Thinking about Children: Christian Faith and Popular Psychology

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This article examines the contribution and limitation of popular psychology's understanding of children as victims of parental narcissism, cultural exploitation, and punitive Christian discipline. It invites a fresh regard for children that honors the complexity of childhood and parenthood, arguing that children needs must be both respected and shaped.

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A growing body of parenting literature fills the shelves of major bookstore chains and receives lots of media attention. Books about the harm done to girls (such as *Reviving Ophelia*) or the difficulties of raising boys (such as *Raising Cain*) quickly rise to the top of best-seller lists and make the circuit of television talk shows, newspaper interest stories, and daily conversation. Parents worry that their daughters' confidence will plummet when they reach adolescence or that their sons will adopt the "boy code" of emotional illiteracy, stoicism, and cruelty. Today's parenting generation has become increasingly psychologically sophisticated. Yet are children and parents any better off than previous generations as a result? What kind of moral and spiritual framework for understanding children does psychology provide?

On many fronts, "therapeutic"–a term that suggests healing–has become a bad word. Hand and hand with "therapeutic liberalism" and "therapeutic individualism," psychology has corrupted, critics say, the American commitment to the wider social good. Criticism grows particularly heated when it comes to the subject of families. In an editorial introduction to a recent issue of *Theology Today* on children, Ellen Charry brusquely rules out psychology. "Self-realization psychology," as she calls it, "lacks the sources for a self-concept that can endure through danger and hardship, and honor the dignity of sacrifice for a greater good." Psychology simply promotes the shortsighted goal of wanting "children to feel good about themselves."

Some of this concern is warranted. Parents who regularly put their own needs before the needs of children cause children to suffer. Adults guided by psychology alone cannot prepare children for the strenuous challenges of moral and religious development. If a parent knows how to increase a child's self-esteem but struggles to discuss such spiritual matters as prayer or human fallibility, a child may not have a way to talk about the desire for God or anguish over harm done.

When it comes to children, however, such blanket dismissal of

psychology is premature. If any discipline has given children a fresh voice and special place, it is psychology. Freud, in fact, got everyone's attention precisely because he argued for the importance of childhood. His theories were scandalous not just because he talked about sexuality but because he talked about sexual desire *in childhood*. He studied adults but he dared to suggest that these adults had important emotional needs when they were children–needs that adults should take more seriously.

From Freud's own daughter, Anna, to Erik Erikson to Robert Coles, psychology has extended to children what Freud suggested as a rich counseling technique–"closely hovering attention." Therapeutic and psychological attention hovers over children, listening closely to them and their words spoken and unspoken, and then goes back again, and once again, to ask what one has missed. This is precisely what Anna Freud recommends when Coles wonders where to go after his five-volume work on children in crises. Go back over your work and see what you have missed, she says. So he went back over his field notes and made the rich discoveries that led to his best-selling trilogy on the moral, political, and spiritual lives of children.

In other words, blind dismissal of psychology is problematic. Psychology is one of the most prevalent voices shaping contemporary views of children. People need a broader perspective from which to judge its enormous informational output. In particular, as we will explore in a moment, it has indicted parents on several counts. A key question then becomes: How do the religiously minded of all faiths and Christians in particular situate psychology and its charges in a broader scheme of life that includes religious understandings of human will and destiny?

Children as Victims of Narcissistically Needy Parents

The plot of Alice Miller's best-selling book, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, seemed like every person's plot when the book first appeared in Europe in 1979 and then in the United States in 1981. The idea that needy parents push children to repress their own desires in order to meet their parents' needs hit a raw nerve. Miller herself believes that she touched something universal. Many people, she says, trace their "personal awakening" to her book.

The scenario of parental disregard and loss of self begins innocently enough. A toddler desires and reaches for a parent's ice cream cone. Believing that the child cannot handle a cone, the parent offers only a small spoonful. In frustration, the child whines. Again the parent refuses. The child cries, tries again, sobs, grows disheartened. Dis-

concerted, perhaps even angered, the adult scolds the child. Or amused, the adult laughs and tries to humor the child. In either case, the result is the same. Narcissistically immature parents fail to respect the child as the person she or he is at any given time and the child loses a sense of herself or himself. When a parent repeatedly fails to respect a child by refusing to tolerate the child's emotional responses or by seeking gratification through the child's achievements, the child perceives her or his self as fundamentally untrustworthy. Rather than recognizing feelings–anger, jealousy, anxiety, and grief–as integral parts of the self, children subvert such feelings to keep their parents happy.

