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## Whither the Children? Childhood in Religious Education

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Several years ago I turned my attention to the study of childhood in theology.<sup>1</sup> Colleagues with whom I spoke as I took up this research often naturally assumed that I would find the literature of religious education helpful. But for the most part I did not. This article arose out of curiosity about this impasse.<sup>2</sup>

Since its inception, Western theology has largely cast the mature adult Caucasian male as primary actor. While questions about the need for greater inclusivity have led to fresh consideration of gender, race, ethnicity, and class, the adult-centered proclivity of theology has become even more entrenched in the last few centuries. Whereas many premodern theologians took seriously the nature of childhood and the education and formation of children as an important subject matter, until recently modern theologians have not<sup>3</sup>—except those in religious

<sup>1</sup> Some publications that resulted include Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "Let the Child Come Revisited: Feminist Theologians on Children," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 446–73, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), "Heard and Seen: The Challenge of Religious Formation in Families," in *Religious Education of Boys and Girls*, ed. Werner G. Jeanrond and Lisa Sowle Cahill (London: SCM Press, 2004), 45–54; "Sloppy Mutuality: Love and Justice for Children and Adults," in *Mutuality Matters: Faith, Family, and Just Love*, ed. Edward Foley, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Robert Schreiter, and Herbert Anderson (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2004), 121–35, "Children and Religion in the Public Square: 'Too Dangerous and Too Safe, Too Difficult and Too Silly,'" *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 3 (July 2006), and *In the Midst of Chaos: Care of Children as Religious Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> I presented initial findings in a session of a new Consultation on Childhood Studies and Religion on the state of current research on children at the American Academy of Religion in Fall 2003. I am thankful to colleague Dale Johnson for raising the question about the relevance of scholarship in religious education and to Marcia Bunge for encouraging me to pursue it further.

<sup>3</sup> Marcia Bunge, "Introduction," in Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*, 3, 11; Todd David Whitmore, "Children: An Undeveloped Theme in Catholic Teaching," in *The Challenge of Global Stewardship: Roman Catholic Responses*, ed. Maura A. Ryan and Todd David Whitmore © 2006 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.  
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education, many people presupposed. Over the last century and a half, roughly since Horace Bushnell's highly regarded *Christian Nurture*, the academy of religion has increasingly relegated the subject of children to the area of religious education.<sup>4</sup>

When I considered prominent texts in religious education in my quest to articulate a theology of childhood, however, I did not see them as helpful. Why, I wondered? Had I seldom turned to acclaimed works because of unfair, uninformed stereotypes on my part? Or are there problems inherent to the state of the study of childhood in religious education? Many scholars suppose the field has a fundamental investment in children, but few, I discovered, have actually stepped back to examine conceptions of children in religious education. A closer investigation reveals that the field is less interested in children than often imagined.<sup>5</sup>

Material on religious education, including denominational literature, is extensive. I am not talking here about denominational publications, which do in fact often focus squarely on how and what to teach children. Instead I refer to one particular strand within the academic scholarship of the last two to three decades in the United States that has had impact on views of children.<sup>6</sup> To understand and evaluate its influence, I organize selected scholars into three groups and investigate as illustrative two scholars in each group, plus one figure who defies cut-and-dried categorization: modern figures James Fowler and John Westerhoff, transitional scholars Craig Dykstra and Charles Foster, new postmodern spokespersons Elizabeth F. Caldwell and Bradley Wigger, and "Godly play" theorist Jerome Berryman.<sup>7</sup>

This typology and my selection of scholars hint at my argument. I chose Fowler and Westerhoff as representative because for a quarter

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(Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1997), 161–68; and Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, xxi–xxii, xxvii–xxx.

<sup>4</sup> Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (1908; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> In my interest in children, I have been drawn beyond my field of pastoral theology and into a companion field in practical theology. I suspect, however, that I could draw analogous conclusions about the state of childhood in pastoral theology where the focus has been primarily on care for adults in crisis and less so on children.

<sup>6</sup> The situation in the United States is different from other contexts, such as Europe and Africa, where there are different scholarly influences and broader political and social commitment to children as a shared responsibility.

<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of my argument, I do not attempt a full exploration of other important figures and diverse models that have characterized the field. For helpful overview of the field, see Jack L. Seymour and Donald E. Miller, *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), and *Theological Approaches to Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990); Richard R. Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer, *Religious Education between Modernization and Globalization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Mary C. Boys, *Educating in Faith: Maps and Visions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); and Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

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century they have established a powerful precedent for the field. Although their work is heralded as primary, their classic texts, I will argue, are more concerned about adulthood than childhood. They overshadow scholars in the decades before them who did explicitly address children.<sup>8</sup> In different ways Dykstra and Foster express subtle unrest and dissatisfaction with this status quo. However, it is ultimately Caldwell, Wigger, and Berryman who, in contrast to the other four, address children most directly. They typify a new generation that has turned attention to childhood but whose work has received insufficient attention thus far.<sup>9</sup>

To be clear at the outset, I am not arguing that Fowler and Westerhoff ignore children or that they did not appreciate children's faith. Both Fowler and Westerhoff did spark new appreciation for faith in childhood and laid groundwork for the current interest in children. Nor am I suggesting that scholars in the field as a whole have not had an interest in children. Several have studied children.<sup>10</sup> Rather, I maintain that dominant voices that have received considerable attention and wielded significant influence over the past two decades tended to focus on adulthood more than on childhood. They seldom approached the kind of theological reflection on children that transitional figures desired or that has just begun to surface among new scholars. One implication of this argument is the simple conclusion that children should figure more prominently in religious education. Moreover, the subject matter of children is of sufficient importance that it need not be just the responsibility of those in religious education but deserves greater place in theology more broadly.

Analysis of the work of these scholars reveals a general shift, I suggest, from interest in generic, universal, adult development to exploration of the particularities of children's faith. This shift corresponds roughly with the shift from modern to postmodern understanding of religion. The modern research of Fowler and Westerhoff arose at a time when people esteemed value-free science and desired Christian ecumenical dialogue. Renewed interest in children, toward which Dykstra and Fos-

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Iris V. Cully, *Christian Child Development* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), and her earlier book, *Children in Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

<sup>9</sup> Two additional texts have appeared in religious education between completion of this article and its publication that affirm my argument that important new work on children is now taking place among religious educators: Joyce Ann Mercer's *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005); and Karen-Marie Yust's *Real Kids, Real Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004). My analysis does not attempt to include them.

