

# CHILD THEOLOGY

*Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives*

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# INTRODUCTION

## Strengthening Theology by Honoring Children

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Every human being on the planet was or is a child. No one enters the world fully grown; we are all born and develop. Children are part of families, communities, and nations. Although the definition of a child can change across time and place, their presence does not. Based on the commonly used international definition of children as persons below the age of eighteen, they make up nearly 30 percent of human beings on the planet.<sup>1</sup> Whether they comprise 20 or 40 percent of a nation's population, children make a difference in personal, social, and religious life. Even if we have no children of our own, and even if conceptions and treatment of children differ widely among individuals and across cultures, childhood is part of the human experience, and children influence our world.

Although children are all around us, children and childhood have been marginal topics in many academic fields. Recently, however, scholars from a host of disciplines are devoting more attention to children and contributing to the new and burgeoning interdisciplinary field of childhood studies. Like women's studies, racial studies, and other interdisciplinary fields that bring marginalized persons to the forefront by recognizing their full humanity, childhood studies is opening innovative lines of intellectual inquiry and strategies for advocacy by honoring the full humanity and dignity of children. Thus, children are now the focus of study not only in education or psychology but also history, literature, art, sociology, economics, political science, philosophy, ethics, and human rights. Insights from this growing body of research and the actions of young people themselves are creating greater public awareness of children's agency and complexity. Popular books and documentaries on brain development, for example, reveal the complex thinking and moral reasoning of infants and children. Social media also help us see more clearly the courage and leadership capacities of young people in political life.

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<sup>1</sup> See the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child (1989) and other human rights documents.

Religious scholars and theologians are also contributing to the growing interdisciplinary field of childhood studies.<sup>2</sup> Current scholarship in several areas is paying greater attention to the agency, role, and status of children in religious communities and public life, past and present. For example, theologians and ethicists are devoting more attention to children's rights and child advocacy.<sup>3</sup> Scholars in various areas of practical theology are providing more engaging forms of faith formation, youth ministry, and intergenerational worship.<sup>4</sup> Biblical scholars and historians are also more attentive to the presence and active participation of children in biblical narratives, historical events, religious rituals, and community life.<sup>5</sup>

Building on scholarship in these and other fields, another growing area of inquiry that focuses directly on children is termed "Theologies of Childhood." The task of such theologies is to articulate informed and robust understandings of children and adult obligations to them. Like other contemporary theologies that have strengthened the commitment to and understanding of groups that are voiceless, marginalized, or oppressed, theologies of childhood focus on one of the world's most voiceless and vulnerable: children and youth. These theologies build on wisdom from the Bible, Christian tradition, human experience, and insights from the sciences and the humanities. Several contemporary theologians have offered sophisticated insights that challenge narrow assumptions about children in both church and society, name injustices against children, and underscore parental and social responsibilities.<sup>6</sup> They have provided multi-

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview, see 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 (2006): 549–578.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Kathleen Marshall and Paul Parvis, *Honouring Children: The Human Rights of the Child in Christian Perspective* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 2004); Pamela Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000); and John Wall, *Ethics in the Light of Childhood* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005); Karen-Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009); and Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> For biblical and historical studies, see, for example: Roy Zuck, *Precious in His Sight: Childhood and Children in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996); Julie Faith Parker and Sharon Betsworth, eds., *The T & T Clark Handbook of Children in the Bible and the Biblical World* (London: Bloomsbury / T & T Clark, 2019); Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); and Marcia J. Bunge, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, and Terence Fretheim, eds., *The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," in *Theo-*

faceted understandings of children that highlight their moral and spiritual capacities, needs and strengths, and vulnerabilities and agency. Consequently, these theologies inspire and empower more respectful treatment of children in homes, congregations, and societies.

### Theological Challenge

Regardless of the strides made in religious studies and theology, including theologies of childhood, children still play a marginal role in many key areas of theological reflection. Although theologies of childhood and other child-related fields certainly draw necessary attention to the dignity, needs, and strengths of children, the role and significance of children are almost invisible in many areas of systematic, constructive, or contextual theology. This pattern is evident throughout the history of Christian thought: the rocky road of moving from acknowledging marginalized persons as human beings, fully and equally made in the image of God, to rethinking and reframing major theological themes in the light of these persons. Feminist theology primarily began, for example, with a focus on women's agency, equality, and gender justice. Thus, numerous studies were published about women's equality and the role of women in the Bible and the history of Christianity. However, feminist theologians soon challenged the church to rethink its notions not only of women and gender relations but also of other central beliefs and doctrines, such as the language of God, the nature of the church, and sin.

