



Feminism, Children, and Mothering Three Books and Three Children Later

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore
Vanderbilt University Divinity School
bonnie.miller-mclemore@vanderbilt.edu

Over the past twenty years, my research has been shaped by relational commitments. I did not set out to write what became a trilogy on mothers, children, and parenting. The progression from study of motherhood to childhood to family spirituality was driven more by passion or demand and makes more sense in retrospect than it did at the time. But I doubt I would have felt compelled to fill what I saw as a big void in theology on mothers and children if I had not had a child when I first started teaching in 1986. Even though I had three sons by the time *Also a*

Mother appeared in 1994 (the toddler in the romanticized Impressionist picture on its cover was close to the age of my youngest), I see now that each book has a telling correspondence to each child. *Also a Mother* marks the dilemmas of the multiple roles that arise with the first child.¹ *Let the Children Come* reflects the welcome of a second son and a turn of subject matter from adults to children.² *In the Midst of Chaos* springs from the confusion of finding ourselves outnumbered as parents.³ A student in a class on family religious practices once remarked that all the books on our reading list that urged fresh appreciation for everyday spirituality and a redemption of chaos were written by parents of three children.⁴ He did not think this was purely coincidental. Neither do I.

I also see that I have been writing a sort of protest theology—in a minor key, not contesting major injustices, such as poverty and war, but wondering about the unimaginative neglect of basic dimensions of life. *Also a Mother* asks about the absence of serious reflection on motherhood among theologians, feminist and non-feminist alike, and the implications of such neglect for a range of issues from god imagery to sin and sacrifice to scriptural interpretation. *Let the Children Come* insists that contemporary theology has been incredibly adult-centric, ignoring

¹ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

² Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

³ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *In the Midst of Chaos: Care of Children as Spiritual Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

⁴ For example, Ernest Boyer, *A Way in the World: Family Life as Spiritual Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) and David Robinson, *The Family Cloister: Benedictine Wisdom for the Home* (New York: Crossroad, 2000).

children in the construction of doctrine. *In the Midst of Chaos* claims that prominent Western assumptions about spirituality and faith have left out children and those who care for them.

For this essay, I return to this corpus with two questions in mind. The first arises out of a request to provide an overview of my work on children for a conference by scholar and friend Cristina Grenholm and her colleagues in the Church of Sweden's Secretariat of Theology and Ecumenism. What are some key insights that have shaped my research? Drawing especially on my book, *Let the Children Come* and its sequel, *In the Midst of Chaos*, I identify three awakenings: (1) recognition of children as subjects; (2) encounter with cultural constructions of children; and (3) realization of the poverty of conventional models of spirituality. I explore each of these three briefly before turning to a second question they provoke that brings me back full circle to motherhood, the first book with which I began: What is the nature of the relationship between children and women and, related to this, between women's studies, now several decades old, and the more recent advent of childhood studies? Or, to put the question in a more proactive and provocative way, how do families and society secure the welfare of children *and* parents, especially when their needs conflict as they inevitably do?

As always, the stress and strain of familial change shapes my argument. I began thinking about this second question as my middle son left for college almost three years ago.⁵ When I returned to it this fall in preparation for my plenary address, my youngest departed. Without meaning to sound melodramatic, each departure has been like a reverse pregnancy, sometimes accompanied by an almost physical sensation of grief, a kind of welling up, breathlessness, and

⁵ Initial research was done for a session at the American Academy of Religion, "Children, Mothers, and Mothering: Feminist Religious Perspectives," in 2007 in San Diego.

wrenching. I am almost back to where I began when I started teaching twenty-four years ago when my first son was nine months. In slow motion metamorphosis I am getting small parts of my life back, but losing more than I expected.⁶ Of course, my children's departures are *not* major losses when compared to the kinds of child loss one can suffer—separation from children by divorce, imprisonment, rebellion, abandonment, abuse, injury, illness, or death. Indeed, children need to leave home. So the loss is a gain. But all these experiences stand on a continuum that marks the odd and intense nature of the relationship between mothers and children.

These ruminations suggest an initial response to my second question. In my view, feminist theologians (and others in general) have failed to reconcile or adequately theorize the *oddly unequal or lopsided nature* of the mother-child relationship and the implications of this for childhood and women's studies. Children do not miss parents in the same way and I would not expect or want my own children to do so. My thesis, three books and three children later, is that childhood and women studies ignore at their peril the deep interconnections *and* the deep discord between mothers and children. Moreover, as I will argue, avid interest in children and the recent advent of childhood studies in theology must not come at the cost of women and women's studies. Their welfare is intricately interconnected.

Recognition of Children as Subjects

For ten years between 1990 and 2000, I wrote on women, studied mothers at length, taught courses on families and work, and was involved in a major grant on families and religion.

⁶ See Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Mundane Grief," in *Reflections on Grief and Spiritual Development*, ed. Andrew J. Weaver and Howard W. Stone (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 96-104.

In all this, I never noticed that children were not quite featured as the subject.⁷ Children did not seem to matter to theologians in books and courses on Christian doctrine. They were seldom seen as primary actors in scripture by biblical scholars or in sermons shaped by this approach to reading scripture. People rarely wondered how children experienced the rituals to which religions subjected them. Even in religious education, they sometimes disappeared because people did not really see them as subjects themselves. They were studied and taught, seldom teachers or actors with voice, place, and contribution. Even in the best feminist theological scholarship on family and mutuality, children remained mostly a tough reality with which women have had to deal. Although seen as a powerful cause for justice, they were still more an object than concrete embodied players in the material landscape of faith and family dilemmas.