<sup>10</sup> Some scholars, such as Catherine Stonehouse, for example, have made up for the deficit in explicit reflection on children by illustrating more concretely how developmental theory can help adults "join children on the spiritual journey." See Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998).

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ter hint and which Caldwell, Wigger, and Berryman develop more fully, corresponds to several larger postmodern changes, including recognition of the limits of science, state, and market in solving complex social problems, new regard for the public role of particular religious beliefs, acceptance of a non-Christian pluralism, major gender role changes, and heightened anxiety about and attention to children.

### CLASSIC MODERN FIGURES: BECOMING ADULT

Shortly after Gail Sheehy's *Passages* topped the best-seller list in 1976 and for more than a quarter century since then, Fowler's *Stages of Faith* has held sway.<sup>11</sup> Scholars and laity have been captivated by the clarity of his contribution, the usefulness of stage theory, its empirical documentation, the ecumenical appeal to believers and nonbelievers, the combination of personal and scholarly tone, and the relevance of questions about ultimate values. Avoiding technical jargon, Fowler initiates an imaginative conversation between Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, and Lawrence Kohlberg and their models of psychodynamic, cognitive, and moral development. He enriches their claims by adding faith, drawing significantly upon H. Richard Niebuhr. He outlines a six-stage evolution beyond the primal faith of infants, from the literal, mythic beliefs of children through conventional commitments of young adults to more universal, self-transcending ideals in later life. Within each stage, he measures change in moral reasoning, ego perspective, religious symbolization, worldview, locus of authority, and radius of social relationships.

In designing this schema, Fowler makes important claims about the nature of childhood. Throughout his research, he takes young children's imaginary life quite seriously. Children are immensely responsive to the religious nuance of the images and stories that surround them, as personal illustration vividly attests. Even quite young children have a potential for creative religiosity. Of special significance for Fowler: adults should not exploit this sensitivity by badgering children with overly rigid, fear-inducing doctrine, such as accounts of the devil or the punishment of hell. As psychologists establish, this burdens the young with destructive patterns of guilt and shame and impedes healthy growth. Children and adults who move past stage-two instrumental bargaining with God and the conformity of stage three demonstrate greater overall maturity. The character and quality of institutions and groups make a difference

<sup>11</sup> Gail Sheehy, *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* (New York: Dutton, 1976); James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

in provoking or suppressing the self-reflective, self-transcending faith of higher stages.

Academicians and educators have made good use of the theory. Among academics, Fowler has a national and international reputation as the unequivocal expert on faith development. In church circles, Christian education directors have found distinctions between less mature and more mature faith helpful in understanding children, designing curricula, and assessing children's cognitive and moral readiness for grasping particular religious ideas.

Nonetheless, many people voice a variety of concerns.<sup>12</sup> Few scholars, however, connect criticism of Fowler's theory with an inadequate understanding of children. Yet closer inspection reveals ways in which many of the identified problems limit perception of children. In particular, I identify several assumptions about adult faith and childhood that impede understanding of children and their religious formation.

Foremost, although Fowler makes general claims about children, his primary subject is not the child but the individuating adult who is looking back over life to judge where one stands and where one is going. Even though one of his early essays locates stage theory in re-

<sup>12</sup> See C. Ellis Nelson, "Does Faith Develop? An Evaluation of Fowler's Position," *Living Light* 19 (1982): 162-73; James Loder, "Reflections on Fowler's *Stages of Faith*," *Religious Education* 77 (1982): 133-39; Gabriel Moran, *Religious Education Development: Images for the Future* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1983); John McDargh, "Faith Development Theory at Ten Years," *Religious Studies Review* 10 (1984): 341-42; Harriet Miller, "Human Development: Making Webs or Pyramids," in *Women's Issues in Religious Education*, ed. Fern M. Giltner (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1985), 149-72; Randall Y. Furushima, "Faith Development in a Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Religious Education* 80 (1985): 414-20; Craig Dykstra, "What Is Faith? An Experiment in the Hypothetical Mode," in *Faith Development and Fowler*, ed. Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1986), 45-64; Carl Schneider, "Faith Development and Pastoral Diagnosis," in Dykstra and Parks, *Faith Development and Fowler*, 221-50; Clyde J. Steckel, "The Emergence of Morality and Faith in Stages: A Theological Critique of Developmental Theories," in *Changing Views of the Human Condition*, ed. Paul W. Pruyser (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 159-77; Mary Ford-Gabrowsky, "Flaw in Faith Development Theory," *Religious Education* 82 (1987): 80-93, and "The Fullness of the Christian Faith Experience: Dimensions Missing in Faith Development Theory," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 41 (1987): 39-47; Richard R. Osmer, "James W. Fowler and the Reformed Tradition: An Exercise in Theological Reflection in Religious Education," *Religious Education* 85, no. 1 (1990): 51-68; William O. Avery, "A Lutheran Examines James W. Fowler," *Religious Education* 85, no. 1 (1990): 74-85; Sharon Daloz Parks, "The North American Critique of James Fowler's Theory of Faith Development," in *Stages of Faith and Religious Development: Implications for Church, Education, and Society*, ed. James W. Fowler, Karl Ernst Nipkow, and Friedrich Schweitzer (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 101-15, and "Faith Development in a Changing World," in *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development: A Reader*, ed. Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 92-104; Gabriel Moran, "Alternative Developmental Images," in Fowler, Nipkow, and Schweitzer, *Stages of Faith and Religious Development*, 149-61; Jack H. Hanford, "Is the Faith of Faith Development Christian Faith?" *Pastoral Psychology* 42, no. 2 (1993): 95-105; and Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (London: Ashgate, 2004).

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relationship to family, he talks less in *Stages of Faith* about “being children today” or “raising children in faith” and more about “becoming adult,” as his second book is titled.<sup>13</sup>

Developmental knowledge about childhood often actually targets adults more than children. The aim is to help adults understand stages through which they pass on their way to greater maturity. Enhancing children’s lives is an indirect consequence: “I believe that when a community expects and provides models for significant continuing faith development in adulthood,” Fowler concludes in *Stages of Faith*, “its patterns of nurturing the faith of children and youth will change and become more open-ended.” This stimulates an important question for his next book, *Becoming Adult*—“What might providing for ongoing adult development mean?”<sup>14</sup>

This subtle shift from childhood to adulthood results in part from the theory itself. It is hard to have a stage theory that does not overvalue the final frame. Moreover, since many adults do not progress beyond the conventional faith of stage three, only the first two stages pertain distinctively to childhood, and even these do not refer to children under four.<sup>15</sup> Twenty-eight-year-old Mary is the capstone case of *Stages of Faith*, and many more pages are devoted to her twenties than to her primary years.