Similarly, although theologians are contributing significantly to many areas related directly to children, they have devoted less attention to how honoring children might reframe and readjust our thinking about other major themes in theology. We can certainly applaud the many recent studies directly focused

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*logical Investigations VIII*, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), 33–50; Dawn DeVries, "Toward a Theology of Childhood," *Interpretation* 55, no. 2: 161–173; David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005); Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* (New York: Morehouse, 2009); Deusdedit R. K. Nkurunziza, "African Theology of Childhood in Relation to Child Labour," *African Ecclesial Review* 46, no. 2 (2004): 121–138; Marcia J. Bunge, "Beyond Children as Agents or Victims: Reexamining Children's Paradoxical Strengths and Vulnerabilities with Resources from Christian Theologies of Childhood and Child Theologies," in *The Given Child: The Religions' Contribution to Children's Citizenship*, ed. Trygve Wyller and Usha S. Nayar (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007), 27–50; Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Re-Imagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (2003; repr. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019); and Jan Grobbelaar and Gert Breed, eds., *Theologies of Childhood and the Children of Africa* (Durbanville, South Africa: Aosis Publishing, 2016).

on children as persons in biblical studies, the history of Christianity, ministry, faith formation, advocacy, human rights, and theologies of childhood. Yet how deeply have Christian theologians truly reflected on how honoring children—recognizing them as persons—might change the way Christians think about other major theological topics or “loci,” such as sin, salvation, the doctrine of creation, and the concept of God? In other words, how does respect for children help us reexamine or rethink Christian thought and practice for the sake of the whole church and its work in the world?

### The Primary Aim

This volume takes up this challenging question and aims to strengthen theological reflection across the church by rethinking, reinterpreting, and reevaluating fundamental Christian beliefs and practices with attention to children. Building on a wide range of sources, chapters offer new insights into selected and central theological themes, such as creation, the human person, Christology, sin, salvation, mission, and hope. While the volume primarily aims to transform theological reflection for the whole body of Christ and its work in the world, contributors also seek to strengthen the church’s understanding of and global commitments to children.

Theologians worldwide use various terms and phrases to designate the specific task of rethinking theology in the light of children and childhood. The title of this book, *Child Theology*, is a term first used by Keith White, Haddon Willmer, and John Collier, who together cultivated international awareness of this task.<sup>7</sup> They were inspired by and built their initial work on a close reading of Matthew 18. Here Jesus places a “child in the midst” of his disciples in response to a question about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and says to them, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (18:1–5).

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<sup>7</sup> The term “Child Theology” was first used by Keith White in 2002. White, Willmer, and Collier organized the first consultation of the Child Theology Movement (CTM) in Penang in 2002. They have since hosted consultations in other parts of the world and contributed various publications to this new research domain, including Keith J. White and Haddon Willmer, *An Introduction to Child Theology* (London: Child Theology Movement, 2006); John Collier, ed., *Toddling to the Kingdom: Child Theology at Work in the Church* (London: Child Theology Movement, 2009); and Haddon Willmer and Keith J. White, *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18* (London: WTL Publications, 2013). For more information about CTM, reports of consultations, and resources, see [childtheologymovement.org](http://childtheologymovement.org).

Although they developed a specific approach, these pathfinders as well as the contributors to this volume all recognize that theologians worldwide who pursue the distinct task of reexamining central beliefs and practices through a child-attentive lens take different approaches, incorporate diverse sources, and designate their work using various terms. Our contributors and others describe this work, for example, as “child-attentive theology,” “theology using the ‘lens’ of child/children as a category of analysis,” or “theology in solidarity with children.” They generally avoid terms such as “child-centered” or “child-centric” theology, since, as D. J. Konz and others argue, theology focuses on God and God’s relation to the whole world.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, they are careful not to confuse this task with other important and related but distinct tasks, such as child advocacy, religious education, children’s spirituality, theologies for children, children’s own theologies, or theologies of childhood.

Theologians pursuing this specific area of theological inquiry share some similarities with feminist, womanist, Black, Dalit, and liberation theologians. Like these and other contemporary forms of theological reflection, child-attentive theologies recognize the dignity and full humanity of a group of people who are often voiceless, marginalized, or exploited—children, in this case. Child theology attends to children’s challenges and contributions, honors their vulnerabilities and strengths, and emphasizes adult duties and responsibilities to children. Thus, Child Theology contributes and is intimately related to theologies of childhood. However, by taking the next step of rethinking and reinterpreting theological doctrines and practices in the light of children and childhood, Child Theology offers new insights into central themes of the Christian faith, thereby sometimes tweaking and other times causing seismic shifts in our understanding of many theological doctrines, practices, and methodologies.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> D. J. Konz, “Child Theology and Its Theological Method, Past and Future,” *ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission* 35, no. 1 (2019): 21–27. Konz prefers the term “child-attentive” to some of the methodological adjectives used in biblical studies (including “childist,” “child-centered,” and “child-centric” readings of Scripture) because “the term doesn’t centre the child in the same way, and in doing so risks displacing God as the primary object of theology” (26).

