

The Radical Reconstruction of Childhood: Is There a Place for Theology?¹

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Abstract: This essay explores profound alterations in constructions of children, arguing that the twists and turns of history reveal a stark need for deeper theological reflection. In particular, it traces a move from the premodern child as *imperfectible in a fallen world* to the modern child as *perfectible in an imperfect world* to the postmodern child as *imperfect, even potentially volatile, in an imperfect, volatile world*. This shift invites serious moral and theological reconsideration, including grappling anew with classical doctrines of sin and grace.

My research and writing as a Luce Fellow has centered on the question of how to raise children faithfully as a feminist Christian in a complex postmodern society. In this single sentence, I juxtapose four elements that do not sit easily together—Christianity, feminism, children, and postmodernity. I am convinced, however, that much is gained from this juxtaposition. As a Christian feminist mother of three boys, my research naturally emerged out of my own personal frustrations with the limitations of mainline Christian and feminist views of children and, at the same time, my conviction that both Christianity and feminist theology have important insights to offer.

Whereas my personal frustrations are widely shared, my confidence in Christianity and feminism is less so. On a personal level, many people, regardless of class, race, or religious tradition, find that parenthood is a vocation under siege and that the formation of children is a task for which they are largely unprepared. And on a social level, there is a growing public concern about children. But most people today seldom see Christianity as a credible or relevant resource, either in terms of congregational guidance or academic theological insight. And when it comes to child rearing advice,

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feminists do not fare much better. It has been hard for feminists, both secular and religious, to avoid the pitfall of placing women and children's needs against one another.

Dogged pursuit of my question has therefore required several steps common to fundamental practical theology, from descriptive, historical, and analytical investigation to more constructive efforts. In this paper, I attend to only one slice of this research. I turn to an area where I found myself both surprised and intrigued—my historical investigation of the cultural construction of children and the reconstructive theological efforts that this historical study invites. The twists and turns of history reveal a stark need for much deeper theological reflection on how we think and talk about children today. The images and realities of childhood are under radical reconstruction and this reconstruction inevitably spills over into important moral and theological understandings.

Historical Roots of Child-Rearing Anxieties

An intense anxiety surrounds the question of how to bring up children today. Mainline congregations and academic theology have paid little attention to either this anxiety or to its historical roots, even though these roots are inextricably entwined around deep moral and religious quandaries.

The anxiety about raising children is a direct outcome of a series of “domestic revolutions,” as historians Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg call the far-reaching transformations in American family life of the last three centuries.¹ Profound alterations in demographic, organizational, functional, and social characteristics of the Western family have raised what might be called the “Child Question”: What will become of children in a greatly changed world in which they no longer seem to fit easily or well?²

Economic Shifts: Children as Asset or Burden?

Last year, on an elementary school field trip to a 4-H agricultural center, I listened as a woman explained the processes of dairy production on a farm in bygone years to two classrooms of third-grade children. She displayed an antique butter-churn and several other implements used to get butter from cow to table. Who, she asked, did they think churned the butter? Blank stares led her to hint, “Do you have chores?” “No” was the resounding chorus of about fifty 8-9 year olds. In the distribution of farm labor not all that long ago, as it turns out, children close to their age churned the butter. That children no longer see themselves as directly responsible for family welfare may seem like a small matter. But in actuality it exemplifies a sea-change of great proportions.

One of the best known and widely debated theories about childhood is that of historian Philip Ariès. He saw the “idea of childhood” as a “discovery” of the seventeenth century. Until that time, childhood was not considered a distinct developmental stage. Children were perceived largely as tiny adults or at least as adults in the making.³ Scholars of all sorts have contested these claims, demonstrating a real appreciation for childhood prior to the modern period. Perhaps a poor English translation of Ariès’s French term “sentiment” as simply “idea” has contributed to the confusion.⁴ By “sentiment,” he did not necessarily mean that childhood itself did not exist; rather childhood did not carry the emotional freight that it has acquired since that time. The debate over historical accuracy aside, however, Ariès was right on at least two accounts. Each historical period fashions its own unique attitudes toward children. And, equally important, a profound change occurred with the advent of modernity. Modernity raised

new questions about a child's place in society that have plagued parents up to the present day.

What is it about the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and today's continued technological and social innovations that has displaced and continues to displace children? Why have the developments of the last few centuries made it harder and harder for families to deal with their responsibilities?

Although in premodern and early modern times children remained subordinates in a highly structured, patriarchal family, they had essential roles. As soon as they were old enough, they took their place in family industries, weeding and hoeing gardens, herding domestic animals, carding and spinning wool, making clothing, and caring for younger brothers and sisters. The seventeenth-century American family in general existed as a more cohesive whole, bringing together under one roof the labors of economic production, domestic life, social interaction, and political participation. As family historian John Demos puts it, "All could feel—could *see*—the contributions of the others; and all could feel the underlying framework of reciprocity."⁵ While children may have had to submit to the sometimes arbitrary authority of harsh fathers or weary mothers, they knew where they stood in relationship to the family's well being. They were a part of the struggle to survive and thrive.