Fowler is not alone in his investment in adult growth. *Stages of Faith* belongs to a period of intense study of the adult life cycle in psychology and religion initiated by Erikson. Although Erikson, under Anna Freud’s tutelage, had an abiding interest in children, one of his major contributions was extending Freud’s stage theory from childhood to adulthood.<sup>16</sup> No longer did people assume adulthood was a static state. Many others began to study adult growth, as seen dramatically in the work of those such as Daniel J. Levinson, Douglas C. Kimmel, George Vaillant, Kenneth Stokes, and Carol Gilligan.<sup>17</sup> This trend shaped Fowler and influenced how others used his work. Unfortunately, in-

<sup>13</sup> James W. Fowler, “Perspectives on the Family from the Standpoint of Faith Development Theory,” *Perkins Journal* 33 (1979): 1–19, and *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 295.

<sup>15</sup> See Schneider, “Faith Development and Pastoral Diagnosis.”

<sup>16</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 35th anniversary ed. (1950; repr., New York: Norton, 1963).

<sup>17</sup> Daniel J. Levinson, with Charlotte N. Darrow, Edward B. Klein, Maria H. Levinson, and Braxton McKee, *Seasons of a Man’s Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1978); Douglas C. Kimmel, *Adulthood and Aging: An Interdisciplinary Developmental View* (New York: Wiley, 1974); George Vaillant, *Adaptation to Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977); Kenneth Stokes, ed., *Faith Development in the Adult Life Cycle* (New York: W. H. Sadlier, 1982); and Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

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creased knowledge of adult development did not lead naturally to improved nurture of children and their faith formation, as Fowler himself laments in his most recent book, *Faithful Change*.<sup>18</sup>

In later explications of his theory, Fowler does amplify psychological characteristics of the initial stage of “primal faith” in infancy. A symposium on public advocacy for infants and children in the mid-1980s prompted him to publish an essay devoted to early childhood that lays out new discoveries of Daniel Stern and Ana-Maria Rizzuto about the relational capacities and dynamics of god imagery, material that appears again in *Faithful Change*.<sup>19</sup> Later in the same symposium publication Fowler urges consideration of children as a wider public church issue. Churches should support families in their efforts to provide value, meaning, and traditions for children.<sup>20</sup>

Fowler’s definition of faith, however, further limits his understanding of children. He defines faith in the most generic sense as a “verb.” It is a way of making and preserving meaning “prior to our being religious or irreligious.”<sup>21</sup> He purposively focuses on universal values and cognitive structures of faith instead of substantive dogmas and faith differences in order to reach a more diverse religious audience and the wider public of nonprofit organizations, public schools, and prisons.

This differentiation between the formal structure and the particular content of faith is unwieldy with children, however. For those who nurture children, there is no easy distinction between how one makes meaning in a generic sense and the specific practices, rituals, traditions, stories, and convictions that hold meaning. Children’s faith grows precisely in the very midst of particular beliefs and practices that Fowler sees as most susceptible of “idolatrous distortion.”<sup>22</sup> For a child, there is no such thing as a faith that is “beyond the specific domains of religion and

<sup>18</sup> James W. Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 209–10, 221–22; see also his “The Enlightenment and Faith Development Theory,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 1, no. 1 (1988): 29–42.

<sup>19</sup> James W. Fowler, “Strength for the Journey: Early Childhood Development in Selfhood and Faith,” in *Faith Development in Early Childhood*, ed. Doris A. Blazer (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1989), 1–36. Fowler also coauthored a chapter with Richard Osmer on children, “Childhood and Adolescence: A Faith Development Perspective,” in *Clinical Handbook of Pastoral Counseling*, ed. Robert J. Wicks, Richard D. Parsons, and Donald Capp (New York: Paulist, 1985), 171–212. Osmer cites an unpublished lecture given by Fowler at Boston College, “Faith Development and the Catechesis of Children,” in his article on “James W. Fowler and the Reformed Tradition,” 56.

<sup>20</sup> James W. Fowler, “The Public Church: Ecology for Faith Education and Advocate for Children,” in Blazer, *Faith Development in Early Childhood*, 131–54.

<sup>21</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 5. He is following the modern distinction of Paul Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith between institutional religion and ultimate concern or between doctrinal belief and loyalty to centering values.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 9, 293.

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belief” or “deeper and more personal than religion.” In his interest in empirical documentation of the structural forms of faith, he acknowledges that he has collapsed into common terms “a great variety of different ‘contents’ of faith.” He tries to get at the latter using categories from Niebuhr of “centers of value,” “images of power,” and “master stories.”<sup>23</sup> But his usage of these terms still has a highly abstract cast. He does not talk about the many varied ways value, power, and story are preserved and conveyed in children’s lives—what particular beliefs and practices are passed on to children and how that content is conveyed, a question that neither parents nor churches can ignore.

One final characteristic impedes genuine theological encounter with childhood. Fowler mostly avoids complicated questions about wrongdoing, evil, corruption, and reconciliation or, in traditional Christian terms, dynamics of sin and grace that are, despite the misuse of these terms with children, still of import in their lives. Children and adults have a “nascent capacity” for meaning making, as he argues.<sup>24</sup> But most religious traditions acknowledge an equally powerful proclivity toward self-preservation, ethnocentric group loyalty, violence toward others, and the tragic loss of meaning. In an essay on early childhood, Fowler offers some “preliminary thoughts” about original sin, conceding that transgression threatens each developmental stage. But sin and transgression are primarily adult categories, he says. Children are more prone to “befallenness” or the alienation “due to circumstances utterly beyond our control.”<sup>25</sup> Although this respects children’s vulnerability, it also tends to shortchange their spiritual complexity and moral agency.

Again, Fowler is not alone. He follows a trend in most post-Freudian psychology that presumes that children who are surrounded by a rich environment of healthy relationships will naturally acquire the needed internal emotional and cognitive structures of faith. In cognitive structural understanding, it is assumed optimistically that people can “*think* their way into goodness,” as Dykstra observes.<sup>26</sup> Yet many religious traditions recognize that neither goodness nor faith emerges so spontaneously. They exist side by side with potentially corruptible, distorted, and misdirected desire and involve an incremental accretion of

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 5, 9, 273, 276–77, 293.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>25</sup> Fowler, “Strength for the Journey,” 34.

