyond war.

On the other side, such idealization makes it even more difficult to understand the complex ways that children participate in wars. In the context of actual wars, children are rock-throwers and propaganda-spouters. They carry toy guns in imitation of soldiers and real guns when pressed into service as soldiers. When harmed, they become occasions for instigating violence and after occasions of systematic violence, they are difficult to reintegrate into peaceful societies. They are vulnerable—but also perpetrators of violence; they are gifts—but also burdens on societies. They are agents of hospitality—but also of harm. Their involvement in war makes it worse than it otherwise would be, but if idealized, their involvement also makes it appear even more inhuman than it actually is.[17]

The Changing Shape of War

One of the great strengths of the new theologies of children is that it is spending substantial energy in recovering the history of Christian thought about children. This work

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[17] *Children and Conflict in a Changing World* highlights the complexity of thinking about children in contexts of armed conflict early on when it notes that, ". . . children themselves have found their status changing—once considered victims unlawfully recruited, now they are seen as 'gang members.' In detailing the realities faced by children . . . there are 'confirmed reports that children have been used as messengers, spotters, attackers, and porters to transfer and hide weapons, as well as for kidnappings.'" *Children and Conflict*, 9.

provides invaluable foundations for constructive work in theology and spirituality by adding both antecedents and complexity to such work, thereby mitigating temptations toward idealism.[18]

This approach faces a different kind of abstraction, though in a decidedly concrete way: efficiency all-but-demands that writings on children from earlier generations are abstracted from the larger bodies of literature in which they occur and from the larger historical contexts in which they were written. Had the ways wars are understood and fought remained constant over time, this move would probably not create noticeably large problems as the theologians of childhood work to address the contexts in which half of the world's children live. After all, those who wrote about children in previous centuries often also wrote about war. And even if they didn't write about war, they were certainly aware that wars existed; indeed, many of them were more closely connected to particular wars than are most of the scholars writing today.[19]

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[18] Attention to actual children in history also helps avoid Philippe Ariès' error of attributing causes to historical statistics without examining evidence. In his book, *Centuries of Childhood*, Ariès suggested that prior to the 16th Century, "[t]he idea of childhood did not exist" and gave, as evidence for this, the facts that infant mortality rates were too high to allow parents to become attached to their children at a young age and the basic needs of the family were too great to allow parents to treat their children as something other than fellow-laborers as they grew older—two claims which fly in the face of literature rife with grief at the loss of children and rich in attention to children-as-children. Think, for instance, of Shakespeare's lines from *King John*, written after his own son, Hamnet, died at the age of eleven:

> Grief fills the room up of my empty child,
> Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
> Puts on his pretty looks; repeats his words,
> Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
> Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form.

See Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (Vintage, 1962) and William Shakespeare, *King John* (Signet Classics, 2004), both cited in Bill Bryson, *At Home: A Short History of Private Life* (Doubleday, 2010), 403-404.

[19] Attention, for example, to the Children's Crusade of 1212, of historic instances of children being used as aids, armor-bearers, buglers and drummer-boys, or even of David in the service to Saul in 1

Wars, though, have changed. They are not only fought with different weapons and for different reasons, but understood in different ways.

Perhaps no one has paid closer attention to the changes in how wars are understood than John Mueller. In his 1989 book *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War*[20] and, more centrally, in his 2004 book *The Remnants of War,*[21] Mueller makes the case that the institution of conventional war, which has been in existence for over 5000 years[22] has been in decline for over a century and is now all-but-obsolete. It has been replaced, Mueller argues, by unconventional civil wars and "policing wars." This change in war, though perhaps as significant a change as any in human history, has gone significantly overlooked. Yet if Mueller is right, then theologies of childhood will not only have to discover the conditions and voices of the children of war, specifically, in order to do their work, they will have to gain expertise in trends in contemporary war—like those described by Mueller—to do so.

The central thesis of Mueller's work is that war is an idea; that "[u]nlike breathing eating, or sex, war is not something that is somehow required by the human condition or by the forces of history."[23] Because it is neither natural nor inevitable, war can fade into non-existence, much as state-supported slavery has done. And as war-making states have found it more horrific than

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Samuel 16-18 *may* help here—though perhaps less than might be first thought, as I try to explain in the remainder of this section.

[20] John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

[21] John Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Ithica: Cornell UP, 2004).

[22] See Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) for a broad historical and interdisciplinary examination of war.