With the advent of industrialization, men became breadwinners and women largely became homemakers in ever more exclusive ways. Most accounts stop here. But what about children? With work and family split into public and private worlds, children, like women, lost their place as contributing members of household economies and, later in life, as insurance for aging parents. This shift occurred more slowly for girls and for

working-class and slave children whose labor in textile mills and coal mines or as field and domestic workers initially made it possible for white middle-class mothers and children to retreat to a private realm. Eventually, however, with emancipation, mandatory education, and child labor laws in the last century, the end result was much the same for almost all U.S. children. No longer participants in home industries or farmed out as servants and apprentices and eventually banned from factories, children no longer increased a family's chances of survival but instead drained limited resources. While appropriately freed from exploitative labor, their position in the family changed dramatically from asset to burden. Parents simply no longer expected children to be useful.

Today's parents resist the idea of children as workers. Yet, ironically, an inverse commodification of the child has become increasingly harder to resist. As if parents need any reminder of the costs, estimates of the expense of raising a child make regular news headlines. In 1980, not that long before my oldest son was born in 1986, children, it was reported, would cost parents between \$100,000 and \$140,000. This public pricing of children as a major family liability, something foreign less than a century ago, epitomizes the revolution that has occurred in daily life.

Psychological Overcompensation: Children as Emotionally Priceless and Yet Invisible

This sweeping historical change, however, does not necessarily mean that children were any less cherished. To the contrary. What would become of children now? From the nineteenth century until today, children became even more precious in a new way. Ironically enough, the more productively useless children became and the less

valuable in the “real” world, the more emotionally priceless they became within the home.⁶ With the benefits of children less obvious, their desirability and even presence in the family required fresh explanation. Almost as if overcompensating for expelling children from the adult world, debates about the nature and amount of attention adults should lavish on them have raged in the years since industrialization. New social science experts on the intricacies of child rearing, aided by theologians like Horace Bushnell on the true nature of Christian sacrificial love, happily offered variations on an answer. Children were to be inordinately and unconditionally loved in the private sphere of home and family—that is, loved without any limit on private parental excess or expectation of return on the child’s part.

The early nineteenth century saw a glorification of motherhood often described as the “cult of womanhood,” extolling the piety, purity, and passivity of wives and mothers. Every bit as captivating and virulent was the “cult of childhood” and the obsession with child rearing. The very idea that improper maternal love could permanently harm a child’s development, dictating how they would turn out as adults, was virtually unheard of in the Middle Ages.⁷ But by early modernity, children were idealized as precious, delicate, and in need of constant care. “Only the most careful and moral ‘rearing,’” observes Demos, “would bring the young out safe in later life; anything less might imperil their destiny irrevocably.”⁸

That the child prized did not mean, however, that children assumed center stage. Throughout these domestic revolutions of the last several generations, children moved farther and farther from the center of adult activity and more and more into a separate, privatized realm of home and school. Children not only lost steady contact with parents;

they lost contact with the wider world of nonfamily adults. The family's purpose itself became increasingly defined around personal desires, shifting progressively from the parent-child relationship to the couple.⁹ The redefined family goals of emotional companionship and fulfillment did not fit all that well with one of the results of intimate love—children. In fact, it was not too hard to see the demands of raising children as an impediment to these goals. Long before the feminism of the mid-twentieth century, therefore, parenting and children began to lose their ascribed status in the larger scheme of adult life.¹⁰ Children were to “be seen but not heard.” This English proverb was not recorded before the nineteenth century, according to one dictionary of quotations, even though it was familiar “with maids in place of children” since the 1400s.¹¹ Regardless of its exact origin, its familiar ring even today speaks a thousand words about the marginalization of “inferiors,” women and servants certainly, but especially children in modern society. In the adult business of modernity, adults gaze upon children with adoration but children had better keep quiet.

Even the artifacts used by and for children reveal the need to create a separate, restricted place for them. In a fascinating study of changes in the material culture surrounding child rearing, historian Karin Calvert observes that “most children's furniture of the seventeenth century was designed to stand babies up and propel them forward” into adulthood and away from the precariousness of early childhood. By contrast, by the middle of the nineteenth century cribs, high chairs, and perambulators replaced the objects designed to assimilate children rapidly into adult society. These new inventions served instead as barriers, carefully establishing a child's special sphere separate from the adult realm. Infant furnishing was designed to “hold infants down and

contain them in one spot.”¹² These differences reveal a change in where parents saw danger. Before parents located life’s major threat in childhood with its dangers of disease, sin, and death. The sooner parents could usher children through childhood the better. In the nineteenth century the danger moved to adulthood with its threat of worldly contamination. Childhood then emerged as a safe haven and the longer children remained there the better.