<sup>9</sup> In the area of philosophical ethics, John Walls emphasizes a similar move by calling for a new “childism”: an effort that not only pays greater attention to children but responds “more self-critically to children’s particular experiences by transforming fundamental structures of understanding and practice for all.” See John Wall, “Childism: The Challenge of Childhood to Ethics and the Humanities” in *The Children’s Table: Childhood Studies and the Humanities*, ed. Anna Mae Duane (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 68.

## Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives

This volume uniquely brings together theologians from various parts of the world who engage a wide range of sources and methods. Contributors live in diverse cultural contexts and self-identify with different theological traditions, including Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and various forms of Protestantism, such as Lutheran, Reformed, Episcopalian, Evangelical, and Pentecostal. Like other contemporary Christian theologians, they build on common sources of theological reflection, including scripture, wisdom from the Christian tradition, insights from various disciplines across the academy, and the experiences of individuals and communities.

However, as an ecumenical and international group seeking to deepen theological reflection that takes children into account, they build on diverse sources that are based in their particular theological traditions and speak to questions and experiences in their specific social and cultural contexts. Furthermore, just as all theologians who have attended to various marginalized or exploited persons have discovered, contributors find that focusing on children opens their eyes to both new and neglected sources. They have mined, for example, insights from neglected biblical and theological sources, research in the humanities and the sciences on childhood, experiences of children, and memories of their own childhoods. By incorporating these and other resources, contributors strengthen theological reflection across a range of topics. Taken as a whole, the volume also reminds readers of the gifts of world Christianity, which, as Lalsangkima Pachuau states, is owned “by people of diverse cultures and societies from every region and every continent, and portrayed in the multiplicity of church traditions, cultural expressions of faith-practices, and doctrinal voices.”<sup>10</sup>

The following examples demonstrate some of the diverse and often untapped resources that contributors incorporate, arranged under the four major sources of theological reflection that inform the work of all contributors.

### *The Bible*

Contributors build primarily on biblical sources related directly to the topic of their chapter yet also incorporate a number of significant child-related passages. Several chapters integrate biblical mandates to care for the poor, seek justice, and love the neighbor; stories of named and unnamed children; and accounts of Jesus’s childhood and interactions with children. Contributors reflect care-

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<sup>10</sup> Lalsangkima Pachuau, *World Christianity: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 3.

fully, for example, on well-known Gospel accounts of Jesus welcoming, blessing, and healing children. Others refer to particular children, such as those Jesus healed or the boy with five barley loaves and two fish in the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand (John 9:6). Others draw attention to passages that include children but are rarely considered “child-related” biblical texts. For example, in his chapter on hope, South African and Reformed theologian Dirk J. Smit draws attention to a verse in Hebrews that focuses on faith and that states how the parents of Moses “saw that the child was beautiful” (11:23). This passage prompts Smit to reflect on how prominent South African theologians reimagined hope and courageously fought for justice during apartheid by engaging with and being inspired by children. Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong, in his exploration of the Holy Spirit, focuses primarily on Luke and Acts, and by attending carefully to just a few passages regarding children, he not only expands our view of the Spirit but also strengthens our understanding of children as Spirit-filled.

However, reflecting on central theological themes with attention to children does not mandate that biblical sources are limited to passages that directly refer to children. In revisiting biblical sources relevant to their chosen topic, contributors discover new dimensions and implications of the sources simply by remembering that references to human beings, in general, or to specific groups of people, such as tribes, communities, or slaves, are also references to children. For example, Reformed theologian Michael Welker enriches his reflections on the first chapter of Genesis and several creation topics—such as the image of God and the realm of life shared by plants, animals, and human beings—not only through dialogue with the natural sciences but also by honoring the full humanity, vulnerabilities, and contributions of children.