Overlooking children is easy today. A few years ago while visiting a church where two colleagues and their daughters worshiped, I stood up next to them as the minister invited us to pass the peace. Left, right, front, behind, and I thought I was done. Passing the peace goes quickly when you do not know many people in the congregation. Then my friend tapped my arm and pointed down, down to her daughter waiting for me to notice her and shake her hand. I had just skipped right past her. How had I overlooked this greeting, author of *Let the Children Come*, a book all about recognizing children more fully? I, the mother who had glared at well-meaning adults in my own congregation when they looked right past my own sons as toddlers, children, and youths, greeted only adults, and taught my kids to expect adults to overlook them? I, the person of faith who has turned to the Synoptic Gospels again and again trying to figure out

⁷ For an early effort to understand this oversight, see Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Children and Religion in the Public Square: ‘Too Dangerous and Too Safe, Too Difficult and Too Silly,’” *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 385-401.

exactly what is meant by the story of Jesus paying attention to children? Me. Author, scholar, mother, friend of children. I failed to pass the peace to this one child waiting.

Adults do not see children. They are too short; they move too quickly; they move too slowly. They move at a pace we have forgotten and no longer understand. Most of us—all besides those truly gifted for working with kids—are honestly baffled by them. I do not want to stereotype or exaggerate the differences between adults and children but sometimes we do seem foreign to each other. It is hard to say when adults cross the age threshold but most of us cross it and then, forever after, kids seem a bit incomprehensible. We have left the world they inhabit and it takes imagination to reenter it. This can even happen with our own children. In fact, sometimes those with whom we are most deeply connected can seem the most foreign.

The problem of children's invisibility is more than a personal quirk of adulthood, however. The very structure of contemporary living spaces makes it harder to correct this. Our physical surroundings even exaggerate the estrangement. Churches in the United States, for example, have educational wings and middle-class homes have recreation rooms in the basement or upstairs, ostensibly for the benefit of kids. But they can sometimes add a further impediment to seeing and including children. They are off in some other part of the house, building, and world. Isolating children in the home, classroom, Sunday school, and so forth deprives adults of moral and religious lessons that we can learn from them.

I am not alone, of course, in noticing this and voicing concern. On almost every count listed above—doctrine, scriptural interpretation, children's understanding of religious ritual, religious education—scholars have undertaken important projects to broaden the inclusion of

children.⁸ I am indebted to a range of scholars who have helped turn the tide, beginning with Marcia Bunge who gathered together a panel of US scholars in theology a little over ten years ago to consider classic Christian theologians on children. Bunge's edited book, *The Child in Christian Thought*, is a pioneering text.⁹ One contribution of this early work was the recognition that although children sometimes served as chest pieces in doctrinal debates over original sin and we remember many theologians, such as Augustine or Calvin, as much for the damage they did in depicting children as sinful as for their contributions, children at least occupied an important concern for many classic male leaders. Children had a place in Christian conversion and community as members of the body of Christ and as a crucial responsibility shared by all baptized Christians.

By contrast, many modern and mostly male twentieth-century theologians forgot about children in their systematic schemas of Christian belief. The presumed subject in theological treatises across the centuries has been the white European or European-American male adult. In the last century, academic departments went even further. They juxtaposed children to adults in a classic modern hegemonic binary and farmed out concerns about childhood to areas with notoriously less status, such as religious education. In a parallel process, many churches built new wings to house Christian education programs where children and mostly female Christian

⁸ See, for example, Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*; David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005); John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010); Susan Ridgely Bales, *When I Was a Child: Children's Interpretations of First Communion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005); Marcia J. Bunge, Terence E. Fretheim, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, eds., *The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); and Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005).

⁹ Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

education directors resided. Good intentions went into the creation of specialized education for children. But their exile in new annexes was a troubling unintended consequence.

Inspired in part by the conversation Bunge began, many other voices have joined the swelling chorus asking us to see children anew.¹⁰ This burst of scholarly production does not mean the problem has completely dissipated. Religious studies scholar Paula Cooley argues that children still “constitute, metaphorically speaking, an unexplored terrain in social production.”¹¹ The “lack of attention to children as religious agents . . . and to the role of the child in religious practices” arises in part because of “limited assumptions and models” of human agency as a static immaterial abstraction. One cannot understand adults, however, if one does not understand

¹⁰ The list of US publications on children in Christian theology in the past decade is voluminous. In addition to books in the prior two footnotes, see Pamela D. Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000); Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Growing Up Protestant: Parents, Children, and Mainline Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); J. Bradley Wigger, *The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love and Grace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Karen-Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004); Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005); Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Kristin Herzog, *Children and Our Global Future* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005); Miller-McLemore, *In the Midst of Chaos*; Pamela D. Couture, *Child Poverty: Love, Justice and Social Responsibility* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007); Don S. Browning and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, eds., *Children and Childhood in American Religions* (forthcoming, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Don S. Browning and Marcia Bunge, eds., *Children and Childhood in World Religions* (forthcoming, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007). This list does not include literature in historical and biblical studies or in other religions. For helpful summaries of the developments in general, see John Wall, “Childhood Studies, Hermeneutics, and Theological Ethics,” *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 4 (October 2006): 523-548 and Marcia J. Bunge, “The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understandings of Children and Childhood,” *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 4 (October 2006): 549-579.

¹¹ Paula Cooley, “Neither Seen Nor Heard: The Absent Child in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of Childhood and Religion* 1, no. 1 (March 2010): 4. www.childhoodandreligion.com.

children. In her words, “to the extent that children are neglected as proper subjects, themselves agents of a sort and persons in their own right, the adults studied remain abstracted from their full historical context, not sufficiently entangled in contexts of power.”¹² To include children more fully, we need a richer view of agency as a capacity that emerges over time, remains open-ended, and always involves “dependencies of one kind or another,” whether economic, environmental, or emotional.¹³

Changing Cultural Constructions of Children

Why have children seemed so invisible, their agency so compromised? This oversight seems especially odd because it comes paradoxically at a time when many societies, the US in particular, believe that they love children more than ever. How could children disappear in an era of history that, according to one renowned historian, created a brand new category and name for the very phase of life called childhood?¹⁴ What is it about the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution that displaced children?