<sup>26</sup> Craig Dykstra, “What Are People Like? An Alternative to Kohlberg’s View,” in *Moral Development Foundations: Judeo-Christian Alternatives to Piaget and Kohlberg*, ed. Donald M. Joy (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 153–62, 153.



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trust and responsibility in childhood and youth as well as failure, accountability, reprieve, and dependence on powers beyond the self.<sup>27</sup>

Westerhoff appears to provide a suggestive alternative—particularly in his books *Will Our Children Have Faith?* and *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith*, published, respectively, a few years before and after *Stages of Faith*.<sup>28</sup> He speaks more directly about his own “inadequacies” as a parent, imposes limits on psychology, searches for other models for growth, and locates faith securely within the ecclesial community. His book titles themselves explicitly name and feature children.

In contrast to Fowler, Westerhoff argues, “We have assumed that the more we know about people and learning, the more effective will be our educational efforts.” Instead, we need to reshape the very “institutions within which people dwell.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, in contrast to the inherent hierarchy of stage theory, faith forms like the addition of rings to a tree as children move from “experienced” to “affiliative” to “searching” and “owned” faith. The tree does not become “more truly a tree” or a better tree; it “only becomes more complex.”<sup>30</sup>

Westerhoff also makes some basic claims about children that have a more pronounced theological bent. Children deserve respect as equal participants in religious life and as part of God’s promise and not as a means to some other, adult end. Indeed, children are normative for faith. He offers five specific mandates for sharing faith with them: tell faith stories, enact religious rituals, pray together, talk about religious questions, and engage in faithful service and witness.

Most important, faith has little to do with cognitive categories. Westerhoff stands directly in line with a long stream of educators going back to Bushnell in the nineteenth century and George Coe and C. Ellis Nelson in the twentieth, who all proposed a socialization model of faith formation rather than a didactic model of informational instruction. If children are to have faith, they must experience its distinctive expression within a small intergenerational community, grounded in the rituals of worship and joined in social efforts to fight political and economic injustice, and not sequestered in the educational “wing” of the church.<sup>31</sup> His other publications prior to *Will Our*

<sup>27</sup> See Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, esp. chaps. 2 and 3; and Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*.

<sup>28</sup> John H. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (1976; repr., Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2000), and *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1980).

<sup>29</sup> Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 16.

<sup>30</sup> Westerhoff, *Bringing Up Children*, 24, and *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 88.

<sup>31</sup> Some of these ideas have received renewed attention in the last decade. See, e.g., Peter L. Benson and Carolyn H. Elkin, *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations—a Summary Report on Faith, Loyalty and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Search

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*Children Have Faith?* stress the important role of family in this process.<sup>32</sup> Practices such as religious rites of transition and family retreats exemplify the beneficial influence of church and family.

On the whole, however, even in books with “children” in the title, Westerhoff talks more about adult crises in religious education than about children and family. In other words, he writes wonderful books on faith. They are not exactly books on children. Those who review his most influential book, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* have done so with hardly any mention of children at all.<sup>33</sup> One reviewer finally pinpoints the problem: *Bringing Up Children*, she observes, “might have been [better] subtitled *Bringing Up Father and Mother*.”<sup>34</sup>

Westerhoff responds to general criticism that he has not been attentive to children by explaining in *Generation to Generation*, “What I’d like to make clear once and for all is that I am very concerned about children. It is because I am so concerned about them that I recommend we center our attention on adults.”<sup>35</sup> The present adult generation’s loss of faith is of greater concern than the next generation’s acquisition.<sup>36</sup> Just as Fowler focuses his stage theory around “becoming adult,” Westerhoff molds his theory around “reshaping adults,” as a later chapter in *Generation to Generation* is titled. His book on bringing up children insists the problem “does not lie so much with our children as with ourselves. We adults need to be born again.”<sup>37</sup> Even his depiction of the five activities of narrative, ritual, prayer, inquiry, and service that he offers as a guide to raising children in faith can almost be read without knowing that they pertain to life with children at all.

Many social and historical factors play a role in this eclipse of children in Fowler’s and Westerhoff’s work. Christian education did not

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Institute, 1990); Merton P. Strommen and A. Irene Strommen, *The Five Cries of Parents* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985); Merton P. Strommen, “Rethinking Family Ministry,” in *Rethinking Christian Education: Explorations in Theory and Practice*, ed. David S. Schuller (St. Louis: Chalice, 1993), 57–72; Dorothy Jean Furnish, “Rethinking Children’s Ministry,” in Schuller, *Rethinking Christian Education*, 73–84; Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1994); Merton P. Strommen and Richard A. Hardel, *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* (Winona, MN: St. Mary’s Press, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> John H. Westerhoff, *Values for Tomorrow’s Children: An Alternative Future for Education in the Church* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1970); John H. Westerhoff and Gwen Kennedy Neville, *Generation to Generation: Conversations on Religious Education and Culture* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1974).

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Osmer and Schweitzer, *Religious Education*, 176–79; and reviews of Westerhoff’s *Will Our Children Have Faith?* by C. Ellis Nelson, *Religious Education* 72 (1977): 91–92, and Neely D. McCarter, *Theology Today* 34 (1977): 132–34.

<sup>34</sup> Catharine Regen, review of *Bringing Up Children*, by Westerhoff, *Weavings* 3, no. 1 (January/February 1988): 40.

<sup>35</sup> Westerhoff and Neville, *Generation to Generation*, 118–19.

<sup>36</sup> Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* 141.

<sup>37</sup> Westerhoff, *Bringing Up Children*, 23.

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emerge as a completely distinct discipline until the early twentieth century. It was extensively influenced by liberal theology's emphasis on religious experience and growth, although this was tempered somewhat by mid-twentieth century neo-orthodoxy.<sup>38</sup> Early twentieth-century churches and scholars sought to professionalize Christian education, partially in reaction to the powerful nineteenth-century Sunday-school movement in the United States and England designed around conversion and moral formation. They relied heavily upon new information about children in the social sciences and followed trends in general education that moved away from instruction and indoctrination and toward lifelong learning through interaction and experience.<sup>39</sup> The focus until the 1960s was almost wholly on children and youth.

The literature of the 1960s that shaped Fowler, Westerhoff, and others reacted to this emphasis on children by asserting the value of education not just for children but also for adults. This coincided with a general shift in the mainline church away from a domestic Christianity centered on the family as the primary agent of religious formation.<sup>40</sup> Scholars in religious education also faced a whole array of other challenging issues, such as religious pluralism, gender and racial diversity, and globalism, that demanded serious attention and furthered the subtle disappearance of the study of the child.