Even demographically, children have come to occupy an ever-shrinking place in adult lives. In the nineteenth century, only about 20 percent of families did not have children under 18 years old. By 1991, at least 42 percent of all families did not include children.¹³ The one most common living arrangement in the U.S. in 1998 was unmarried people and no children, doubling in just a few decades from 16 percent of all families in 1972 to 32 percent. In the twenty-first century, as more choose to postpone marriage or remain single and childless and as those who bear children live longer after their children leave home, a majority of households will not include children.¹⁴

It is the state of poor children, however, that most epitomizes the problem of the displacement of children from public view. The private sentimentalization of children and child rearing, it seems, has been inversely related to a collective indifference toward other people’s children. The contradictions are grim. Some four-to-twelve year olds have almost five billion dollars in discretionary income from gifts, allowances, and chores, while a fourth of the nation’s children live in poverty. Middle-class parents invest in private schools and educational tax-deferred funds while poor parents buy burial coverage for their child’s premature death. The U.S. economy grew by approximately 20 percent in the 1980s as four million more children moved into poverty, making up the

largest proportion of poor persons in the U.S. As Daniel Patrick Moynihan remarks, “there is no equivalent in our history for such a number or such a proportion.”¹⁵

Moral and Religious Quandaries: Children as Depraved or Innocent?

Hand in hand with these redefinitions of the child as productively useless but emotionally priceless and yet increasingly invisible was the redefinition of the child as morally and spiritually innocent. That is, childhood was also erased as a vital moral and religious phase of human development. In part, this was an inevitable consequence of who responded to the “Child Question.” In all the fuss over what would become of children, social scientists more than church leaders and theologians began to provide the answers. In one of the most striking inversions of the last three centuries, largely secular ideas replaced fundamentally religious approaches to child rearing. The theologians who did continue to speak about children, such as Friedrich Schleiermacher or Bushnell, were mostly happy to comply with the ideas of philosophers and scientists on the child’s nature. Beyond this, most theologians did not even try to address the topic at all.

Prior to the eighteenth century, parents may have treated the care of children casually, but attention to a child’s moral and religious development was anything but casual. A parent’s primary task was to suppress and control what was seen as a child’s natural depravity. Children entered the world as carriers of “original sin,” an affliction associated with pride, self, and above all, will. They, like adults, encountered daily temptations but without the aid of adult religious disciplines of self-scrutiny and self-regulation. Hence, religious advice-literature urged “breaking” and “beating down” of the will by the heads of households through weekly catechism, daily prayer and scripture

reading, repeated admonitions, and sometimes intense psychological and even physical reprimand.¹⁶

By the end of the eighteenth century, fewer people accepted this portrayal. The child's mind is a blank slate, philosopher John Locke argued, upon which anything may be imprinted. The child is by nature social and affectionate, not sinful, Jean-Jacques Rousseau said. By the mid-nineteenth century the emphasis had almost entirely shifted (although certainly not within all circles). Children were now defined as morally neutral, even "innocent" and "sacralized." One of the most powerful illustrations of this shift appears in the evolution of children's portraits. In colonial representations, children of the upper class wear grown-up fashions and adopt regal stances, with hands on hips and one leg extended, designed to indicate their future adult status. By the mid-eighteenth century, such personifications of adultlike children were replaced by the endearing, soft image of the naturally innocent child. Children were endowed with an almost celestial goodness, pure and unsullied by worldly corruption. This "Romantic child," art historian Anne Higonnet declares, "simply did not exist before the modern era."¹⁷

This change marks a major shift in understandings of moral agency and accountability. In the premodern view of *imperfect children in a fallen world*, responsibility for human evil and failure was more evenly distributed among child, parents, community, church, and society. With the rise of *perfectible children in an imperfect world*, blame for problems increasingly moved away from the child. As one historian puts it, "As God's sovereignty lessened, parental responsibility increased."¹⁸ As a child's moral duties shrank, maternal moral obligation expanded accordingly. Parents were obliged to protect children from social threats, of which there seemed to be

increasingly more. Emotional nurture more than moral and religious guidance would bring about independence, self-initiative, and creativity, the skills that seemed necessary for success in a modernized society instead of obedience to authority. If children demonstrated selfishness or aggression, the reason was that they were being improperly cared for and not something inherent to their moral or spiritual nature.