A profound change in cultural constructions of children occurred with the advent of modernity that fostered their invisibility. Although in pre-modern and early modern times children remained subordinates in a highly structured, patriarchal family, they had essential

¹² Cooley, “Neither Seen Nor Heard,” 3-4.

¹³ Cooley, “Neither Seen Nor Heard,” 15.

¹⁴ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of the Family*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 125. Originally published as *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1960). He saw the “idea of childhood” as a “discovery” of the seventeenth century. Although this theory is now widely debated, he argued that childhood was not considered a distinct developmental stage until this time. Children were perceived largely as tiny adults.

roles.¹⁵ While children may have had to submit to the arbitrary authority of harsh fathers or weary mothers, they knew where they stood in relationship to the family. With the advent of industrialization, children lost their place as contributing members of household economies. This shift occurred more slowly for girls and for working-class and slave children. But with emancipation, mandatory education, and child labor laws in the last century—important progressive goods in themselves—the end result was much the same for almost all children. No longer participants in home industries or farmed out as servants, apprentices, or factory workers, children no longer increased a family’s chances of survival but instead drained limited resources. Their position in the family changed dramatically from asset to burden. Children cost parents. The purpose of the family itself became increasingly defined around intimate adult love more than care of the next generation.¹⁶ The demands of raising children seemed an impediment to adult fulfillment rather than an essential aspect.¹⁷ Even demographically, children have come to occupy an ever-shrinking place in adult lives. 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.¹⁸ Public surveys

¹⁵ See John Demos, *Past, Present, and Personal: The Family and the Life Course in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 10. See also Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

¹⁶ See Stephanie Coontz, *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families 1600-1900* (New York: Verso, 1988), 35.

¹⁷ See Larry L. Bumpass, “What’s Happening to the Family? Interactions between Demographic and Institutional Change,” *Demography* 27, no. 4 (November 1990): (483-498); see also Bumpass, “Is Low Fertility Here to Stay?” *Family Planning Perspectives* 5 (1973): 68-69.

¹⁸ Tom W. Smith, “The Emerging 21st-Century American Family,” a report from the National Opinion Research Center, available on the internet at <http://cloud9.norc.uchicago.edu/dlib/sc-42.htm>.

now calculate just how much it costs adults to raise a child. This public pricing of children as a major liability, something foreign less than a century ago, now epitomizes the revolution that has occurred in children's daily lives.

Hand in hand with these redefinitions of children as productively useless and socially invisible was the redefinition of the child as emotionally priceless and morally and spiritually innocent.¹⁹ Prior to the eighteenth century, parents may have treated the care of children casually, but attention to children's moral and religious development was anything but casual. A parent had the serious task of controlling and reforming what was seen as a child's natural depravity. By the end of the eighteenth century, fewer people accepted this portrayal. Children were redefined as morally neutral, even innocent and sacralized. Despite the many social and theological goods that came with these new views, including appreciation for individual freedom and human rights that have fostered new respect for children, this construction of the romanticized child marks a diminishment in their moral and spiritual agency and accountability. In the pre-modern view of *imperfect children in a fallen world*, responsibility for human evil and failure was more evenly distributed among children, parents, community, church, and society. With the rise of *perfectible children in an imperfect world*, blame for problems increasingly moved away from children.²⁰

This moral shift placed new onerous weight on women's shoulders. The very idea that improper maternal love could permanently harm a child's development, dictating how they

¹⁹ See Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

²⁰ 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 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 96.

would turn out as adults, was virtually unheard of in the Middle Ages.²¹ But by early modernity, anything less than the “most careful and moral ‘rearing’” was seen as a problem that “might imperil their destiny irrevocably,” in the words of historian John Demos.²² Horace Bushnell, the most prominent Protestant theologian to address child rearing in the nineteenth century, offered religious justification for this shift in his book, *Christian Nurture*. Devotion to one’s own children could itself be justified as salvific.²³

We now stand in the midst of a third major reconstruction in our understandings of children on the “same order of magnitude,” according to art historian Anne Higonnet, as the reconstruction that occurred with the romanticization of the child in the eighteenth century, a portrayal of childhood that has now run its course.²⁴ Just as the new construction of innocent childhood caused anxiety, resistance, and innovation in its time, so also does the reinvention of childhood today. In reclaiming children’s subjectivity and agency, we have moved irrevocably beyond the sentimental toward some other vision, what Higonnet calls “*Knowing children*.” The ideology of innocence meant that adults saw children as cute but less often as capable, intelligent, desiring individuals in their own right. Knowing children call into question children’s

²¹ See Hugh Cunningham, “Histories of Childhood,” *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 4 (October 1998): 1197; and James A. Schultz, *The Knowledge of Childhood in the German Middle Ages, 1100-1350* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

²² Demos, *Past, Present, and Personal*, 35.

²³ Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (1861; repr., Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994). See Margaret Bendroth, “Children of Adam, Children of God: Christian Nurture in Early Nineteenth-Century America,” *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (January 2000): 502-503 and Bendroth, *Growing Up Protestant*, 19.

²⁴ Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 193.

“psychic and sexual innocence by attributing to them consciously active minds and bodies.”²⁵

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.”²⁶

Changing Understandings of Children and Spirituality

Knowing children suggest the need to reconsider standard assumptions about spirituality and faith development. Children *de facto* create problems for conventional models. For those who seek the divine in solitude and silence or in organized worship, children—their noise, demands, and distractions—are a major impediment. Despite popular movements and publications affirming everyday spirituality and despite longer standing religious traditions, such as Ignatian and Benedictine spirituality, which have encouraged the integration of faith into daily life, spirituality as something that happens outside ordinary time and space, on the mountaintop, in the desert, at the retreat center, within formal religious institutions, or within the private

²⁵ Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*, 12.

²⁶ Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*, 209, 224.

confines of one's soul still pervades Western society.²⁷ This understanding diminishes the role and value of children, leaving them and those who care for them confused about how to embody a spiritual life in the midst of daily activity and demands.