[23] Mueller, *Remnants*, 4.

they once did and less helpful in resolving their conflicts and extending their power—at least in comparison to other forms of engagement—conventional war has become increasingly rare over the past 100+ years. Indeed, Mueller argues, because it is an idea, its displacement is largely the product of the growing power of ideas that can be loosely gathered under the socio-cultural umbrella of anti-war movements. In Mueller's analysis, significant percentages of the citizens in most (Western) countries had treated war as generally justifiable and often desirable; after 1918, however, war might be necessary but was always horrible, normally immoral, and generally futile.

Yet even if disciplined or conventional warfare has receded from prominence, war itself has not disappeared from human history. There have always been some—Mueller labels them "criminals—robbers, brigands, freebooters, highwaymen, hooligans, thugs, bandits, pirates, gangsters, outlaws"[24]—who benefit from the chaos and social instability of war. These groups, war's remnants, continue either to promote war or to be used by weak governments as mercenaries in irregular wars.

As a result, wars since the end of the Cold War have been almost exclusively of two kinds. The first and most common has been civil war, though civil wars of the sort that tend toward the unconventional and terroristic in the means by which they are fought and the criminal in regard to the "soldiers" who are their primary combatants. Examples include those wars fought in the former Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone, and Colombia.[25] The second, often in response

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[24] Mueller, *Remnants*, 17.

[25] The Children's Theology Movement is not alone in being slow to recognize the changing shape of war. When the United Nations estimates that as of 2001, there were roughly 300,000 active child combatants, it focuses on wars between states (in which some 50 states have actively recruited children).

to the first, has been the increasing prevalence of policing wars which are aimed at inhibiting or eliminating the excesses of contemporary civil wars. Examples include the first Gulf War, Somalia between 1992 and 1994, and Kosovo in 1999. Such policing wars aim at stabilizing conflict-torn countries in order to make humanitarian assistance possible, containing or overturning dangerous regimes, and punishing the misbehavior of tyrants.

If Mueller is right that not only the goals and tactics of war are different but the very nature of war, itself, is changing, then those trying to develop theologies of childhood face a daunting task: they need both to incorporate attention to children in war into their work in order for it to be meaningful and they also need to learn to evaluate war in general or specific wars in particular (whether via moral, historical, or strategic forms of reasoning) in ways that are attentive to the ways war is changing.

This concern becomes especially pressing because even if Mueller is right that war is receding from prominence as an idea, its remnants tend to make life worse for children. Contemporary wars are more likely to be fought with small arms and light weapons (i.e., weapons that children can carry) and indiscriminant weapons like IED's, cluster bombs, and mines (some of which use or resemble children's toys).[26] They are more likely to be fought by non-state players who do not observe traditional rules of war that distinguish between combatants and noncombatants and are more willing to use children in war. They are more likely to become "resource wars" whose parties draw children into new forms of hazardous labor

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This number ignores non-state players and the children in their ranks; as horrific as 300,00 is, that number is undoubtedly far too low.

[26] As Singer notes, "[c]hildren are participating as active combatants in over 75 percent of the world's armed conflicts," on battlefields on every continent except Australia and Antarctica—and in many instances as the primary combatants. Singer, "Caution: Children at War," 40-41.

(e.g., in diamond and gold mines or drug fields). And they are more likely to be connected to the internationalization of terrorism wherein children are targeted as both victims (as in the Beslan school in 2004) and perpetrators (including recruiting children as decoys or as suicide bombers, some of whom have been as young as 11). This last is especially troubling because counterterrorism measures—such as aerial bombardment—make collateral damage more likely and most attempts to control troubled areas multiply restrictions on children's access to basic goods and protection, thereby creating conditions even more favorable for harm to children and the recruitment of children into war.[27]

These concerns warrant closer and more sustained attention than I can give here. Wall's book, among others, addresses some of them. In what follows, I highlight three foci which not only spring out of the new concerns about children that these new wars raise but that connect to contemporary developments in theologies of childhood. The use (and abuse) of children in war by the "remnants of war" raises complicated questions about how we might understand the vocation(s) of children. The increasing vulnerability of children to the loss of caregivers and displacement from familial and social support systems, especially when combined with the increasing numbers of children caring for other children, raises questions about what it means to think of children as dependent. And the dangerous contexts in which the children of war are growing up—and the complex ways in which they shape their play in these contexts—raise serious questions about the value of non-instrumental joy that we associate with childhood.[28]

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[27] *Children and Conflict*, 8-15. As the global population continues to swell, therein exacerbating fights over increasingly scarce resources, the numbers of children in war will worsen.