Bushnell, the most prominent theologian to address child rearing in the nineteenth century, kindly offered religious justification for this shift. His book, Christian Nurture, deified the household and Christianized emotional nurture. A child is still born spiritually and morally disabled, but a faithful family environment offered a handy remedy. In fact, every act of parental care, every word and deed, mattered. Devotion to one's own children could itself be justified as salvific.¹⁹

But if child-rearing problems were no longer related so much to sin as to emotional needs, who cared any longer what theologians had to say? Gradually parents looked less and less to the church and more and more to secular experts. In an innovation unique to the twentieth century, all facets of childcare received attention in the laboratory centers attached to major universities, such as Yale, Cornell, and Minnesota. Child experts now included not only pediatricians, psychologists, psychiatrists and educators but also sociologists and anthropologists.²⁰ Childcare manuals became the new "Bibles" for proper motherhood, climaxing in the mid-twentieth century with Dr. Spock. The best-selling 1968 edition of Baby and Child Care was released after 179 previous paperback printings of the original 1945 edition. The book sold millions of copies. Without using Freud's technical terms, Spock popularized Freudian assumptions about the absolutely crucial importance of the early years for a child's future.²¹ This pattern of

seeing faulty child rearing as the source of delinquency, poverty, violence, and other major social problems continues today. In Dr. Spock's world, the household required a kind of scientific engineering and ingenuity. Housekeeping became a matter of home economics and interior design; child rearing became a job that could be methodically mastered and even perfected.

In the past half-century, science became obsessed with a peculiarly modern question: Why do children turn out the way they do? Social scientific debates about nature and nurture largely replaced moral and religious debates about innocence and depravity. Judith Harris, author of the much-discussed The Nurture Assumption, claims that nature and nurture, what psychology used to call heredity and environment, are the “the yin and yang, the Adam and Eve, the Mom and Pop of pop psychology.”²² Parents in turn became more and more hung up about doing the right thing, having been led by science into believing that children and parents are perfectible, infinitely open to human design, rather than flawed and imperfect. Today many middle-class parents have taken the mandate to lavish the very best on one's own children to an extreme, intensely apprehensive about how one's own individual children will turn out. Significantly, this preoccupation is focused on fewer and fewer children: the number of children per household has dropped from 6.6 in 1890 to 1.9 in 1994.²³ Like a silent spiritual contagion, this preoccupation and the inevitability of failure has spread from mothers to fathers, single parents, stepparents, grandparents, and even siblings.

No wonder recent books challenging this obsession and taking an extreme opposite position sell so many copies. Harris's book itself argues that psychology has tricked us: peers matter, children socialize other children, but parents are basically not

responsible. She concludes a chapter on “What Parents Can Do” with an especially gratifying section titled “The Guilt Trip Stops Here” that reads like a recipe to ease our heavy load. Similarly, education consultant John Bruer received all sorts of hype when he challenged the “myth” that the family environment during the first three years alters brain development.²⁴ Jerome Kegan likewise declared the idea that the first two years determine a child’s development seductively false.²⁵ Do any of these books, however, offer satisfactory answers to the deeper moral and spiritual questions that have now arisen about what children need and adult responsibility for children? Unfortunately, questions about guilt, responsibility, and children can no longer be so easily resolved.

A Place for Theology? Children as Moral and Religious Agents

We stand now in the midst of a major reconstruction in our understandings of children. This reconstruction is on the “same order of magnitude,” Higonnet believes, as that which occurred with the romanticization of the child in the eighteenth century, a portrayal of childhood that has now run its course.²⁶ Just as the new construction of innocent childhood caused anxiety, resistance, and innovation in its time, so also does the reinvention of childhood today.

Three negative images dominate contemporary views of children—the Hurried child, the Market child, and the Neglected or Endangered child.²⁷ Beyond assessing the problems of the child who must check a daily planner before deciding to play with a friend or the child bombarded by advertisements as the next big growth market, it is equally important to ask why these images have taken over. They are desperate, even if poor, cultural attempts to figure out where and how children will now fit into postmodern

life. These views are particularly disturbing because they upset cherished nineteenth-century conventions of idyllic childhood, revealing the artificiality and limitations of the invention of childhood innocence. Moreover, they contest the sharp line drawn between adult and child worlds. They show the inevitable and sometimes severe consequences for children of adult actions in the so-called separate adult realm, and they insist that adults once again take children's lives more seriously, including their moral and religious struggles. Together these images point toward a more apt characterization of postmodern children. We have moved irrevocably beyond the sentimental toward some other vision, what Higonnet calls "Knowing children."