Children also baffle those who define mature faith around the linear acquisition of adult reason or knowledge. For over two decades, Christian scholarship on children's faith has been captivated by categories of cognitive development, formulated by psychologist Jean Piaget, elaborated by moral philosopher Lawrence Kohlberg, and systematized by practical theologian James Fowler.²⁸ In the last quarter of the twentieth century, Fowler's *Stages of Faith* held sway in U.S. in particular.²⁹ He offers a six-stage portrait of religious development from the primal faith of infants to the literal mythic beliefs of children and conventional commitments of young adults to more universal self-transcending ideals in later life. Academicians and educators alike

²⁷ For efforts in the Christian tradition to bridge contemplation and action, see Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, S. J. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951); Timothy Fry, ed., *The Rule of Saint Benedict in English* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982); and Marilyn Schauble and Barbara Wojciak, eds., *A Reader's Version of the Rule of Saint Benedict in Inclusive Language* (Erie, PA: Benet Press, 1989). For literature applying the Benedictine rule to family life, see Delores R. Leckey, *The Ordinary Way: A Family Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984) and *Living with Contradiction: An Introduction to Benedictine Spirituality* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1989); and Joan Chittister, OSB, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990).

²⁸ B. Inhelder and J. Piaget, *The Growth of Logical Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (New York: Basic Books, 1958); Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Psychology of Moral Development: The Nature and Validity of Moral Stages* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984); and James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

²⁹ For more detailed exploration of this problem, see Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Whither the Children? Childhood in Religious Education," *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 4 (October 2006): 635-657.

have made good use of the theory to make distinctions between less mature and more mature faith and to design curricula sensitive to children's cognitive and moral readiness for grasping religious ideas. But it is hard to have a stage theory that does not overvalue the final adult frame. In fact, stage theory often functions as a contemporary version of the early Greek and Christian division between the unreasonable child and the rational adult. On closer inspection, Fowler's primary subject is not quite the child. He talks less in his book about "being children today" and more about "becoming adult," as his second book is titled.³⁰ Stage theory does include children and it does appreciate their faith.³¹ But it also perpetuates a second problem—the chronological divide between young and old.

Models of spirituality shaped by these two views of quiet space and linear growth in time often exclude children and those who care for them. Where the early Christian tradition perpetuates a spatial dichotomy of inner over outer (mind over body, intellectual over material), developmental theory presumes a chronological divide between young and old (immature and mature, small and big).

Knowing children challenge these conventional views and suggest the need for an expanded understanding of spirituality that embraces the whole of family living in all its beauty and misery. Their spirituality takes shape in the concrete activities of the day-to-day and the varied contexts where children and adults live together (e.g., playing, working, eating, talking,

³⁰ James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

³¹ Some scholars, such as Catherine Stonehouse, have made up for the deficit in Fowler by illustrating how developmental theory can help adults "join children on the spiritual journey." See *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

learning, fighting, reconciling, arriving, departing, and otherwise making a home).³² This is not to say that children rule out the importance of silence and solitude as part of the Christian life or that there are not important cognitive markers of faith's development. Rather children demand a widening of the circle of faith to include them more fully. Children actually exemplify a wisdom that somehow emerges in the chaos itself. In other words, children encourage us to reconsider ways in which spirituality for children and adults takes shape in the midst of everyday rituals, practices, and habits that shape daily life.

Children also have spiritual abilities that defy conventional chronological categories of faith development. Religious faith does not develop in quite the same way as other parts of our bodies and minds from small to large or from immature to mature. Growing up, in fact, does not guarantee spiritual development. Like philosophical imagination, spirituality evolves in more curious and less quantifiable ways. It depends on freshness or vitality that is as likely to be lost in adolescence and adulthood as gained. "All too often," philosopher Gareth Matthews observes in his research on children, "maturity brings with it staleness and uninventiveness."³³ It also brings, I would add, a desire to conform to convention, greater fears about life, and increasingly inflexible beliefs and opinions. Children by contrast have an eye for incongruity and perplexity. They are curious. They communicate what they see with candor. Sometimes educational settings

³² For further comment on faith as a way of life, see Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra in Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997). Robert Wuthnow makes a similar argument about the influence of everyday practice in *Growing Up Religious: Christians and Jews and Their Journeys of Faith* (Boston: Beacon, 1991).

³³ Gareth B. Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 16-18.

actually discourage just these attributes and, in doing so, more imaginative philosophical thinking and deeper faith. According to Tobin Hart, a psychologist who has spent several years doing empirical research with children, “adult-centric, rationalistic, and institutionalized understandings of spirituality” have misled us by equating spirituality with reason and verbal acuity. Such understandings assume a certain kind of “abstract thinking and language ability,” he argues, and a certain kind of “God talk” or way of thinking and talking about God and other religious concepts. Focus on the verbal and the conceptual sometimes obscures the extent to which children’s spirituality is tactile, shaped in part by what they sense and know physically, by what they do and how they respond. Children’s spirituality entails what Hart calls “an activity of knowing.” It is not just what they know conceptually or what they say verbally but how it gets “walked out into” their lives and translated into “character and compassion.”³⁴

Women and Children at Odds: Living the Tension

New appreciation for children’s subjectivity, knowledge, and spirituality has intellectual and pastoral implications. I want to focus on just one outcome that leads back to where I began over twenty years ago—the impact of children on women. Scholars such as historian Peter Stearns have traced the rise in “anxious parenting” over the last century.³⁵ In particular, Nancy Pottishman Weiss argues that the post-World War II shift in patterns of child rearing led to an

³⁴ Tobin Hart, “The Mystical Child: Glimpsing the Spiritual World of Children,” *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 1, 3, 5, 11.

³⁵ Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

emphasis on the “well being of the child *at the expense of the mother.*”³⁶ This leads me to wonder about the motivation behind the new interest in childhood studies. I cannot help but feel a certain suspicion about the sudden increase in intellectual time and effort. What does the creation of childhood studies as a new academic area mean? Where does it fit within this history? Does fresh attention to children divert attention from women and undermine women’s progress? Does advocacy for children come at the expense of mothers?

