

Angela Shier-Jones (ed.),

*Children of God: Towards a Theology of Childhood.*

Peterborough: Epworth, 2007. Pp. xvii, 205.

The government has an 'Every Child Matters' agenda; 'pester power' makes every child also matter to the commercial world; in 2006 BBC Radio 4 ran an extensive series on the invention of childhood; The Children's Society is in the midst of a thorough 'Good Childhood Inquiry'. It seems that everyone has something to say about childhood. *Children of God: Towards a Theology of Childhood* attempts to give some response to the question, 'What does theology have to say on the matter?'

Editor Angela Shier-Jones claims in her introduction that so far theology has not contributed much. However, a look at the work of Marcia Bunge, particularly the volume of essays she edited, *The Child in Christian Thought* (Eerdmans, 2001), shows that there is considerable theological material to be found on children. Recently (2004/5) the *Sewanee Theological Review* majored on 'Children and the Kingdom'. And the *Child Theology Movement* is an innovative example of a vibrant current interest in the interface between children and theology. What can perhaps be claimed is that a theology of 'childhood' as a whole is in need of development.

That said, the most interesting and valuable contribution of this collection tends to work against a unified view of childhood as its nine chapters, contributed by different authors, identify separate phases in the

process of growing to adulthood and consider the distinctive nature of each. Norman Nicholson's poem 'Rising Five' (*The Pot Geranium*, 1954) reminds us that the insistence of the four year old on being described as 'rising five' can result in adults who are 'not living/ But rising dead'. What *Children of God* does so effectively is stop readers in their tracks and ask them to consider not their ultimate destiny, but the significance in God's plan of their current place in life. In the context of childhood, this means looking at the specific characteristics of each phase and examining its theological importance.

The story starts before birth, with expectation and the Church's vocation to welcome children. The pain of birth and the place of imperfections in God's plan are then examined. Chalcedonian Christology informs a reading of the infant as fully human. And Christian nurture provokes a critical look at adult faith constructs. In view of the current fear of the 'hoodie' it is refreshing to have contributions that take a positive approach to adolescence, examining the necessity for rebellion in human development and examining the importance of relationships.

Indeed, the implications of each phase for the whole community provides a strong and important theme of the collection, as does an avoidance of the sentimental. A monitory note is sounded in the penultimate chapter on adults and memory. It is too easy to become nostalgic, controlling and reshaping childhood. The chapter suggests we should be seeking to let the past properly live in the present – a reminder of the theological question

towards to which this collection points: is childhood significant because of what it leads to, or does it have lifelong theological significance in itself?

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