In later publications and editions of the initial volume, Miller became angrier, more strident, and eventually rejected psychoanalysis itself. In the early 1980s, around the time that child abuse began to receive more public attention, she writes less about parental narcissism and more about intentional cruelty and physical abuse. The child suffers not only from emotional humiliation but also from corporal punishment and sexual violation. Miller describes in increasingly horrifying detail what she calls "poisonous pedagogy," the cruel mental and physical techniques used by parents and teachers to squelch the spontaneity and vitality of children. By 1988, convinced that psychoanalysis itself had joined others in hiding the real abuse suffered by children, Miller resigned from the Swiss and international psychoanalytical associations. However we evaluate Miller's ideas–a matter to which we will return after running through two other charges she spawned–she sounds a clear indictment of parents that deserves a serious hearing.

Children as Victims of a Girl-Poisoning, Boy-Fearing Culture

Several recent best-selling books have turned the lament about the damage caused by narcissistic or abusive parents into a tirade against our girl-poisoning, boy-fearing culture. If Miller makes parents into the enemy, these texts turn on U.S. society and accuse it of "cultural abuse." Miller's influence is evident. Among the best known, Mary Pipher, who describes *Reviving Ophelia* as a natural outgrowth of Miller's work, puts the difference bluntly: "Whereas Miller sees the parents as responsible . . . , I see the culture as splitting adolescent girls into true and false selves." Families are not dysfunctional, she says. Culture is. Pipher actually popularizes the more academic writings of educational psychologist Carol Gilligan. Gilligan began to study adolescent girls when she became troubled by her observation that bright, exuberant ten- and eleven-year old girls "go underground" when they become adolescents, losing confidence in all that they knew and assumed about

themselves. When they witness women without power in the wider public world and experience daily harassment, they become silent, deferential, and begin the long and sorry road of defining themselves no longer around their own desires and gifts but around gaining approval and meeting the needs of others.

Pipher quietly carries forward Gilligan's protest against the largely male-dominated world of developmental studies. Until recently, well-known psychologists made men the primary subject of study and the standard by which women were defined. Although Pipher never says so, her book is a kind of liberation psychology for girls. Girls are oppressed by their very own "problem with no name." As in the feminist adage that the "personal is political," eating disorders, suicidal ideation, self mutilation, early sexual activity, and running away from home are more than personal. These problems result from living in a "junk culture."

Not surprisingly, authors of several best-selling books on boys have recently jumped on the bandwagon, using a similar kind of analysis and benefiting from Pipher's book endorsement. The cause for alarm is familiar: increased risks for depression, loneliness, suicide, violence, and alcohol and drug use. But boys are silenced in different ways and for different reasons. A "boy code" that determines when one is a "real boy" demands stoicism, bravado, and denial of genuine feelings of fear, uncertainty, and emotional need. This culturally imposed emotional suppression leads to a disturbing "culture of cruelty." Rigid ideals of masculinity require boys to either assert power or be labeled a weakling.

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When these clinicians turn on culture, they carry Miller's critique to a new level. They do not diagnose patients. They diagnose culture. They demand modifications in how culture constructs girls and boys. Culture, not so much parents, does a bad job defining "real" boys and girls. New norms and traditions are needed.

Children as Victims of a Punitive Christianity

Psychology's indictments of parents and culture also indict Christianity both directly and indirectly. Poisonous pedagogy, in Miller's opinion, is rooted in the Jewish and Christian traditions, encouraged by Christian child-rearing manuals, and perpetuated in Protestant homes. Others have taken up the baton and spelled out ways in which Christian theology reinforces abuse. These accusations have had a vast impact on society and Christian ministry that has not really been measured or evaluated.

In one of the first and most important Miller-inspired explorations, historian Philip Greven is clear about the religious roots of pun-

ishment: "The most enduring and influential source for the widespread practice of physical punishment . . . has been the Bible." Several passages in the Book of Proverbs provide the most direct instruction on use of the rod (for example, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" Prov. 13:24). Another key text in the Letter to the Hebrews exhorts parents to chastise their children as the "Lord disciplines him whom he loves" (Hebrews 12:6). More troubling is the general portrayal in both Testaments of a God who requires obedience unto death, in asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, and then in commanding the crucifixion of God's own son. The German manuals quoted at length in one of Miller's books offer biblical warrant for a godlike parental authority and a child's duty of unquestioning obedience. If God chastises those who wander away, runs the argument, so also must parents.