Whereas scholars in social sciences and humanities have by and large published a great deal on feminism, motherhood, and children as interrelated concerns, scholars in religion have written comparatively little. When these topics are studied at all, they mostly explore one or the other—women *or* children. I can almost count on one hand the scholars who have joined these two.³⁷ A few years ago, when the Steering Committee for Childhood Studies and Religion Consultation co-sponsored a session at the American Academy of Religion on “children in feminist religious thought and practice in a variety of traditions” with the Women and Religion Section, they received only a few proposals. Slim results need not necessarily imply disinterest. But it does make one wonder. It behooves us to ask what is going on more generally?

³⁶ Nancy Pottishman Weiss, “The Mother-Child Dyad Revisited: Perceptions of Mothers and Children in Twentieth-Century Child-Rearing Manuals,” in *Childhood in America*, ed. Paula S. Fass and Mary Ann Mason (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 56; emphasis added. The original article appears in *American Quarterly* 29 (Winter 1977): 519–46.

³⁷ There are a few classic articles indirectly linking women and children—Valerie Saiving’s *Journal of Religion* article that kicked off twentieth-century feminist theology in the 1960s, Beverly Harrison’s essay on women’s anger and love, Christine Gudorf’s effort to re-think parental sacrifice—and a few books or articles that touch on mothers and children together by Karen Rabuzzi, Margaret Hammer, Megan McKenna, Delores Williams, Pamela Couture, Laura Zoloth, Cristina Traina, and Rosemary Barciauskaas and Debra Hull in the US and Anne Thurston and Margaret Hebblethwaite in the UK.

Disinterest in women and children as joint topics in religion makes sense. Women and children have been repeatedly defined in relationship to each other *to their detriment* (e.g., the single mother *and* the neglected child, the working mother *and* the hurried child, the narcissistic mother *and* the wounded child etc.). Women and children have been lumped together in the private haven of the home, ostensibly for their protection, and rendered invisible. So, as feminist theologians joined feminists more generally in defending the viability of the choice not to have children and including women more fully, we justifiably overlooked children. A woman can have a full and meaningful life without motherhood and children. Similarly, childhood scholars in religion have bracketed women's studies in order to give children a fair hearing. As was true for women a few decades before, children deserve to be studied on their own merits, freed of their embeddedness in the family. They are not merely a subset of families or schools but have active roles in and are affected by a variety of other social contexts. Seeing women and children as full and separate subjects apart from their familial connections is one of the key advances of both women's and children's studies.

Nonetheless, sharp separation of the subject of children and the subject of women is problematic. Children and women's plight and welfare are intricately interconnected, even if neither subject should be reduced to its relationship to the other. Any work we can do to trace the intricate connections *and* name the conflicts or discord between mothers and children and between women's studies and children's studies will advance the efforts of both areas.

Necessary Connections, Often Overlooked

Women and children are connected in at least two ways, the first more personal, the second more social. Mothers and children share deep emotional bonds. Having children creates an unrelenting tug of attachment, as French feminist Julie Kristeva argues, what she calls a pain that “comes from the inside” and “never remains apart”: “You may close your eyes,” she says, “teach courses, run errands, . . . think about objects, subjects.” But a mother is marked by a tenacious link to another that begins at conception and never quite goes away.³⁸ This is potentially true for men but as long as women physically bear and/or tend children, people cannot ignore the potential impact and should talk cautiously about equity between mothers and fathers as “easily attainable.”³⁹

This deep child-mother bond captures epic imagination. Harry Potter and J. K. Rowling’s seven-book series is a wonderful recent example. In *Harry Potter* and another classic battle between good and evil, *The Lord of the Rings*, it is ordinary affection and friendship, whether between Frodo and Sam and the rest of the Fellowship of the Ring or between Harry, Hermione, Ron, Dumbledore’s Army, and their extended families, that turn the tide and cause good to triumph over evil. But there is a major difference between these two classics that surely grows out of Rowling’s identity as mother. In the end, for Rowling it is the affection of a mother for a

³⁸Julia Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 166. See also Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Also A Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 143 for my original discussion of this.

³⁹Alice S. Rossi, “A Biosocial Perspective on Parenting,” *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 106 (Spring 1977): 24 (1-31). See also Noelle Oxenhandler, *The Eros of Parenthood: Explorations in Light and Dark* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001) for a more recent attempt to explore the denial and fear of erotic aspects of this attachment. She both celebrates and seeks the limits of this passion, seeking a middle ground between the extremes of fusion with and neglect of the child.

child, off in our peripheral vision, almost backstage, that makes the difference. In the final book, it is Narcissa of the malevolent Malfoy family—of all people—who is the “flaw in the plan” of evil, the title of the final chapter. At the climax, her loyalty ultimately goes to her son Draco, not to the powerful, fear-instilling Voldemort.⁴⁰ This is dramatically hammered home several pages later when another mother, Mrs. Weasley, kills Narcissa’s even more malevolent older sister Bellatrix Lestrange to save her daughter, screaming “NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH”—a line few will censure because it seems so right. All this cannot help but remind the reader once again of the maternal act from which the entire series springs—Harry’s mother Lily placing herself between her infant son and Voldemort’s killing curse. *Harry Potter* is an ode to mother-child connections. It is the bond between mother and child that Voldemort cannot predict, fathom, or defeat.

The child-mother attachment, however, is tainted by social, economic, and political complications, a second connection of a different sort. Children and women share “certain crucial social characteristics,” in British sociologist Ann Oakley’s words, as members of “social minority groups” who face “collective discrimination.”⁴¹ In a positive sense, both have fought similar battles to obtain recognition and rights in families and society. More negatively speaking, biases against children and women are linked with racism and colonization. In the colonizing Western world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, woman, children, and non-white races

⁴⁰ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007), 726, 736, chap. 37.