Gender dichotomization also contributed.<sup>41</sup> Prior to the 1960s, church and society largely delegated responsibility for children to mothers, women, and female Christian education directors and teachers while men took charge of adult worship and scholarship.<sup>42</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars wanted to solidify religious education's place in the academy as a central theological discipline, and they did so in part by distancing themselves from women, children, and Sunday school. Women

<sup>38</sup> Karen G. Massey, "Christian Education Developments in the Twentieth Century," *Review and Expositor* 96, no. 3 (1999): 411–12, 414–15. See also Stephen Schmidt, *A History of the Religious Education Association* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1983). I thank Rick Osmer and Dean G. Blevins for offering additional insights about historical developments.

<sup>39</sup> Sara Little, "The 'Clue' to Religious Education," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 47, nos. 3–4 (1993): 10.

<sup>40</sup> Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Growing up Protestant: Parents, Children, and Mainline Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 125–29.

<sup>41</sup> Few have studied the impact of gender on religious education as a field, but for a general analysis of gender and sexism in religious education, see Mary Elizabeth Moore, "Women and Men in the Social Order: Challenge to Religious Education," in *Religious Education as Social Transformation*, ed. Allen J. Moore (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1989), 66–69; Giltner, *Women's Issues in Religious Education*; and Gloria Durka, "The Influence of Societal and Political Factors on Religious Development and Education in the United States," in Fowler, Nipkow, and Schweitzer, *Stages of Faith and Religious Development*, 209–37.

<sup>42</sup> Janet Fishburn, *Confronting the Idolatry of Family: A New Vision for the Household of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), chap. 2.

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scholars have made major inroads in the last few decades, but until recently their scholarship has focused only occasionally on children, perhaps justifiably avoiding the very stereotype that would presume children to be their sole interest.

### TRANSITIONAL FIGURES: CONGREGATIONS AND FAMILIES

Closer inspection of the field reveals hints of dissension even as Fowler and Westerhoff first formed their ideas. Both Foster and Dykstra assert the value of interpreting faith in terms of particular beliefs and practices rather than according to its universal characteristics. It may even be the explicitly confessional nature of their research that, in contrast to Fowler, jeopardized its reach. Whereas those who “know nothing of faith,” as Fowler says, can locate themselves within his framework, Foster and Dykstra appeal to those steeped in the tradition.<sup>43</sup> If this audience restricted the consideration of their work, it is unfortunate because it has meant the loss of other ways to understand children and faith.

Dykstra and Foster share several qualities that build on Westerhoff’s scholarship and mark their place as transitional scholars in the study of children. They challenge optimistic renderings of life cycle theories that ignore the fragile, anxious, and self-deceiving quality of human life. They question the tendency of psychology to liken mature faith to strength, progress, and rationality. They confirm the extremely important role of religious communities and families in guiding and sustaining children’s formation. Finally, they see shared participation in key practices of religion—prayer, worship, service, and so on—as essential for children’s faith formation. Whether their work stemmed the tide behind the captivation with Piaget, Kohlberg, Fowler, and stage theory is another question.

In *Vision and Character*, Dykstra questions what he calls Kohlberg’s “juridical ethics” of principles, rights, and duties. The clarity of Kohlberg’s categories comes “at the expense of a rich description of the manifold complexities of the moral life as we actually experience it” within particular communities.<sup>44</sup> Even the term “development” misleads educators because it assumes that maturity rests primarily upon acquiring ever-expanding capabilities and diverts attention from the

<sup>43</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, xii.

<sup>44</sup> Craig Dykstra, *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator’s Alternative to Kohlberg* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 4. I am surprised at the lack of discussion of this text, published the same year as *Stages of Faith*, including Dykstra’s claim that Kohlberg’s emphasis on rational justice precludes relational care, a judgment similar to Gilligan’s later well-known critique.

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kind of practice necessary to moral growth.<sup>45</sup> Outgrowing egocentricity involves a complicated process of lapses, distortion, reconciliation, and revelatory transformation. In contrast to a “juridical ethics,” a “visional ethics” that includes confession, repentance, fellowship, discipleship, and biblical study “accounts for more of what the moral life involves.”<sup>46</sup> Participation in such practices is essential for growth in faith.

Dykstra’s most pointed critique appears at the conclusion of a 1984 essay reviewing the developmental literature. Developmental theory “describes important dimensions of the religious life, but it does not define the purposes and goals of religious nurture for any particular faith or even necessarily chart out the major turning points.”<sup>47</sup> Life cycle crises do not necessarily prompt growth. Growth is better situated within particular faith traditions that have for centuries attempted to understand the evolution of virtue, spiritual discipline, and faith. He reiterates a point made in his first book. Developmental theory cannot account for moral and spiritual growth because it tracks the development of certain “capacities.” Moral and spiritual growth is not, per se, a matter of capacity. It is a matter of the “use to which those capacities are put, the way in which they are ‘activated’ in concrete, historical circumstances,” what he will later call a “way of life.” We need to look at the “details” of the lived life rather than at abstractions.<sup>48</sup>

Dykstra does not make much mention of children either, however. When he does, he mostly falls back on common conceptual categories borrowed from Piaget and Kohlberg that characterize childhood as a time of concrete, playful imagery and adolescence as a time of formal operational thought. He does not attempt to trace how his own primary categories of prayer, repentance, and service unfold in childhood. Practicing these disciplines is an “adult activity.” They are “not disciplines that children are capable of undertaking *as disciplines*, consciously and intentionally.” Children only enact them “*as acts*” sporadically and spontaneously, an interpretation that his more recent writing on the life of faith seems to rescind.<sup>49</sup>

Strikingly, Foster’s *Teaching in the Community of Faith* makes children central in an almost completely uncharacteristic way compared to other literature in religion in 1982.<sup>50</sup> He dedicates an entire chapter

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 3. See also Dykstra, “What Is Faith?”

<sup>47</sup> Craig Dykstra, “Faith Development Issues and Religious Nurture,” in *Changing Patterns of Religious Education*, ed. Marvin J. Taylor (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 85–86.

<sup>48</sup> Dykstra, *Vision and Character*, 67. See his more recent book: Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville, KY: Geneva, 1999).

<sup>49</sup> Dykstra, *Vision and Character*, 106. See also Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*.

<sup>50</sup> Charles R. Foster, *Teaching in the Community of Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982).