[28] Though these three ideas recur frequently in the literature, the three terms I'm using to describe them—except, perhaps, "vocation"—are mine.

Each of these three foci for theologies of childhood—vocation, dependence, and non-instrumental joy—not only need to be nuanced in light of the contexts of the children of war, but such nuancing may lead to a richer theological understanding not only of children but, perhaps, even of persons more generally.

Vocation, Vulnerability, and the Intrinsic Value of Play:
Rethinking Three Central Claims within the Theology of Children

While the theologians of childhood each bring their own distinctive interests and emphases to bear in writing about children, several claims recur through the literature. Among the most prominent are: 1) That children have vocations unique to their contexts and attention to the vocation(s) of childhood will enrich our understanding of vocation more generally; 2) That understanding how children are vulnerable may help us understand human vulnerability more generally; and, 3) That in their play, children model forms of engagement in which goods are never simply instrumental and, therefore, some activities have intrinsic worth. This section explores these three claims, asking how attention to the children of war may modify those claims.

The doctrine of vocation—the idea that God calls all persons to places and pursuits particular to their contexts—recurs throughout the literature of the theology of childhood. Attention to vocation, at least in principle, helps name the significance of each child without leveling out difference between children and adults. It suggests that children-*qua*-children have purposes that are their own including, primarily, learning wisdom, virtue, and piety, playing, and, in doing

these things, modeling learning and playing for others—especially adults.[29] The power of this approach isn't simply to allow children to have purposes unique to their ages and locations, though; it is to recast the doctrine of vocation, itself, into something that is fundamentally a project taken on over time rather than a purpose one has at some specific point in time. Vocation is something all of us grow into rather than something each of us has.

As such, vocation—when viewed through the lens of a theology of childhood—implies agency, but not the agency of the autonomous actor so much as the agency of the developing learner. Attention to this understanding of agency helps specify how children can be actors while still being significantly acted upon. It also undermines claims that agency is contingent upon free choice. Vocation, then, helps make sense of the paradox between describing children as vulnerable to whatever forces of formation and destruction surround them and describing them as persons whose unique identities set them apart from others.

This approach to agency also helps us think about children-as-actors in contexts of violence, as the Machel Study and its follow-up review reveal:

> [I]t is misleading to describe any military recruitment of boys and girls as voluntary. Rather than exercising free choice, these children are more likely responding to a variety of pressures—economic, cultural, social and political. . . [however] young people may engage in political struggle for ideological reasons: "It is important to note that children may also identify with and fight for social causes, religious expression, self-determination, or national liberation."[30]

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[29] For the vocational emphasis on learning wisdom and virtue, see Brennan (ed.), *The Vocation of the Child* and Bunge, "Education and the Child in Eighteenth-Century German Pietism" in Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*. For an emphasis on play, see Jerome Berryman's work on Godly Play. For an emphasis on modeling, see Richards and Privett (eds.), *Through the Eyes of a Child* and Collier (ed.), *Toddling to the Kingdom*.

[30] *Children and Conflict*, 37.

Attention to the contexts of children's participation in war helps to nuance this vision of vocational agency in two ways. First, and most obviously, it highlights and therein complicates the degree to which agency can be shaped by damaging as well as beneficial social forces. The child who is recruited or conscripted into an armed force to carry a weapon is a victim but also creates victims through the use of that weapon and may, as a result, face criminal proceedings.[31] The structure of those proceedings will have to address such concerns by, e.g., setting a minimum age for criminal responsibility, providing alternative forms of judicial process, and/or establishing distinct systems of justice that aim at rehabilitation and reintegration.[32,33] Along the way, a more complicated vision of agency will find resonances in developing areas within theological and political ethics (as, e.g., in Rebekah Miles' work on the relation between things that bind us and things that free us in the work of Reinhold Niebuhr or Patrick Deneen's work on the "democratic man" described in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*[34]).

Second, attention to the children of war when thinking about vocation helps avoid simplifying how children are understood theologically when the doctrine is carried back out of

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[31] This matter is especially pressing because child soldiers are, themselves, more likely to ignore or be unaware of the rules of war. They are less likely, for instance, to distinguish between opposing forces and civilians and, because they lack life experiences through which persons come to recognize the value of human life, they are more likely to behave in vicious ways. Indeed, as Singer points out, "the younger child soldiers are, the more vicious they tend to be." Singer, "Caution: Children at War," 49.