⁴¹ Ann Oakley, “Women and Children First and Last: Parallels and Difference between Children’s and Women’s Studies,” in *Children’s Childhood: Observed and Experienced*, ed. Berry Mayall (London: Falmer Press, 1994), 14.

were often all called “primitive”—all child-like, irrational, and in need of adult male help. Oakley names three other less obvious political connections: our shared construction as “less than adult” or incapable of “behaving in adult ways” defined in male terms; the “critical and even hostile attitudes” members have toward others internal to the group as a result of our own powerlessness and exclusion (e.g., so women in many religious traditions oppose women’s ordination; kids bully, exclude, and, most troubling, kill other kids); and our common “constitution as a social problem” that lumps us together as a stigmatized group in crisis (e.g., single mothers; delinquent children).⁴² Statistics on poverty are particularly revealing. “Women are more likely to live in poverty than men, and children are more likely to live in poverty than adults,” Oakley reports. But “families with children are generally the poorest households, and families consisting of a mother and a child or children alone the poorest of all.”⁴³

Although academic research is beginning to catch up, fiction, film, and memoir offer hints about how children experience these two kinds of bonds of affection and discrimination. If we can take the best-selling appeal of *Harry Potter* as reflective of children’s thoughts and desires, children hope for a kind of undying affection from those with whom they are most closely connected, mothers in particular. They want this from friends but they know their life and the obliteration of evil depends in part on receiving love and help from adults. We can also surmise that they recognize their own position of social invisibility and subjugation in relationship to mothers. They seek and find magical ways to subvert this.

⁴² Oakley, “Women and Children First and Last,” 15-17.

⁴³ Oakley, “Women and Children First and Last,” 17.

Disparities and Discord, Also Repressed

We cannot understand the full complexity of the mother-child relationship without also understanding the discord and asymmetry between women and children, not just their personal and political bonds. Children have been and remain largely women's social responsibility. Caring for children is work. "What all women have in common," political scientist Hilda Scott asserted in the 1980s, "is that they share most of the unpaid work of the world." More than two decades have passed since Scott wrote these words in the 1980s but the reality remains relatively unchanged. This unpaid work "underpins the world's economy, yet it is peripheral to the world's economy as men define it, and therefore has no value."⁴⁴ According to 2006 survey data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, one in five men engages in some kind of housework on an average day, while more than half of all women do. Marriage and children increase men's earnings; they take a toll on women's income. All this puts mothers and children at odds.

The difference runs deeper, however. This material and political discord between women and children corresponds to a second emotional or personal discontinuity. Mothers make room for children in their lives and bodies (literally) in a way that children do not, cannot, and should not make room for adults. Children owe parents a great deal, what Jewish tradition describes as honor and respect.⁴⁵ But they do not owe parents what parents have given them, they could not give such a thing if they tried nor would most parents desire this. As Dutch priest and philosopher Roger Burggraeve argues, children (and all of us by implication) are radically

⁴⁴ Hilda Scott, *Working Your Way to the Bottom: The Feminization of Poverty* (London: Pandora, 1984), x, 3.

⁴⁵ See Elliot N. Dorff, "Parents and Children," in *Love Your Neighbor and Yourself: A Jewish Approach to Modern Personal Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003), chap. 4.

passive in at least this one important sense: They/we “cannot conceive” them/ourselves. A child “has to be conceived.” This is the condition of being human. We cannot even choose this passivity. Any autonomy a child achieves is always dependent on an “existence that comes from elsewhere.” As much as modern theory has helped us talk about agency, including children’s agency, a child “never begins as an active agent.”⁴⁶ From a feminist perspective, I would argue that this asymmetry is tempered, sometimes immediately as the egg and sperm initiate their own mating or as the embryo/fetus and infant provokes parental response. But I would agree with Burggraeve that the child can only become an agent within a “pre-original asymmetry” and the “original asymmetry will never completely disappear.” In other words, the child is always “second” in relationship to its own developing consciousness and “with respect to those who went before it.” In his words, “The child has parents and can never become its own parent.” Adult responsibility for children is therefore marked by a fundamental non-reciprocity. “Willingly or not” parents “place the child in the world.” Those who give birth “immediately realize that they are responsible for this child” and “this responsibility is essentially marked by non-reciprocity.” Adults can shirk this, but they cannot completely deny it.⁴⁷

Parents also find themselves caught up in what Burggraeve and Swedish scholar and church theologian Cristina Grenholm call a “strange heteronomy” or lack of control, lack of

⁴⁶ Roger Burggraeve, “The Ethical Voice of the Child: Plea for a Chaistic Responsibility in the Footsteps of Levinas,” in *Children’s Voices: Perspectives in Ethics, Theology, and Religious Education*, ed. Annemie Dillen (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 271-273. He builds on Emmanuel Levinas, in particular *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague, Boston, London: Nijhoff, 1961), even though Levinas “did not develop direct, specific insights” on the child-parent relationship. Burggraeve argues convincingly that ideas about responsibility for the Other in Levinas are suggestive for the adult-child relationships.

⁴⁷ Burggraeve, “The Ethical Voice of the Child,” 274.

autonomy, and dependence in relationship to a child.⁴⁸ They can choose to have *a* child but “they can never decide to conceive of ‘*this*’ child,” in Burggraeve’s words.⁴⁹ As Grenholm says, the child born is always other than expected. For Burggraeve, this paradoxically elevates the child. “We do not teach and instruct the child,” he says. “First the child has to speak to us and teach us. Every parental and educational relationship has therefore to begin . . . with a form of humility and obedience to the child as our teacher.”⁵⁰ Adults have to make a radical leap of comprehension to know children and to avoid using them as a means a means to some other end—the most serious act of violence with which all parents struggle. Sometimes one’s social situation or one’s own dysfunctional childhood makes this almost impossible. Sadly enough, power over children is all too often the only real influence women possess. We do not always use it well.⁵¹

Literature and film, developmental studies, observation of children, and our own memories themselves suggest that children also experience the dissonance, inequity, and conflict between themselves and their mothers. They feel the vulnerable and sometimes helpless position into which this relationship places them, sometimes unfairly, sometimes even abusively. They need adults in ways that adults do not need them. They seldom have the physical or social means

⁴⁸ Cristina Grenholm, “Mary Among Stereotypes and Dogmas: A Feminist Critique and Reinterpretation of the Patriarchal Cornerstone of Motherhood,” *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 15 (2007): 23-25. See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 277.