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to spelling out how the biblical tradition has defined children as gifts from God, bearers of religious tradition, and religious agents. The child is a powerful metaphor for adult faith and, at the same time, a living, breathing partner within the faith community, although Foster tends to emphasize the child as exemplary model more than the child as a real and ordinary dependent person.

Yet, because Foster is convinced that children have formative impact, he avoids Westerhoff's emphasis on adults as the primary subject, while enriching one of Westerhoff's key claims: isolating children and youth according to age groupings to make corporate life more manageable stifles their potential for sanctifying the mundane. Most important, Foster rethinks definitions of adult and child and assumptions about mature and immature faith. The Jewish and Christian traditions call all people children of God. The "differences in maturity between the youngest child and the oldest adult," Foster contends, "are very small when contrasted with the differences between the faithfulness of any human being and the faithfulness of God."<sup>51</sup> There is, then, a paradoxical relationship between childlikeness, defined as recognizing our dependence on God, and mature faith, defined as greater consciousness of "who we are as we are known by God."<sup>52</sup> In short, there is no assurance, both Dykstra and Foster seem to imply, that simply by growing up in other respects—physically, intellectually, and so forth—we grow in faith.

Nevertheless, both Dykstra and Foster lack important strengths of Fowler's approach—his use of empirical research within the broader hermeneutical task of practical theology and his wide public audience. And neither returns to children in any extensive way in later publications.

Their recent scholarship, however, prepares the ground for renewed attention to children. Foster challenges congregations to dismantle educational programs that fragment families, to create ways to build family networks, and to reinforce family faith practices and connect them to the congregation's liturgy and mission.<sup>53</sup> When Dykstra redefines the key educational task in a 1999 book, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, as teaching "all the basic Christian practices" to children, youth, and adults together, he counters his prior judgment that children practice

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 104–5.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>53</sup> Charles R. Foster, "The Changing Family," in Moore, *Religious Education as Social Transformation*, 37–65, and *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

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them only occasionally. The “faith of children is essential in the faith of the whole church,” he claims.<sup>54</sup>

### NEW POSTMODERN VOICES: WELCOMING CHILDREN

Whereas these modern and transitional scholars mostly speak to adults who need, as Fowler said in 1981, to “revisit their earlier years,” a few recent scholars have made children and the adults who raise them a more central focus. Wigger and Caldwell are illustrative of this. They draw on their own experience as ministers and as parents or parenting figures more than on empirical quantitative study, and they turn to scriptural resources and history to support their proposals.

Indeed, Wigger and Caldwell represent a different generation of child rearing. Westerhoff dedicates *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith* to his wife, who “assumed the larger role,” and to his children, who “loved me even when I ignored them in my preoccupation with the nurture of other children.”<sup>55</sup> Wigger dedicates his recent book to his children and does not portray himself as an absent father.<sup>56</sup> Although he does not explicitly describe his convictions about fatherhood, one senses through his personal stories that he assumes a central responsibility for his kids alongside his wife. One also gleans a picture of Caldwell, based on her account of her nieces and nephews, as someone who takes her role as aunt within her extended family beyond a superficial level to interactions of real intimacy. In fact, as she attests, she wrote a major part of a book on youth while on sabbatical living with her sister and family.<sup>57</sup>

Although neither Caldwell nor Wigger overtly claim a practical theological method, both begin with crises in Christian life, mine the tradition for a more rigorous, lively restatement of central claims about children, and offer a plethora of strategies to revive formational practices. Caldwell tends to collect wide-ranging, eclectic ideas more than to engage in reflective assessment of them. But Wigger does not want his book to fall into the “how-to variety.”<sup>58</sup> He spends two chapters painting a sweeping overview of the biblical “story” and its relevance to home and family, addresses transcendence and sin in families, and

<sup>54</sup> Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 45, 71.

<sup>55</sup> Westerhoff, *Bringing Up Children*, i.

<sup>56</sup> Bradley J. Wigger, *The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love and Grace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth F. Caldwell, *Leaving Home with Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Our Youth* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2002), 11.

<sup>58</sup> Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 4.

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reserves the last few chapters for more directive strategies for faith formation.

Both Wigger's and Caldwell's work appeals to a wider audience than do those of conventional academic scholarship. They want their ideas discussed, debated, and used by pastors, congregations, and families, and they provide discussion questions and appendixes for that purpose. As voiced in the overview for the Family and Faith book series, which Wigger coedits, the hope is to offer a "resource for those seeking to make love real in their families, congregations, and communities."<sup>59</sup> Here faith refers to more than how people make meaning and includes what children believe, what parents teach them, and how specific beliefs about God and self are situated, understood, and translated within particular traditions.

Four additional characteristics distinguish Caldwell and Wigger's contribution to understanding children and faith. First, home occupies a central place, as illustrated most overtly in their book titles. Caldwell has two companion books, *Making a Home for Faith*, on children, and *Leaving Home with Faith*, on youth. Wigger titles his book *The Power of God at Home*. Despite more than a century of religious educators from Bushnell to Coe to Westerhoff advocating greater recognition of the home, parents still largely assume, perhaps now more than ever, that it is the church that educates children.

Caldwell encourages parents to reclaim their primary role. Within her Presbyterian tradition, parenting is a central religious vocation to which adults are called.<sup>60</sup> It is not only a matter of recognizing an overlooked vocation. Parents are more proximate: "Parents have many more opportunities for educating their child . . . than church school teachers do in one hour, once a week."<sup>61</sup> Wigger also hopes to counter unthinking reliance upon Sunday school by helping parents realize how much they are "already doing to till spiritual soil."<sup>62</sup> He counters the normal reticence and intimidation parents feel about this by insisting that such teaching begins quite simply in "paying attention." If one looks at "life in a deeper way," one just might notice practices previously overlooked that contribute to faith formation. His entire book is, in fact, geared toward a reclamation of the home as "spiritual territory."<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth F. Caldwell, *Making a Home for Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Your Children* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 75.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>62</sup> Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 113.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 2, 19.



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Second, both emphasize religious practices as important for child rearing, drawing on Dorothy Bass, Robert Wuthnow, and others who have studied practices.<sup>64</sup> Adults should not underestimate the power daily life holds for children. Between the more commonly recognized practices of baptism and confirmation, a great deal happens in everyday practice that falls in the family's lap. Congregations assume parents know what to do. Many parents do not. Wigger specifically lifts up prayer, sacred reading, service, God talk, mealtime, and holiday festivities as activities that history itself has deemed central. More important than any particular practice is making explicit the chosen patterns or ways one lives out faith within family life. Caldwell tries to fill in the often empty space that accrues between Advent and Lent and between prayer at dinner and bedtime. She identifies a plethora of concrete suggestions, from renewed appreciation for the Sabbath, for example, to a regular post-Sunday school ritual for conversation about what was learned that morning in church. Implicit in both Wigger's and Caldwell's work is the conviction that sheer repetition and participation in any of the rich array of practices can serve to convey important religious values and virtues, such as reverence, wisdom, hospitality, and generosity.