In place of the ideal of the innocent child, Knowing children call into question children's "psychic and sexual innocence by attributing to them consciously active minds and bodies."²⁸ The ideology of innocence meant that adults saw children as cute but less often as capable, intelligent, desiring individuals in their own right. Innocence allowed adults to picture children as passive, trivial, and even available to adult objectification and abuse. Absolute distinctions between adult and child especially stranded adolescents, as if they ought to metamorphose overnight from one to the other and spare adults the real complexity of human life. More than anything, however, the more realistic, less romanticized Knowing child mixes together sexual, moral, and spiritual attributes previously dichotomized. The Romantic child defined children in terms of what adults were not—"not sexual, not vicious, not ugly, not conscious, not damaged." The Knowing child presents a less simple alternative. As Higonnet remarks, children are as much about "difficulty, trouble, and tension" as they are about "celebration, admiration,

and passionate attachment.” This confronts adults with “many more challenges as well as many more pleasures than any idea of childhood has done before.”²⁹

The image of the Knowing child suggests an intriguing return of moral and religious questions. If the premodern family portrayed the child as *imperfectible in a fallen world* and the modern world saw the child as *perfectible in an imperfect world*, the postmodern child is perhaps the most morally and spiritually perplexing: *the imperfect, even potentially volatile, child in an imperfect, volatile world*. Recent events, such as child-on-child violence and school shootings, have raised serious questions about how to judge the moral and spiritual capacities of children and the responsibilities of adults. At the same time, children seem all the more vulnerable. By picturing children as innocent, blank slates, adults often abused their responsibility for earnest protection of children’s physical, moral, and spiritual well being. Adults can no longer avoid their obligations to oversee children’s moral and spiritual development by surrounding themselves with pictures of cuddly, unblemished, blissful infants.

In a word, a rich moral and religious complexity has returned along with the honesty and real ambiguity of children and parenting. How well do children really know what they need? Are their desires as susceptible as adult desires to the human temptation of wanting too much or wanting wrongly or destructively? “Can a child indeed choose to do evil?” as American religious historian Margaret Bendroth asks. “Perhaps,” she concludes, “our own times suggest the need to revisit an old and still deeply anguished question.”³⁰

Such questions are complicated by an important critique of parents and Christianity that has dominated much thinking on children in the past two decades. Lead

by psychoanalyst Alice Miller and others who avidly took up her work, people have become acutely aware of the distorted use of children to meet adult needs as well as the dangers of religious justification for such abuse.³¹ Drawing on her work, several others have spelled out in great detail how biblical and Christian images are used to justify abusive patterns.³² However, in all this discussion a huge question stands unanswered. If “much Christian theology has been rooted in the threat of punishment,” as Philip Greven argues,³³ why has Christian theology paid so little attention to creating a more child-friendly theology that sets new precedents for interactions with children? Can an alternative course be drawn from scripture and other Christian sources, a course that provides a better means of guidance and discipline? Do Christian understandings of sin and love inherently lead to child abuse or can these doctrines be read in fresh ways to empower children and parents?

Reconstructive efforts are especially needed in three broad areas: notions of sin, redemption, and children; ideas about children’s worth; and parenting as an important religious practice. In the remainder of this paper, I focus only on the first. I take up the other two at greater length elsewhere.³⁴

Given the amazingly destructive role doctrines of sin have played in condoning the harsh and abusive treatment and discipline of children, why jump into this thicket at all? While we automatically react negatively to the idea of children as sinful or depraved, the history of the “depraved adultish-child” of premodern times and the “innocent childish-child” of modern times has shown the limits of both views. The reign of the cherished, romanticized child created its own set of problems every bit as troubling as belief in the sinful, corrupt child had done. A more complex understanding of sin and

grace therefore helps us move beyond the unfortunate dichotomy of the last several centuries between child as villain and child as victim, child as wholly depraved and child as wholly innocent. It especially explains the moral and spiritual complexity of the teen years without pathologizing them. Indeed, the theological concept gives children and adults a word and way to talk about betrayal of self, others, and God, an experience that they undoubtedly share.

Second, if one can talk about sin, restoration, and children, one can then reconsider the complexities of moral and spiritual development, a topic familiar to many pre-Enlightenment theologians, but largely depleted of significant meaning today. Prior to the turn to the Romantic child, many Christian theologians described the course of a child's spiritual formation in rich and varied ways. Although it comes as a surprise to our postmodern ears, these largely forgotten views add something missing in more recent psychological views. Romanticized views freeze children in a sort of static childhood innocence threatened by external forces. Current life cycle views in psychology divide development into stages of either increasing independence or increasing relationality—enlightening but limited typologies of human nature.

By contrast, classical Christian developmental schemes capture important dimensions of a child's evolving moral and religious struggles. They trace the dynamics of an incremental accretion of responsibility and make a place for human frailty, mistakes, and destructive failures. These failures are not occasions for despair or unrelenting guilt but rather occasions for deeper moral and religious awakening, compassion, remorse, reparation, and formation. This view contests the prevalent drive to perfect parenting and individual children. It suggests a different approach, one that

includes a ready disclosure of shortcomings and the promise of reprieve. A theological framework also suggests that adults in religious communities have broader responsibilities for the formation of children well beyond their own biological offspring.