⁴⁹ Burggraeve, “The Ethical Voice of the Child,” 275.

⁵⁰ Burggraeve, “The Ethical Voice of the Child,” 279.

⁵¹ See Julia Hanigsberg and Sara Ruddick, eds., *Mother Troubles: Rethinking Contemporary Maternal Dilemmas* (Boston: Beacon, 1999).

or the emotional or intellectual maturity to resist the mishandling of this complex inequity and heteronomy between generations.⁵²

Scholarly and Pastoral Implications

I suggest four scholarly and pastoral conclusions from this bonded yet tense relationship. First, *women's and children's welfare are intricately connected*. As second-wave feminist theory made clear, care of children can jeopardize women's welfare. When we advocate for children, we must consider how to enhance their lives without diminishing the lives of those who most readily care for them, still mostly women. Imperatives to listen to children's voices must not come at the cost of women's relatively recent recognition as full subjects. Inversely, women stand in a powerful position to harm or help children. To borrow Grenhold's helpful translation of Swedish feminist philosopher Ulla Holm, the test for the "relatively autonomous" woman is to see how she handles the "necessarily asymmetrical relationships [with children] without either oppressing the weak or suppressing her own vital needs."⁵³

Undoing harmful or limiting social constructions of women and children is a scholarly, political, and pastoral task that needs to proceed together. The creation of women as the keeper of the home went hand and hand with historical and cultural construction of children as delicate,

⁵² For a powerful portrait of children's experience and limited agency within dire situations in the African continent, see Uwem Akpan's short stories, *Say You're One of Them* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2008). I recently viewed a series of films that also do an excellent job capturing children's use of limited resources when faced with difficult situations or forsaken by adults: a French film "Monsieur Ibrahim" (2003), a Chilean film "Machuca" (2004) and a Brazilian film "The Year My Parents Went on Vacation" (2006).

⁵³ Ulla M. Holm, *Modrande & Praxis: En Feministfilosofisk Undersokning* (Daidalos: Goteborg, 1993), 202 cited in Grenholm, "Mary Among Stereotypes," 25.

innocent, incapable, and in great need of close maternal surveillance. Such characterizations are tightly bound up with religious portraits of an all-loving, sacrificial godhead and a forsaken, sinful child-like believer. Disrupting these perceptions of mothers and of children's need for such mothers disrupts basic religious convictions. Change will not come easily or without resistance. Efforts to protect children and preserve heterosexual marriage, especially among the religious right, are often thinly disguised moves to reassert women's roles in the home.⁵⁴

So language like *putting children first* or *putting children at the center* should be used with care.⁵⁵ The term *parenting*, often used in childhood studies, can also be misleading because it suggests gender neutrality in the labor of children that society has not yet fully achieved. Even when *parenting* is used intentionally out of hope for equal involvement of men and fathers, criticism of poor parenting is often aimed at and heard by mothers in particular. Likewise, undifferentiated use of the term *children* and *child* often overlooks complicated differences that gender makes for girls and boys.

Second, even with a commitment to equal advocacy for women and children, we should recognize that *the category of gender and the social problem of sexism differ in important ways from the category of age and ageism*. Age identity changes in ways that sex identity does not. All children become adults, at least physically. So time partly resolves children's problems of unequal rights, loss of voice, invisibility, and so forth. Gender status is more difficult to adjust.

⁵⁴ See Susan Cohen and Mary Katzenstein, "The 'War Over the Family' Is Not Over the Family" in *The New Families*, ed. Sanford Dornbusch and Myra Strober (New York: Guilford, 1988), 25-46.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Penelope Leach, *Children First: What Our Society Must Do—and is Not Doing for Our Children* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994). John Wall talks about putting children "at the center of inquiry" but explores the complexities and asymmetries of the circle ("Childhood Studies, Hermeneutics, and Theological Ethics," *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 4 [October 2006]: 533, 535-536).

At the same time, children cannot reject childhood in the same way women can protest motherhood. Mothering is “not something that women are, but what they do,” a “social activity” performed under certain “social conditions,” not a “biological destiny.”⁵⁶ Women can choose other roles. Such a differentiation is harder to make with children. Childhood often seems like something children naturally *are* and not something they *do*.⁵⁷

Third, *even when we actively seek to include children’s voices, studying children presents unique challenges*.⁵⁸ We need to be careful not to overstate this, of course. As sociologist Berry Mayall points out, many of the research problems that people reel off, such as a child’s tendency to mix truth with invention, make stuff up to please the interviewer, or say what adults have told them, actually “apply to adults too.” Research strategies developed to understand women and other poorly understood groups can be used with children. Nonetheless, children stand in an odd position in relationship to their own advocacy. They have less power to act on their own behalf to develop political or research agendas. As Finnish sociologist Leena Alanen observes, children “obviously need allies.”⁵⁹ But those who work on behalf of children always stand in power relations to them. At the most basic level, there are “age-imposed constraints on the extent to

⁵⁶ Leena Alanen, “Gender and Generation: Feminism and the ‘Child Question’,” in *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*, ed. Jens Qvortrup, Marjatta Bardy, Giovanni Sgritta, and Helmut Wintersberger (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994), 33.

⁵⁷ Jens Qvortrup, “Childhood Matters: An Introduction,” in *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*, ed. Jens Qvortrup, Marjatta Bardy, Giovanni Sgritta, and Helmut Wintersberger (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994), 3-5.

⁵⁸ Berry Mayall, “Introduction,” in *Children’s Childhood: Observed and Experienced*, ed. Berry Mayall (London: Falmer Press, 1994), 11.