From the seventeenth century to the present, these motifs have seeped into U.S. parenting through evangelical child-rearing guides that say teaching obedience requires the infliction of pain. Even though moderate Christians may find the idea of breaking a child's will through physical punishment more abhorrent, believing that aggression only begets more violence, they still see physical discipline as a last resort when all else has failed. But bending the will, in Greven's opinion, is not much better than breaking it, for both continue a history of religious justification of force and punishment.

These accusations found an immediate audience in the last decade among feminist and pastoral theologians. Religious beliefs not only legitimate physical punishment, many argue. Some religious ideas are inherently traumatizing. Fears about sin, unworthiness, and condemnation bother children in ways adults often overlook. Particularly appalling is the traditional view that God is responsible for Jesus' suffering sacrifice on the cross. This depiction of "divine" or "cosmic child abuse," as some have named it, wrongly exalts suffering and paves the way for parental mistreatment. God condones and even requires suffering as essential to salvation. Some even believe that theologians who have suffered harm as children in turn create distorted and destructive religious doctrines. Miller's groundbreaking work stands in the background behind these accusations.

Respecting a Child's Needs: Psychology as a Corrective to Christianity

How are parents to assess these forceful charges of parental, cultural, and Christian damage? First, why are these premises so powerful? And then where do they finally go astray?

Theologians, such as Charry, complain that psychology lacks the resources for building a self-concept that can "endure hardship and sustain sacrifice." But this is not entirely true. Psychology begins with the fundamental question of children's needs and in many cases has helped adults see children anew. Fresh explanations of an infant's needs for soothing or for facial expression and verbal contact, for example, can help parents go the second mile. Reminders that adolescents are prone to self-absorption or parental ridicule as they search for their own identity allow parents to back off and suspend their knowing criticisms. Helping parents understand why children do what they do sounds simple, but experience proves that adults have made grievous errors in their perceptions. Psychology's practiced ability to comprehend children's thought processes and behaviors makes it profoundly important to anyone who cares about children.

Psychology insists that adults take the child's point of view. In fact, good parenting's single most important trait, according to most psychologies, is to learn from children. Learning from children is extremely difficult, something that some people compare to a kind of religious practice, like meditation or Zen, an idea to which I will return. Psychology, like religion, sometimes sums it up with the term "love." The epigraph of Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson's *Raising Cain*'s final chapter on "What Boys Need" contains a quote from object relations theorist D.W. Winnicott that simply answers a child "absolutely needs to live in a circle of love."

What exactly does providing a circle of love entail from a psychological vantage point? And how does it challenge or correct traditional Christian conceptions? Miller is adamant: a child's most basic emotional need is for "respect, echoing, understanding, sympathy, and mirroring." Here, more than she acknowledges, Miller is influenced by the self psychology of psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, and both of them show the stamp of other theorists, such as Winnicott. How much did Christian assumptions that circulated in the surrounding culture influence all of them? However one answers this, there is no doubt that these theorists made major strides in extending to children religious views about love and inherent human self worth.

Three generations removed from Freud, both Winnicott on British soil and Kohut on American gradually strayed from traditional psychoanalytic emphasis on instinctual strivings and oedipal conflicts and began to attend to the relational needs and desires of early pre-oedipal stages of childhood. Kohut's writings on the self are replete with easy-to-picture sketches of undeniable human desires and heartaches. Yet few people have suggested ramifications for raising children. It is a natural next step. In my own clinical training, I thought I was learning

about Kohut's theories to use them in counseling, but where they really had an impact was on my own life as a new mother. His self-psychology forced me to consider important questions. What is a parent's job description? And what is really needed in childhood?

Trained in psychoanalysis in the late 1940s, Kohut became progressively disenchanted with classic analytic explanations of human pathology. The people who made their way to his office were no longer struggling with the obsessive-compulsive or hysterical symptoms that Freud saw. Clients complained instead about feelings of shame, rage, depression, and emptiness. Working his way backwards from these observations, Kohut hypothesized about the processes in early childhood by which selves are formed.