[32] See *Children and Conflict*, 75.

[33] In this, there are helpful analogies from within the literature of childhood development: the child who bullies others in school, who throws tantrums in the supermarket, or steals from other children is expressing an agency over which he or she never fully had control in developing. As such, how we proceed in dealing with these children has to recognize both their responsibility and its limits.

[34] See Rebekah Miles, *The Bonds of Freedom: Feminist Theology and Christian Realism* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001) and Patrick J. Deneen, *"Lonesome No More!:* Individualism and the Rise of Democratic Despotism", *The Hedgehog Review* 4.1 (Spring, 2002): 60-61.

the contexts of war. Too often, attention to questions of vocation for children are separated from questions of what people are like and how they behave more generally, as if there is a theological anthropology for adults and a theological "pediology" for children. Children behave in complex ways for complex reasons just as adults do; attention to such complexity will help reintegrate studies of the theology of childhood with studies in theology more generally. Attention to the children of war may help theologians of childhood recognize that the objects of their inquiry can't ultimately be separated out from other persons.

In this regard, the context of children in war may be especially helpful since in such a context, children actually do function as agents who are active in both creating and mitigating violence. Indeed, thinking of children's agency in this way is far more likely to help us think about the roles of children in consumerist societies or societies that promote stylized violence through video games and movies than approaches that simply want to protect children in such contexts: children are both victims of powerful marketing forces and choosers among various goods; they are both vulnerable to becoming inured to violence and capable of making interpretive choices about what they will watch or play and why.

Recognizing agency in children does not mean that their powers are as extensive as are those of adults (indeed, if anything, theologies of childhood might remind us that the powers of adults are far more limited—that is, more childlike—than we tend to presume). Children are, to use a word common to the literature, vulnerable, and that vulnerability expresses itself in the sheer volume of adult-driven networks upon which they rely, from families to schools to religious bodies to state governments to non-governmental programs. The flip side of recognizing that children have agency is recognizing that children's agency is significantly

curtailed by forces beyond their control and comprehension: children are vulnerable because they are significantly dependent upon others.

This recognition of dependence and the concerns that it raises has led to one of the tension within theologies of childhood: whether to turn to the language of rights in addressing children's vulnerability and dependence. On the one hand, some theologians are leery of claims about the rights of children. Such rights tend to presume the power of the right-claimant to stand over against the systems upon which they rely—including the family—and, as such, treat children as "miniature adults." Even bracketing out Hauerwasian criticisms of the idea of rights more generally (which, not incidentally, Hauerwas connects to the intrusions of liberalism into the family and, especially, parent-child relationships[35]), the concern is that using the language of rights with respect to children means imputing notions about individualism and rationality onto children. And these notions are sufficiently strange to children that many theologians, in resisting the notion, also resist rights-talk. As Patrick McKinley Brennan states, one of the shortcomings of contemporary discourse about children is that, "[i]n this area, as in so many other areas of social concern, rights-talk has a tendency to occupy the field, with the result that people of good will can by misadventure reduce the child to the status of a junior rights-bearer."[36]

On the other hand, though, there are some theologians of childhood who find rights language more congruent to their work. Pamela Couture has pushed for the use of rights-

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[35] See, e.g., Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1981), esp. 155-174.

[36] Brennan, *The Vocation of the Child,* x.

language in framing international standards for the treatment of children[37] and Christine Gudorf argues for children's "bodyright"—or the right to control their own bodies—as a means of empowering them to resist abuse.[38] As Bonnie Miller-McLemore states, "Parents and adults at large must take children's rights as enfleshed moral subjects more seriously."[39]

The conundrum is apparent: Use the language of individual rights and risk treating the child as independent of those around him or her, thereby draining the term, "child" of any meaning that intrinsically includes dependence. Or avoid the language of rights and risk losing recourse to the various legal and political systems that have formed around it to benefit children.

Here, again, attention to the children of war may be helpful. Most international bodies that are interested in promoting the welfare of such children (e.g., the United Nations and UNICEF, Save the Children, the IRC, the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict) will happily rely on rights-language to help address the plight of such children. Yet the rights they turn to tend to be those associated with children, in particular, especially as advanced by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These are child-specific rights, including rights to education, to play, to be protected from child labor, sexual exploitation, being used in war (and special protections for those who are used in war), and (*contra* Hauerwas) rights of families over against governments. Said differently, the CRC (for the most part) doesn't rely on a generic

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[37] See Pamela Couture, *Child Poverty: Love, Justice, and Social Responsibility* (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2007), esp. Ch. 6.