⁵⁹ Leena Alanen, “Gender and Generation,” 41. See also her book, *Modern Childhood? Exploring the ‘Child Question’ in Sociology* (Jyvaskyla: Institute for Educational Research, 1992).

which children can become full members of the research process,” as Oakley points out. Once one is an adult, it is difficult to experience childhood “because by then one’s whole way of experiencing things has changed.”⁶⁰ Sociologist Barrie Thorne notes that powerful memories of childhood can both aid and obscure one’s understanding.⁶¹

This raises tough questions. In Oakley’s words, is our “work about or on children, or is it in some sense for children?”⁶² To what end or use will the knowledge from adult research on childhood studies be put? As Oakley asks quite honestly, is this research “used *by children* in their struggle for some notion of civil rights”? “Or is it to *advance the academic positions* of researchers who can build on their work in children studies their own chances of promotion and a claim to be the developers of a new specialism?”⁶³ It is extremely hard for adults to take up questions of childhood studies without colonizing their primary subjects and projecting their own interests and assumptions, even when the research is motivated by the very best intent. Using *childist* and *childism*, after the pattern of *feminist* and *feminism*, as John Wall has done, can also mislead us.⁶⁴ These terms suggest a common commitment to political advocacy. But using them as comparable suppresses differences between children and women. In contrast to women’s

⁶⁰ Oakley, “Women and Children First and Last,” 25, 28-29.

⁶¹ Barrie Thorne, “Re-visioning Women and Social Change: Where are the Children?” *Gender and Society* 1, no. 1 (1987): 102.

⁶² Oakley, “Women and Children First and Last,” 23.

⁶³ Oakley, “Women and Children First and Last,” 31, emphasis in the text. See also, Miller-McLemore, “Children and Religion in the Public Square,” 385-401.

⁶⁴ Although I do not think it has caught on among scholars at large, religion and ethics scholar John Wall originated this term and has used it in a number of articles.

studies, the politics of children's studies is not located as clearly in a new consciousness or movement among children themselves.

Even when we actively seek to include children's voices, we stand in a precarious position. Finding research tools that genuinely garner children's standpoint is difficult, not to mention the legal issues of consent, protection, and so forth posed by internal review boards in major universities. There are complicated questions about using one's own children as a source for one's work, whether through observation, as examples in research, or as models in artistic photography. Years after writing about her young children, Catholic ethicist Christine Gudorf expressed concern, especially once her kids had become teenagers and could express their opinion.⁶⁵ My own attempts to ask my kids about telling stories about them did not represent an adequate ethics of consent, given their limited understanding of how such knowledge is made, bought, sold, and used and my own position of greater authority and power.

Finally and of ultimate importance, *an adversarial relationship between mothers and children is not inevitable and many feminists remain allies of children* despite stereotypes to the contrary. To begin, it is important to note that both women's and children's studies would be better off admitting outright that children's and women's interests sometimes conflict. Working from this baseline, one can then ask questions and create personal practices and social policies that address this. What do both children *and* women need? What rights do they have in relationship to one another? How do children's rights fare next to those of mothers and vice versa (a question most acutely debated in pregnancy and abortion but stretching beyond this)? As

⁶⁵ Christine Gudorf, "Parenting, Sacrifice and Mutuality," in *Religion, Feminism, and the Family*, ed. Anne Carr and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1996), 542-571.

sociologist Judith Stacey argues, feminists can no longer ignore the “question of what children need,” even if means investigating and exploring the “possibility that the needs and interests of contemporary women and children may not be fully compatible.”⁶⁶

At the same time, even though mothers and children’s mutual oppression has sometimes led to antagonism and even though feminists have often been portrayed by their critics as anti-children, children and women are not necessarily adversaries. One of the first prominent twentieth-century feminists Shulamith Firestone has often served in the years since as a lightning rod for criticism of early feminism as anti-children. It is important to counter such unfair stereotypes. For, it is Firestone who argued that it is “up to feminist revolutionaries” to speak for children because they often do not have the power and position to do so themselves. Her words, penned in 1972 and cited by Oakley, speak powerfully about the broad aims of women’s advocacy:

We must include the oppression of children in any programme for feminist revolution or we will be subject to the same failing of which we have so often accused men; of not having gone deep enough in our analysis, of having missed an important substratum of oppression merely because it didn’t directly concern *us*. . . . [W]e have developed in our long period of related sufferings, a certain compassion and understanding for them that there is no reason to lose now . . . But we will go further: our final step must be the elimination of the very conditions of femininity and childhood themselves that are now conducive to this alliance of the oppressed, clearing the way for a fully human condition.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Judith Stacey, “Are Feminists Afraid to Leave Home? The Challenge of Conservative Pro-Family Feminism,” in *What is Feminism? A Reexamination*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 236.

⁶⁷ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Morrow, 1972), 101-102, emphasis in text, cited in Oakley, “Women and Children First and Last,” 31.

Oakley, a feminist and sociologist by training, ends her own essay with a similar quasi-religious, quasi-eschatological claim. The “answer” to the tension between children’s and women’s rights, she says, ultimately lies in a “different kind of society—one whose structures do not have to deprive some people of freedom in order to give it to others.”⁶⁸ We could find equally compelling examples of overtly religious and theological claims in support of both women and children from a feminist perspective among early feminist theologians, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Beverly Wildung Harrison.

If childhood studies has risen in prominence, it is at least in part because of feminist women. This does not mean women’s motives in contributing to childhood studies are pure or that men have not contributed. A similar kind of exploration is needed on the relationship between fathers and children and between men’s studies and children’s studies. But much can be learned about children from feminist and women’s studies precisely because of the deep bonds of connection *and* discord between women and children. Connection *and* dissonance between women and children stir the waters of women’s and children’s studies. The more we understand these complex dynamics the better for all involved.

⁶⁸ Oakley, “Women and Children First and Last,” 32.