A child is born with at least two primary needs that must be met for healthy self-development. Kohut called these "narcissistic" needs not because they are inherently selfish or self-centered but because they are constitutive of a child's very earliest yearnings for selfhood. A child needs ideals, someone or something to admire, or something general to respect. And a child needs mirroring, a sort of inverse need to be admired and to feel special, or a sense of the parent's enthusiasm for the child, the "gleam in the mother's eye." When a parent functions as a reliable source of solace and encouragement, a child incorporates parental actions and images as an inner capacity or self structure that eventually allows a child to soothe itself and discern its own ambitions or to empathize with itself and to establish ideals. Without such mirroring from and idealization of the parent, a child struggles to establish a sufficiently cohesive and enduring self.

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Here, as with so many contemporary psychologists who try to redefine childhood, Kohut and Miller stumble upon an age-old religious and moral debate about self-love and love of others. Although they do not frame their ideas in terms of the commandment to "love others as one has loved oneself," they essentially question how popular Christianity has understood love of others as requiring unconditional self-sacrifice and the annihilation of self-love. Loving others is set over against love of the self as if the two were mutually exclusive. Self-interest taints genuine love; real love completely conquers self-interest. Although theologians have debated this premise, it has nonetheless permeated popular piety.

Whether they realize it or not, Kohut and Miller build an interesting counter psychological-moral argument to this Christian view: In contrast to Christian biases, there is such a thing as "healthy narcissism." Without healthy self-love established in life's early years, love of others is impossible. "A little reflection soon shows how inconceivable it is really to love others," Miller argues, "if one cannot love oneself as

one really is. And how could a person do that if, from the beginning, he has had no chance to experience his true feelings and to learn to know himself?"

Contrary to both traditional psychoanalysis and Christianity, children and adults do not outgrow such narcissistic needs. Ideally a child grows not just from self-centered love of self to the love of others but also from immature, primitive, archaic means of meeting narcissistic needs to a more mature self-regard. How a parent responds to narcissism's early fluctuations plants seeds for important developments in later life. Under optimal conditions, dependence on progressively more mature and expansive means of meeting narcissistic needs evolves throughout life. So, for Kohut, the "way out" of narcissism is to "go back into it." That is, the way out of immature narcissism is to enter self-absorption, understand its genesis, and nurture its transformation into more mature forms, not through denial but through recognizing justified narcissistic needs.

Pipher and others challenge Christianity more by omission than commission. They want to change how culture regards real boys and girls but almost completely ignore religion. The variety of stop-gap measures they suggest say strikingly little about faith and faith communities. Pipher recommends centering as an absolutely fundamental skill for girls and others call for nourishing boys' internal life but this retrieval of a quiet time focused on one's inner feelings and thoughts is detached from its natural religious connections. Congregations could provide so many of the components called for by these books besides practices of centering: protected space, belief in larger causes, support in times of adversity, affirmation of selfhood and responsible decision-making, countercultural values and cultural critique, sexual guidelines, positive peer relations, intergenerational activities, practices of altruism and honesty, and a balance of affection and structure, belonging and freedom. By and large, these authors assume that religion has little power to help teens or to inform and change culture. Do congregations no longer provide protected space, alternative values and practices, or support for parents?

Perhaps these psychologists are worried that religious talk, even if not confessional, would dampen a book's popularity or public reach. They have likely been trained simply to disregard or discount religious beliefs and practices as not relevant or even harmful. Pipher says she was a "loyal Methodist" at thirteen, a disenchanted questioner at fifteen, but apart from a few quick anecdotes of teens finding comfort in religious causes she drops the discussion. Regardless of the reason, most psychologists fully accept religion's privatization. By completely avoiding the issue, however, these authors bring us back to an impor-

tant question: Can Christianity make any difference in how people understand and seek to empower girls and boys today?

Shaping a Child's Needs: Christianity as a Corrective to Psychology

Psychology offers a powerful corrective to Christian views of children. But where do its indictments of parents, culture, and Christianity ultimately go astray? Few theologians have questioned Miller's influential framework. Psychological ideas are so compelling that many people consume them unquestioningly. Greven, for example, simply admits that Miller's books became a "part of my internal world, so thoroughly have I absorbed them."