Third, Wigger and Caldwell suggest more complex understandings of faith development. Although Wigger still considers life cycle theory helpful, he raises other kinds of questions. How is the life of faith passed on from one generation to the next? What is a family's role in Christian nurture? What is a congregation's role? How do spirituality and raising children relate to one another? The most powerful development is not from stage to stage but, perhaps portrayed best by one of his chapter titles, "From Fear to Courage," an entirely different sort of transition, with rich theological implications. Caldwell briefly mentions developmental theory as one resource but then affirms alternative metaphors of organic growth, pilgrimage, and, most important, "home-making or making a home for faith" as a fresh way to think about formation.<sup>65</sup> Developmental theory can in fact impede practical discussion of the specific faith needs of both parents and children and what parents can do to facilitate faith.

Finally, both Caldwell and Wigger pair a reinvigorated understanding of parents as "primary faith educators" with an emphasis on the

<sup>64</sup> Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); Robert Wuthnow, *Growing Up Religious: Christians and Jews and Their Journeys of Faith* (Boston: Beacon, 1999).

<sup>65</sup> Caldwell, *Making a Home for Faith*, 34, 4.

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fundamental “partnership between the church and the home.”<sup>66</sup> Families and congregations must work together to help congregations become more like families and families more like worshipping communities. Wigger, like Foster, worries that family ministry programming has often undermined and divided families up rather than empowered them.

The emphasis on home, family, and congregation in religious formation, the attention to practices, and the additional metaphors for the complexity of the growth of faith in Wigger’s and Caldwell’s work help offset the adult centeredness, the generic definition of faith, and the assumption of childhood innocence of the previous generation. What more do these authors tell us that is distinctively new or theological about children themselves, however? Unfortunately, despite their helpful insights into the responsibilities of adults and the faith community, neither Wigger nor Caldwell delves significantly into children’s religious experience or the theological nature of children. Caldwell makes some interesting, even if relatively sparse, claims. She asserts children’s proximity to religious questions without romanticizing this capacity. Children are “naturally curious about the mysteries of God,” although adults often teach children to “reject their epiphanies,” as Kathleen Norris notes.<sup>67</sup> A key adult role, then, is preserving space for the religious imagination of young people. Otherwise, she depends largely on popular ideas of well-known psychologists, such as Robert Kegan and Mary Pipher.

Wigger also does not comment in any extensive way upon the nature of children. But his entire enterprise is guided by three implicit theological assumptions that merit more development: children deserve immense respect, adults have much to learn from attending to them, and nurture of children’s faith is an essential Christian vocation and imperative. “Jane [his wife] and I,” he confesses, “have been learning a lot about who we are as we raise our [children] and as they raise us.”<sup>68</sup> Children’s fears and faults are not that different from adult foibles, except that children need assurance from older people and the religious community that their nightmares are not real, that their vulnerability is respected, and that the gift of freedom entails responsibility. These assumptions are motivated by his own Christian background and are made more apparent in the personal stories he tells about his own parenting than in his theoretical reflections.

<sup>66</sup> Caldwell, *Leaving Home with Faith*, 10, and *Making a Home for Faith*, 40.

<sup>67</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead, 1996), 60, cited by Caldwell, *Making a Home for Faith*, 30–31.

<sup>68</sup> Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 7–8.

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Both Caldwell and Wigger tend to downplay the specific theological content of what children need to learn from adults. Caldwell refers to the Deuteronomic codes that command adults to recite the Shema, the Great Commandment to love God, to children day and night, coming in and going out. This requires, she says, both “inward affirmation and visible external practices.”<sup>69</sup> Both Caldwell and Wigger propound what I would call similar concrete practical imperatives: honor mealtime; involve children in food preparation, dinner rituals, and cleanup; include children in acts of service; read with children, not just scripture but good fiction and poetry; talk candidly about hard religious questions; foster festivities that protect children from an invasive materialistic culture; and learn again from children how to play. Such imperatives assume broader theological values and beliefs about children and adults that mostly go unstated.

The lack of explicit investigation of the theological nature and needs of childhood partly results from the intended lay rather than academic audience. Religious education faces the dilemmas of any practical theological field aimed at the three publics of academy, church, and society. On the one hand, several decades ago, scholars encouraged by fresh understandings of practical theology as an academic discipline redefined religious education as more than a technical application of theology to congregational programs. They hoped to foster “theologian-teachers,” not Sunday school teachers.<sup>70</sup> They also hoped to demonstrate religious education’s academic and public role. This contributed to a distancing from children, who were presumed unable to comprehend theological concepts and who were regarded as a private responsibility.<sup>71</sup> Yet ironically, on the other hand, when recent scholars make the religious community a prime audience and children a prime topic, they often bracket critical theological questions about the nature and needs of childhood as understood within the Christian tradition.

### A “CHILD-EYE’S VIEW”: SEEING CHILDREN AND FAITH ANEW

In the 1970s and 1980s, a strong proponent of children arose within religious education from a rather unconventional direction. Jerome Ber-ryman defies simple categorization. He reveals, consequently, a great

<sup>69</sup> Caldwell, *Making a Home for Faith*, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and University* (Philadelphia: Fortress), 99, cited by Seymour and Miller, *Theological Approaches to Christian Education*, 13.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer note a parallel dynamic in both Germany and the United States: the focus on a professional and academic audience has led scholars to overlook the family (*Religious Education*, 211).

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deal about the oversights in religious education's conception of the child in the past twenty-five years.

Berryman never felt beholden to the definitions and limitations of religious education's place in the academy or congregation. He did not enter the field through typical routes; he worked at the intersection of three often-distinct specialized ministries of pastoral care, worship, and education; and he focused his research almost entirely upon children in the classroom. Although his primary publication, *Godly Play*, is now widely known among church educators and academics alike, it received few critical reviews in academic journals, and he is often not mentioned in overviews of religious education.<sup>72</sup> Chronologically, he began his constructive exploration of children about the same time as Fowler and Westerhoff in the 1970s, but he has an immediate investment in childhood as a subject matter itself that goes beyond that of Wigger and Caldwell.<sup>73</sup> Berryman prizes children as full participants in Christian community, able to enter into faithful encounter with God if provided the space and language to do so. *Godly Play* offers exacting details on just how to foster this and why.