[38] See Christine Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Pilgrim Press, 1994), Ch. 6, esp. 193-195.

[39] Miller-McLemore, 142.

understanding of rights that are applicable to all persons; it advances a targeted set of rights that are specific to a particular category of persons and the situations in which they find themselves.[40]

Perhaps, then, the conundrum for theologies of childhood really is more apparent than it is real. Knowing the origins of rights-language in the Enlightenment and early modernity and the dangers of equalizing persons who shouldn't be thought of as equal doesn't mean relying on those origins to frame political systems that can helpfully address the concerns that children, as dependent, face. Nor does it mean replacing other languages—whether of the church, of the U.S. Government, or of other particular communities—with the language of international rights.[41] Instead, the CRC advances developmentally-attentive, age-directed rights that are cognizant of children's dependence without treating them as only dependent. They are vulnerable agents—as, upon reflection, are all of us. So it could be that further attention to the rights of children within the context of theologies of childhood may actually lead to a way forward in the larger debates about the relation of Christian faith and rights language, creating a kinder, gentler, and more communally-friendly but nonetheless politically potent understanding of human rights than these debates tend to recognize.

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[40] For a much more developed discussion on the relations between children and human rights, see Kathleen Marshall and Paul Parvis, *Honouring Children: The Human Rights of the Child in Christian Perspective* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2004).

[41] Although deeply involved in drafting the CRC, the United States of America is one of only two nations in the world that has not yet ratified it (the other being Somalia). Reasons given for this by religious and political conservatives are that it undermines national sovereignty and that it would make illegal certain practices that are used in the United States (including how children are schooled and, until the Supreme Court's 2005 decision in *Roper v. Simmons*, executing minors). Most of this opposition turns, in my opinion, on misunderstandings and deliberate misreadings of the Convention, its purposes, and their relation to national sovereignty.

One of the more provocative rights enumerated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child is Article 31, which states that, "Children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities."[42] Contrast this, for example, with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes the right to rest and leisure and participation in cultural activities, but is silent on a right to play. The difference between the Convention and the Declaration speaks volumes: play is something associated especially with children.

The connection between childhood and play also finds expression in the theologies of childhood. Thus, following Horace Bushnell, David Jensen writes, "Play is one dimension of the organically connected life, in which children instruct *us.* Parents who nurture, in turn, are nurtured by their own children."[43] Or Peter Privett writes, "Play, for children, is of supreme importance and I hope to illustrate that his can also be true for adults. . . play for children operates in the non-logical, non-verbal realms of language . . . Through play we can begin to discover our own identity and our place on and in the world. . . Play offers opportunities to see other realities."[44] Or Joyce Mercer, includes the following among her concluding sentences:

> Perhaps it is just too hard to believe that children—noisy, messy, playful, unpredictable, spontaneous children—could ever have that much in common with God . . . [but if] welcoming a child is a way to welcome God, then perhaps there is something about God that is as messy, playful, noisy, active, spontaneous, restless, and unpredictable as that which one encounters in welcoming a child.[45]

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[42] Convention on the Rights of the Child: Survival and Development Rights. Available at http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Survival_Development.pdf. Accessed January 5, 2011.

[43] Jensen, 56. Italics his.

[44] Peter Privett, "Play" in Richards and Privett, 101, 103.

[45] Mercer, 262.

Play, in these works and others, tends toward spontaneity, absorption, and joy. It means to serve no larger purpose beyond the pleasure of engaging oneself and the world in imaginative and nonlinear activity whose goods are intrinsic to those activities. It is what I am calling "non-instrumental joy" in order to contrast it with end-oriented activities whose processes are intended to bring about goods that are extrinsic to the activities.[46] And it is from this non-instrumental form of engagement that, these theologians argue, adults need to learn from in order to glimpse something of God. While seldom coming out and simply saying it, the implication is clear: adults who seek after God need to learn to play, and in this, children are models for adults to emulate.

Here, again, attention to the children of war is instructive. On the one hand, the contexts of war make play far more difficult: constraints on free movement and resources and the experiences of horror make the practices of non-instrumental joy all-too-rare (and, even where they occur, often morally troubling—as when children play at war). On the other hand, children make play where they can: we've all seen pictures of children playing on the wreckage of tanks or military helicopters. Indeed, the urge to play makes children especially vulnerable in such contexts because their explorations are more likely to lead them into contact with unexploded ordinance, shards of metal and glass, or combatants who may take advantage of them.