Finally, as this implies, historical notions of sin and children are far more complex and diverse than conventional negative stereotypes allow. Oversimplified conceptions need to be challenged and corrected. Not all allegations of evil in children are a form of religious contempt and abuse. In some cases, as Marcia Bunge demonstrates in her exploration of an important German Pietist of the eighteenth century, Hermann Francke, the idea of original sin and redemption actually fostered the more humane treatment of children in general. It motivated Francke to treat children with respect and kindness and, by leveling the playing field in which all are fallen, to extend such care to poor children in a deeply class-conscious society.³⁵ In a word, there is not a one-to-one correlation between ideas about original sin and harsh punishment of children. Augustine actually argues against physical reprimand, John Calvin does not advocate it, and even Jonathan Edwards, who calls children “young vipers,” does not talk about corporal punishment or “breaking the will” of sinful children. Without denying the harm done in the name of Christianity and in the name of each of these figures by their followers, the weight of the theological tradition falls strongly on the side of the child.

In an edited volume, The Child in Christian Thought, two authors actually devise their own terms to capture the nuance with which important theologians, Augustine in early Christianity (354-430) and Menno Simons as part of the Radical Reformation (1496-1561), talked about children as sinful. In her work on Augustine, Martha Stortz suggests “non-innocence” as the best phrase to describe a third possibility that Augustine

assumed between innocence and depravity. In Augustine's eyes, an infant is willing but not yet capable of causing or strong enough to cause harm, literally not harming or "in-nocens."³⁶ In a similar fashion but for a quite different Christian figure and period, Keith Graber Miller invents the phrase, "complex innocence" to capture Simon's understanding of the "absence of both faithfulness and sinfulness in children," an "innocence' . . . tempered with the acknowledgement of an inherited Adamic nature predisposed toward sinning."³⁷

Stortz does not skirt Augustine's highly ambiguous historical legacy. In the course of history, these same ideas were used to justify corporal punishment, as demonstrated by a later chapter in the same book on the harsh measures used by Jesuit and Ursuline missionaries in their work among the Huron Indians in Canada in the seventeenth century. Still, although Augustine's ideas led to later travesty, his own thinking was "remarkably nuanced." As Stortz's describes it:

He refused the romantic option of seeing children as completely innocent, born with a nature as pure as Adam's before the Fall. Equally he refused the cynic's view of infants as miniature demons in desperate need of discipline. Non-innocence fairly characterizes his attitude toward infancy. As they matured and acquired the abilities to speak and reason, children assumed a gradually increasing accountability for their actions.³⁸

Similarly, Simons develops his own understanding of an intermediary position between innocence and guilt, even though he does so for almost opposite theological purposes—as part of a bigger argument against, rather than for, infant baptism. In the process of providing scriptural, theological, and practical arguments for the excellence of adult baptism, he distinguishes between "a *nature* predisposed toward sin and actual *sinning*, disallowing the former to obliterate childhood innocence and identifying only the latter as

that for which believers have responsibility before God.”³⁹ A child’s “complex innocence” then entails the inborn tainted nature that becomes a graver cause for concern only as a child acquires the ability to discern and confess human frailty.

Allowing for sin, in turn, permitted Augustine and Simons to describe the incremental moves from non-innocence or complex innocence to increased accountability and culpability. Although Simons did not believe that moral and spiritual maturity always coincided with chronological markers, he held that parents had a serious obligation to watch for, recognize, cultivate, and celebrate the age of accountability. Augustine, by contrast, drew on common understandings of antiquity to create a quite sophisticated demarcation of the changing nature of sin and accountability through six stages from infancy to old age.

If a grasping insatiability characterized infancy, disobedience is the notable sin of the second stage of life in which children acquire language, perceive adult expectations, and learn the rules. In adolescence the non-innocence of infancy takes on an increasingly malicious form of "deliberate malice," most characteristically exemplified for Augustine in his own youthful foray with friends into a fruit garden, stealing pears prompted by nothing else than the "sheer delight of doing something wrong." Here we have not just grasping desire or even outright disobedience but the infringement of a "certain bedrock equity in the world of human society," a violation of basic human decency.⁴⁰ Stortz identifies this developmental understanding as one of Augustine’s major contributions to contemporary considerations of children. Her words are worth quoting at length:

Augustine . . . recognized boundaries between the various stages of the life cycle and found in each stage a level of accountability that was chronologically and

experientially appropriate. In particular, he evaluated the first stages of the life cycle in terms of increasing levels of moral accountability. Although they were non-innocent, infants assumed little or no accountability: they had neither language nor reason. It was fruitless to rebuke them because they could not understand language. With the acquisition of language and reason came greater accountability. He expected children to obey verbal commands and adolescents to understand the basic demands of human decency. These graduated levels of accountability implied graver consequences for transgressions. Looking back on a gang-stealing of pears, Augustine lamented the sins of his youth—but at least he knew when it was over!