One wonders, indeed, if Berryman received little initial academic attention because he so seriously attempts a "child's-eye view" and refuses to allow adult thinking to set the course.<sup>74</sup> The neglect of his work is especially interesting here because, although he discusses extensively the technical details of how to implement his "worship-education," he also offers the most explicit reflection on the theological nature of childhood. His approach and conclusions expose a kind of reflection missing in other scholars.

A trained Montessorian with both ministry and law degrees, Berryman is shaped powerfully by his own children, a daughter with spina bifida in particular; his ministry with children in hospital, church, and school settings; and his extensive experience with Montessori education and work with Sofia Cavalletti in Rome. In *Godly Play* Berryman makes clear his debt to Cavalletti and her book *The Religious Potential of the Child*. He first saw her demonstrate how young children might

<sup>72</sup> See the overview texts cited in n. 7 above.

<sup>73</sup> Berryman's interest and connection to Fowler is apparent in his hosting a conference and editing one of the first publications of Fowler's faith stage theory: Jerome Berryman, ed., *Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith* (Waco, TX: Word Press, 1978). His own books, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991), and, coauthored with Sonja Stewart, *Young Children and Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), appeared over a decade later. It is noteworthy that around the same time child psychiatrist Robert Coles also published his third book in a trilogy about children, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), an inside look at religious ideas of children based on interviews.

<sup>74</sup> Berryman, *Godly Play*, 80.

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encounter God through story, parable, and symbol in 1970. He has “worked with this approach to religious education ever since”—it’s his “life work,” he explains.<sup>75</sup> He arranged for the publication of her book in English, authored its preface, and became a good evangelist for her approach in the United States. His “Godly play” or “worship-education” merely hopes to “experiment and extend what she has already achieved” in her “Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.”<sup>76</sup>

Although Berryman’s theology of childhood is not extensive, it is ardent and provocative. It comes at the conclusion of *Godly Play*, although the entire book, devoted to exploring the teacher/child classroom experience, rests upon it. Children’s ability to think theologically goes undetected by developmental research partly because it associates growth with the acquisition and expansion of language and overlooks children’s potential employment of metaphor, symbol, and narrative. Contrary to prior assumptions that children lack the cognitive capacity for theology, Berryman suggests that a rich spirituality is contained in children’s preverbal silence. “We adults talk ‘about’ such [existential questions] more conceptually and with greater differentiation and abstraction than children can,” but such talk may be a “disability” rather than “an improvement.”<sup>77</sup> Even young children have religious experiences and existential questions, while adults often lose touch with the divine as they gain intellectual dexterity.

At the same time, children need and want tradition-specific religious language “to name, value, and express their ultimate concerns so they can cope with them.”<sup>78</sup> Religious education is neither simply instruction nor enculturation but “teaching the art of theological cognition by means of religious language,” a definition that wonderfully embodies his profound respect for children’s spirituality.<sup>79</sup> Children do not just learn about God; they experience God in tactile and cognitive ways.

Some ideas emerge directly from Montessori convictions about each child’s individuality, respect for a child’s own knowledge, and children’s need for safe boundaries and an environment of genuine freedom. But these views appeal to Berryman precisely because they cohere with deeper Christian views. Children are not just objects of study; they

<sup>75</sup> Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, trans. Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter, with preface by Jerome W. Berryman (New York: Paulist, 1983). See *Godly Play*, 26–27, and 160 n. 14). For another example of this approach, see Tina Lillig, *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd in a Parish Setting* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998).

<sup>76</sup> Berryman, *Godly Play*, vii.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 59. See also 140.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

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are subjects in their own right, capable of and even in need of theological reflection on ultimate matters—death, aloneness, meaning, and freedom—that they, like adults, experience in their own way. “Children *do* have an awareness of the existential limits to their being and their knowing,” he insists. They “are crying out in ways we do not recognize for the language tools to help them build a life that takes such ultimate concerns into consideration.”<sup>80</sup> When children and adults laugh and play in the context of religious symbol, story, and celebration, language for and encounter with God is possible.

### BEYOND FAITH DEVELOPMENT: NEW UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD

When Dykstra and Sharon Parks edited one of the first volumes devoted solely to Fowler’s ideas in 1986, they admitted that their focus on one individual theorist was unusual. They speculated that Fowler made a major impression because his work expressed “a wider cultural and intellectual mood” and represented a “consolidation and crystallization of a whole way of seeing things.”<sup>81</sup> He articulated something people knew but could not put into words themselves. And so stage theory became cultural myth.

Theories, however, can sometimes become “blindings,” as Fowler himself cautioned when he first articulated his stage theory. They limit “our ability to see to only those features . . . we can name and account for.”<sup>82</sup> He encourages an Erikson-like “playfulness” with theory. He intends his theory as only “one constituent component” of a larger picture of faith.<sup>83</sup> But perhaps good typologies that organize so lucidly a slice of reality are just too tempting. There has been, it seems, almost no other place to start when talking about children and faith than with stages of faith. Stage theory made valuable discoveries about development. But rendering faith a human universal and a formal rather than content-specific category made it difficult to grapple with other elements essential to childhood. For nearly three decades fascination with its categories stifled other ways of thinking about children and faith. Ensuing discussions of stage theory, with Dykstra and Parks’s book as

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>81</sup> Dykstra and Parks, *Faith Development and Fowler*, 2.

<sup>82</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, xiii.

<sup>83</sup> James Fowler, “The Vocation of Faith Development Theory: Directions and Modifications since 1981” (paper presented at the International Symposium on Religious Development and Education, University of Tubingen, 1987), cited by Avery, “A Lutheran Examines James W. Fowler,” 70–71.

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a good example, pay little attention to children. People seem to forget that the stages begin in infancy, childhood, and youth.

Fortunately, recent developments in religious education reveal a fresh trend. Coming out from under the shadow of old paradigms of faith development, recent literature reflects a refreshingly new interest in children and in theological reflection on and with children that has much to contribute to the study of religion. Whereas a few decades ago, scholars studied childhood primarily for the sake of understanding adult development, childhood has now become an important theological subject matter itself. Seeing faith from a “child-eye’s view” alters not only what is seen but how and why it is seen and even its very size, shape, and significance.