Questioning Miller is a risky venture. Child misuse and abuse in the name of Christian love is a real and serious problem. Putting this problem on the table has not been easy. I do not want to lessen the pressure on theologians and parents alike to consider the damage done to children, not to mention its religious justification. Religious persons of all persuasions must be more careful when they admire Abraham's faith in offering up Isaac; argue for the importance of a wrathful, judging God; glorify Christian sacrifice; interpret the central act of communion only in terms of God's sacrifice; and counsel children on the virtues of humility, forsaking self, and walking the way of the cross. These ideas have a place in doctrinal ruminations, but in daily practice they have all too often served to justify the cruel treatment of children. Theologians must assume greater responsibility than they have so far for the distortion of their formal proclamations in everyday faith.

Questioning Miller is a risky venture for more personal reasons. Any such critique must consider its ulterior motives. Am I simply taking my parents' side and resisting the truth about my own childhood? This is precisely the pattern of destructive pedagogy that Miller predicts: one will go to great lengths to preserve parental innocence and love. I, however, have read Miller not only as an adult remembering my childhood (the audience she really has in mind), but also as a parent and a Christian (an audience for which she does not care a whole lot). From this perspective, I must ask: What are the limits and problems with her psychological diagnosis of human nature and responsibility?

To begin to state the issues in terms of the example of the child and the ice cream cone: What if the child in fury hits the offered spoon of ice cream across the room, bites another child, or threatens her own safety? What if this has happened not once but many times? Must parents

meet every narcissistic need without fail? Is there any allowance for parental exhaustion or for learning from genuine and inevitable mistakes?

Here Kohut and Winnicott provide a helpful psychological correction to Miller and her cohorts. Where psychology often longs for perfect parents or a perfect culture, Kohut and Winnicott build failure into their understandings of development, therapy, and parenting. Kohut likens empathy, or the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of a child, to oxygen, so fundamental is it to development. Yet negotiating empathic failures or "breaks" is equally important. Failure in parental empathy is to be expected and, in fact, when not traumatic, is the seedbed of growth. Parental failings spark the very creation of internal self-structures in the child. When non-traumatic failures occur, the infant must work to incorporate the missing function served by the idealized parent or the grandiose self–what parents provided in responding to the child's needs for idealization and mirroring–into the self's structure in transmuted or changed form. Winnicott suggests the image of the "good enough" mother to capture a range of parental behavior that is less than ideal but adequate. A good enough parent is sufficiently attentive, on the one hand, but avoids overindulgence and overprotection, on the other hand. In other words, both Winnicott and Kohut consider disappointment, failure, and disillusionment essential elements in healthy development.

Nor is empathy equated without remainder with kindness, sympathy, warmth, permissiveness, and unconditional positive regard. Sometimes the most empathic response, the one most in tune with the child's narcissistic needs for admiration and idealization, is correction, confrontation, and the setting of clear boundaries. So, in the incident of the child's desire for ice cream, the most empathic response may not always be simply to give the child a cone.

This is good as far as it goes, but it still leaves unanswered important moral and religious questions. How does a parent discern the empathic response when the desire is not an ice cream cone but something more complex and ambiguous, as most human desires become over the years? Does desire ever need to be curbed? Can parents and society love children without faltering? And is there any place for teaching children and youth not to think only of themselves and to care for others?

If Christian theology has erred on the side of moral mastery and condemnation, psychology errs on the side of moral naivete. Miller contends that "A child who has been allowed to be egoistic, greedy, and asocial long enough will develop spontaneous pleasure in sharing and giving." Certainly children pushed too soon to love others out of duty

will fail to develop adequate resources to do so. But altruism and many other virtues seldom emerge as spontaneously as these psychologies imagine. In a word, sometimes a child's needs must be shaped and formed rather than always simply met.

When Kindlon and Thompson attempt to interpret the biblical story behind their book title, *Raising Cain,* they illustrate vividly psychology's tendency to underestimate the human capacity for wrongdoing. "How different Cain's story might have been," they presume, "had he been able to draw upon inner resources, emotional awareness, empathy, and moral courage." They believe the problem is not human proclivity toward evil but inward emotional confusion. A more emotionally astute Cain, helped to understand his inner life by sensitive parents and a culture with a wider range of male role models, would not have killed Abel. All human beings, they believe, are naturally motivated to be better than they are. As a result, they miss the complex dynamic that the biblical writer had in mind. Seeing Cain's distress, the Lord warns him sin is "couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7). Human nature is so much more complex in this religious view, with sin and evil a challenge and even a threat which humans must take seriously and face with courage and audacity before they overpower us.