By contrast [without an understanding of sin and its gradations], we confuse the boundaries between infancy, childhood, and adulthood. The Jonesboro shootings in March 1998 prompted a Texas legislator to propose extending the death penalty to eleven-year-olds. Meanwhile, parents wander out of families and marriages to find people they should have located decades earlier: themselves. They leave behind children who have probably spent their own adolescence parenting parents. As a culture we are constantly blurring the distinctions between life stages. We could learn from the boundaries Augustine saw and observed in the cycle of life.⁴¹

In other words, the non-innocence of infancy, left unnoticed and untutored, is replicated, intensified, and amplified in the outright guilt of later stages of life.

Several general observations can be made from this brief foray into classic texts. Describing virtue, accountability, and guilt in children is a daunting task. We learn from Christian theology to do so nonetheless, but to proceed with fear and trepidation. Second, in this effort we do not get much help from scriptural accounts of Jesus' life.

The New Testament simply does not make either child rearing or a child's religious formation a topic of discussion. The debates of church history about sin and baptism therefore have at least filled a gap in marking the child as a religious and moral being about to embark on a serious pilgrimage. Moreover, this view stressed the critical obligation of the Christian community for bringing children to voluntary commitments of faith and discipleship. Religious debates about children and sin then open up fresh avenues to discuss the radical understanding of parenting as a religious discipline and practice in its own right. As in Simons' worldview, discussions of sin and grace "utterly obligated parents and the Christian community to nurture children" in the faith.⁴² Religious rituals must sanction the turning points of religious formation and criteria for discipline must correspond to a child's gradual ability to speak, understand, discern, and incorporate good habits and virtues. In other words, people must take the environment, the social and family context, and parental example and guidance seriously without absolving children of gradual responsibility for their own actions or undercutting the richness of their own developing moral and religious sensibilities.

While many, many reasons lead children into trouble, the social sciences often picture the child as a victim of forces beyond her or his control, blaming parents and culture and choking out discussion of complicated questions about moral and religious formation. The tendency to attribute evil to either heredity or the environment sometimes robs the child of responsibility, will, and freedom, overlooks the complexity of parenting, and ignores the richness of religious traditions that have attempted to understand the inherent, although not inevitable, nature of human frailty and brokenness. While many people have focused on the destructive consequences of Christian views of children and

the abuse performed in Christianity's name, we must continue to plumb the depths of an alternative course drawn from scripture and other Christian sources.

As cherished conventions of childhood are upset and images of children and adult responsibilities multiply, articulating a fresh Christian reading on children and child rearing becomes more than a purely academic exercise. It becomes a matter of contributing to a reinvention that is already well underway and in need of a richer variety of perspectives, including perspectives that might address moral and spiritual questions that many secular approaches overlook.

¹ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life (New York: Free Press, 1988), xiv.

² This question is obviously closely related to what has been called the "Woman Question": Shorn by industrialization of their status and function as important participants in public life, what were women going to do with themselves?

³ Philippe Ariès, Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of the Family, Robert Baldick, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 125, originally published as L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1960).

⁴ Hugh Cunningham, "Histories of Childhood," The American Historical Review 103: 4 (October 1998): 1197 (1195-1208).

⁵ John Demos, Past, Present, and Personal: The Family and the Life Course in American History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 10, emphasis in the text. See also his A Little Commonwealth: Family life in Plymouth Colony (New York: 1970).

⁶ Viviana A. Zelizer, Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁷ Cunningham, "Histories of Childhood," 1197. See James A. Schultz, The Knowledge of Childhood in the German Middle Ages, 1100-1350 (Philadelphia, 1995).

⁸ Demos, Past, Present, and Personal, 35.

⁹ Stephanie Coontz, The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families 1600-1900 (New York: Verso, 1988), 35.

¹⁰ See Larry L. Bumpass, "What's Happening to the Family? Interactions between Demographic and Institutional Change," Demography 27: 4 (November 1990): 488 (483-498); see also Bumpass, "Is Low Fertility Here to Stay?" Family Planning Perspectives 5 (1973): 68-69.

¹¹ H. L. Mencken, A New Dictionary of Quotations on Historical Principles From Ancient and Modern Sources (New York: Knopf, 1942), 169.

¹² Karin Calvert, Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900 (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 6-7.

¹³ Dennis A. Ahlburg and Carol J. De Vita, "New Realities of the American Family," in Family in Transition, 9th ed., ed. Arlene S. Skolnick and Jerome H. Skolnick (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1997), 24 (21-29); see also Ron Lesthaeghe, "A Century of Demographic and Cultural Change in Western Europe: An Exploration of Underlying Dimensions," Population and Development Review 9: 3 (September 1983): 431 (411-435).