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[46] Here the "Godly Play" program is interesting in that it explicitly uses the language of play for the purpose of teaching children the language and activities of faith in order that they might now God and deepen their own faith. On the one hand, Godly Play is clearly instrumental: its turn to play intends to develop and reinforce the disciplines of a life of faith. On the other hand, it suggests that the discoveries about God and the world flow organically out of children's play because in play, children discover (or, rather, become more aware of) the mysterious presence of God in their lives.

Yet in such situations, asking adults simply to observe children at play in order to discover how to play themselves is irresponsible and encouraging children to play may well be immoral: the adult obligation is to *prevent*, not to perpetuate play (or, more accurately, to so restrict the range of play to safer spaces as to confer the idea that instrumental concerns ought to trump non-instrumental joy). Moreover, suggesting that children who have experienced the horrors and tragedies of war might find (or reveal) God through play dismisses the traumas that children in war-contexts experience and the way those traumas shape worldviews that often exclude the desire to play. Play may be natural to children's lives; we can't think of it as mandatory for their lives, though.

So if roughly half of the world's children live in such contexts, perhaps the primary obligation that adults take on is to make the world safer for children to play in rather than to learn to emulate their playfulness. After all, attempting to discover non-instrumental joy by observing children—especially children dealing with traumatic events, some of which are retained in their psyches, even if not upon their bodies—is, perversely, to instrumentalize those very children. Learning to discover something of our own natures in the non-instrumental joy of emulative play is, in some contexts perhaps, a good thing (depending on what one thinks about the relation between nature and purpose and the ends toward which we are created). But making a world more welcoming for children—one in which it is less likely that children will face war— is, at least according to Jesus, how we are more likely to meet God: "Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:36-37 [NRSV]).

A Concluding Note

I have, I hope, suggested not only reasons to connect the experiences of the children of war to the theologies of childhood but some of the ways that such connections might be made and some of the benefits that theology might accrue through such connections. There is, I think, one additional benefit that I have not yet named: such an approach solidifies linkages between theology and ethics that are only tenuously made in the literature right now. As I noted at the beginning of the paper, there is a rapidly growing body of literature on theologies of childhood. I also noted that many of the same theologians that write to describe the child theologically also write to make readers aware of the many threats that children face. They do both theology and ethics. And it is clear that they want to relate each to the other. Yet the structures of those relations can feel rather *ad hoc* because the move tends to be always from theology to ethics: we should think of children in this particular way and so we should treat children in this particular way. Theology expresses a general idea and ethics functions to instantiate/concretize that idea. Indicatives leads to imperatives.

The danger here is that the range of ethical methods, norms, and behaviors that can follow from a particular theological description are manifold. Does thinking of children as gifts mean we must treat them as invaluable or does it mean we enter them into systems of reciprocal giving? Does it mean we treat them all equally or can we treat them differently but weigh those differences upon a common scale or are our different treatments of them only evaluated from within the context of a particular set of relationships? Are there limits to how much or how we express our recognition of their value? Do their gift-qualities change as they mature and, if so,

how? All these questions about the treatment of children can follow from the theological affirmation that children are gifts because how we think about the idea of "gift"—even from within a single theological perspective—and what we think we can and cannot do with gifts can vary dramatically.

So if the theologians of childhood connect theology to ethics by doing the former first and then arguing about its implications in discussions of the latter, they risk not only missing the *ad hoc* quality of their ethical conclusions, but the way their theological conclusions actually shape a range of ethical questions (which often are then answered by importing arguments and positions that were not part of the initial theological vision). Moreover, by following a "first this, then that" pattern, the theologians of childhood at least implicitly suggests that theology and ethics can be separated from each other precisely because ethics can be treated as something that follows theology.

Attention to the experiences of the children of war, though, suggests that attention to the ethical concerns surrounding those children has the capacity to reshape theological claims about children. Theologies of childhood and the ethics of how we treat children interpenetrate each other. Attention to the particular ethical concerns of the children of war has the capacity to correct, expand, place limits around, connect ideas between, and add subtlety to theological claims about children even as those theological claims may motivate, clarify, prioritize, make noticeable, and give language to the ways we treat children. Ethics and theology; theology and ethics: they are not only better together but better when we can't think of them apart. The children of war remind us of this.