For the most part, psychology sympathizes with children but has little regard for their complicated nature and the ambiguities of parenting. Concern that children not be held responsible for inappropriate and destructive adult behavior has lead to extraordinary restraint surrounding and even avoidance of the topic of childhood and "sin," a Christian word for human alienation and brokenness. With the arrival of the Enlightenment and modern science, many people followed modern theologians who gave up the idea of original sin as an inherited taint. Psychological efforts to figure out why children turn out the way they do displaced debates about innocence and sinfulness with endless quarrels about the role of nature and parental and social nurture. When children struggle and fail to thrive, psychology mostly blames the latter.

As a result, psychology depicts children as more virtuous, dependent, and helpless than classic Christian readings do, sometimes to the extreme of identifying parents (either unempathic mothers or abusive fathers) or girl-poisoning and boy-fearing culture as the sole loci of evil and wrongdoing. Ironically, in this effort to give children power, psychology actually ends up robbing them of moral agency by blaming the parent or culture exclusively; exaggerating the willful control of adult; and ignoring the complex dynamics of human failure, reconciliation, and hope.

Children have far less control over their actions than adults and

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blame often lies rightfully on the parent's doorstep. But they still have some control. Children can act perversely of their own human and God-given volition. Debunking the myth of innocence in children requires gaining greater knowledge about good and evil in others, children and adults alike. Moral and religious development actually requires gaining control and discernment with age. This does not come easily or even naturally. Moreover, adults have a responsibility to curb children's harmful, aggressive, and inhumane desires and, more difficult yet, to model the love of self, neighbor, and God. Most parental discipline lies precisely in the gray area between appropriate attempts to address genuine misbehavior or shape good behavior and destructive abuse of children.

Caution about sin has also resulted in an inability to recognize inevitable human frailty and, consequently, the need for reprieve or grace. Or, as one of my parent friends said once, "For people who grew up around heavy sin language, caution makes sense. But at some point, some things are just wrong." Given human frailty, children will go astray and adults will inevitably fail children. Parents may harm children not because they were harmed as children, as many psychologists claim, but in a moment of temper gone awry, out of control, or on an impulse that sometimes has no other name than evil. This is not to excuse adult misbehavior but to put it into a more complicated religious and moral context.

Spiritual allowance for human frailty and brokenness is an essential part of good parenting. So many contemporary manuals on child rearing, shaped by psychology's overriding optimism, fail to recognize this. Miller, for example, recommends that a parent who hits a child in an attempt at discipline admit that the child was slapped out of confusion and not out of love. But curiously enough, she pays little heed to the huge question of where parents find the resources for such gestures of admission and confession. She even ridicules religious efforts to teach about practices of forgiveness. However, genuine repentance and even the ability to apologize involve rigorous moral and religious disciplines of self-examination and circumspection that have been better developed by religion than by contemporary psychology.

In short, children's needs and desires must not only be respected. They must be shaped. Christianity may not have done such a great job on this but at least it has broached the questions. Understanding human brokenness and reparation is crucial to understanding the difficult dynamics of child rearing. The tendency to attribute evil to the environment overlooks the complexity of parenting and children and ignores the richness of religious traditions that have attempted to understand human frailty and grace.

While Miller overtly rejects Christian views of formation, covertly she advocates important values that she likely absorbed from the same Christian culture she casts off. This is clearly apparent when Miller (1983) defines her ultimate goal at the beginning of her second book:

> I imagine that someday we will regard our children not as creatures to manipulate or to change but rather as messengers from a world we once deeply knew, . . . who can reveal to us more about the true secrets of life. . . . We do not need to be told whether to be strict or permissive with our children. What we do need is to have respect for their needs, their feelings, and their individuality, as well as for our own. (p. x i)

Three fundamental Christian imperatives lie behind these words. First, children must be loved for their own sake. Christians, however, argue that parents and others can love children in this way only to the extent that we trust ourselves to have already been abundantly loved, so much so that we have what we need and want. Whereas Miller believes this love comes from parents, Christians see it as a gift, a grace ultimately promised and bestowed by God. Second, children must be received as harbingers of God's kingdom. In the midst of chaos, confusion, and problems, they do point to the life's secrets. Finally, to cause a child to stumble and fall is a fate worse than death.

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