¹⁴ Tom W. Smith, "The Emerging 21st-Century American Family," a report from the National Opinion Research Center, available on the internet at www.norc.uchicago.edu.

¹⁵ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Social Justice in the Next Century," America 165: 6 (September 14, 1991): 136 (132-137).

¹⁶ See Demos, A Little Commonwealth, ch. 2; Philip J. Greven, Jr., The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America (New York, 1977), ch. 9.

¹⁷ Anne Higonnet, Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 15.

¹⁸ William G. McLoughlin, "Evangelical Child Rearing in the Age of Jackson: Francis Wayland's Views of When and How to Subdue the Willfulness of Children," in Growing Up in America: Children in Historical Perspective, ed. N. Ray Hiner and Joseph M. Hawes (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 96 (87-107)

¹⁹ Margaret Bendroth, "Children of Adam, Children of God: Christian Nurture in Early Nineteenth-Century America," Theology Today 56: 4 (January 2000): 502-503 (495-505).

²⁰ Mary Cable, The Little Darlings: A History of Child Rearing in America (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 186.

²¹ See A. Michael Sulman, "The Humanization of the American Child: Benjamin Spock as a Popularizer of Psychoanalytic Thought," Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences 9 (1973): 258-65.

²² Judith Rich Harris, The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do (New York: Touchstone, 1999), 1.

²³ Donald Hernandez, with David E. Myers, "Revolutions in Children's Lives," in Family in Transition, 9th ed., ed. Arlene S. Skolnick and Jerome H. Skolnick (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1997), p. 257 (256-66).

²⁴ John T. Bruer, The Myth of the First Three Years: A New Understanding of Early Brain Development and Lifelong Learning (New York: Free Press, 1999).

²⁵ Jerome Kegan, Three Seductive Ideas (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

²⁶ Higonnet, Pictures of Innocence, 193.

²⁷ For an analysis of the "market child," see Todd David Whitmore (with Tobias Winright), "Children: An Undeveloped Theme in Catholic Teaching," in The Challenge of Global Stewardship: Roman Catholic Response, ed. Maura A. Ryan and Todd David Whitmore (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1997), 161-185. David Elkind first identified the "hurried child" in the early 1980s (The Hurried Child : Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon [Reading, Mass. : Addison-Wesley, 1981]; revised edition published by Perseus Press, 1989). And the "neglected or endangered child" is my own nomenclature for a view that has received the most attention in recent years from both conservative and liberal perspectives, far too many books to cite here.

²⁸ Higonnet, Pictures of Innocence, 12.

²⁹ Higonnet, Pictures of Innocence, 224, 209.

³⁰ Bendroth, "Children of Adam, Children of God," 505.

³¹ Alice Miller, For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence, translated by Hildegarde and Hunter Hannum (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983); Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child, translated by Hildegard and Hunter Hannum (New York: Meridian, 1986); The Untouched Key: Tracing Childhood Trama in Creativity and Destructiveness, translated by Hildegard and Hunter Hannum (New York: Doubleday, 1990); Banished Knowledge, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: Doubleday, 1990); Breaking Down the Wall of Silence: The Liberating Experience of Facing Painful Truth, trans. Simon Worrall (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1991).

³² See, for example, Philip Greven, Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Donald Capps, The Child's Song: The Religious Abuse of Children (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Jennifer L. Manlowe, Faith Born of Seduction : Sexual Trauma, Body Image, and Religion (New

York: New York University Press, 1995); and Stephen Pattison, "Suffer Little Children" The Challenge of Child Abuse and Neglect to Theology," T & S 9 (1998): 36-58.

³³ Greven, Spare the Child, 8-9.

³⁴ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Let the Children Come: Christian Perspectives on Children (forthcoming, 2002, Jossey-Bass).

³⁵ Marcia Bunge, "The Child in 18th Century German Pietism: Perspectives from the Work of A. H. Francke," in The Child in Christian Thought, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 247-78.

³⁶ Martha Ellen Stortz, "Where or When was Your Servant Innocent?' Augustine on Childhood," in The Child in Christian Thought, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 82.

³⁷ Keith Graber Miller, "Complex Innocence, Obligatory Nurturance, and Parental Vigilance: 'The Child' in the Work of Menno Simons," in The Child in Christian Thought, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 194.

³⁸ Stortz, "Where or When was Your Servant Innocent?" 100.

³⁹ Miller, "Complex Innocence, Obligatory Nurturance, and Parental Vigilance," 201, emphasis in text.

⁴⁰ Stortz, "Where or When was Your Servant Innocent?" 85.

⁴¹ Stortz, "Where or When was Your Servant Innocent?" 101-2.

⁴² Miller, "Complex Innocence, Obligatory Nurturance, and Parental Vigilance," 194.