Whether reflecting on biblical texts that refer directly or indirectly to children, contributors strengthen theological reflection about both their chapter’s primary topic and children. As these theologians and many biblical scholars find, the Bible provides a rich and multifaceted view of children that challenges narrow conceptions of them in church and society. Children are made in God’s image and fully human, yet are also developing beings in need of instruction and guidance. They are vulnerable orphans and neighbors, yet also social agents with gifts and strengths that contribute to our world. They are members of the community who are nurtured by adults, yet also serve as models for adults.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bunge frequently builds on such paradoxes in her theological reflections on children. See “Beyond Children as Agents or Victims” (cited above); “Conceptions of and Commitments to Children: Biblical Wisdom for Families, Congregations, and the Worldwide Church,” in *Faith Forward: Launching a Revolution through Ministry with Children, Youth, and Families*, vol. 3, ed. David M. Csinos (Lake Country, BC: Wood Lake, 2018),

### *Christian Tradition*

Contributors also draw from a range of Christian theological texts and spiritual practices and build on important sources from their denominational affiliation, theological training, or cultural context. Eastern Orthodox theologian Perry Hamalis offers insights into humility from ancient Christian sources, such as Chrysostom, Saints Anthony the Great and Dorotheos of Gaza, as well as Orthodox liturgies, iconography, and contemporary virtue ethics. Australian systematic theologian and Barth scholar D. J. Konz articulates a healthy and compassionate practice of mission that respects children and adults living in pluralistic settings by critically incorporating a variety of popular theologies of Christian mission as well as insights from the dogmatics of Reformed theologian Karl Barth. In her chapter, Wanda Deifelt, a Lutheran and feminist theologian, provides wisdom from feminist theologians, South American and Black liberation theologians, Martin Luther, and contemporary Lutheran theologians to articulate the meaning and depth of the paradoxes of God's incarnation as an infant.

### *Other Disciplines*

Contributors also build on creative and insightful research pursued in disciplines outside biblical studies and theology. The chapter authors incorporate ideas from disciplines commonly used by theologians, such as philosophy and ethics. They also integrate research on children and childhood, especially from the social sciences and law, where scholars are exploring insightful questions about child development and children's social status, rights, and responsibilities. Social scientists and child advocates devoted to child well-being are also increasingly interested in the many positive roles of religion, religious communities, and spirituality in the resilience of both adults and children.<sup>12</sup> Overall,

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94–112; and “The Vocation of the Child: Theological Perspectives on the Particular and Paradoxical Roles and Responsibilities of Children,” in *The Vocation of the Child*, ed. Patrick McKinley Brennan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 31–52.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Fount, 1998), and numerous studies by the Search Institute ([search-institute.org](http://search-institute.org)), including E. C. Roehlkepartain, P. E. King, L. M. Wagener, and P. L. Benson, eds., *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), and K.-M. Yust, A. N. Johnson, S. E. Sasso, and E. C. Roehlkepartain, eds., *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); and the work of the National Study of Youth and Religion ([youthandreligion.nd.edu](http://youthandreligion.nd.edu)), including the study by Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton titled *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

by harnessing the strengths and contributions of a wide range of disciplines, the chapter authors enrich our theological understanding of children and offer pertinent ways in which we can honor their dignity and full humanity.

Like others informed by various forms of liberation theology, many contributors also incorporate research from sociology, political science, and economics, as well as the voices of the oppressed to address the injustices they face. However, contributors greatly expand their sources to understand and address the unique forms of suffering and challenges that children face by building on research in the areas of child development, child maltreatment, and children's rights. Several contributors also refer to the groundbreaking Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study and the Search Institute's Developmental Assets Framework. Although it is more difficult to hear the voices of children than adults, much of this contemporary research includes interviews and testimonies of children themselves.

For example, Craig L. Nesson sees his work as contributing to what some are calling "child liberation theology" and to discussions of the theological method more broadly by building on social-scientific studies of child abuse and neglect, the dangers of corporal punishment, and effective approaches to child protection and well-being. Rohan P. Gideon notices, even among Dalit theologians in India, the lack of attention to the harsh realities and exploitation of children. As he seeks to expand Christian understandings of salvation, Gideon utilizes research on child labor and children's rights and recognizes the intersectionality of children's multiple identities. He also calls for creating more spaces for listening to their unique stories, experiences of discrimination, and hopes. Finally, Kenneth Mtata exposes adult-centered and hierarchical notions of personhood in church and society. He finds that despite their attention to community and the marginalized, even Black, womanist, and liberation theologies in Africa are often child-blind. Mtata paves the way toward a stronger, more child-inclusive theological anthropology by using resources from philosophy, linguistics, and cultural anthropology as well as theology.

### *Experience*

Another significant source for all contributors is the experience of individuals and communities, including the experience of children. "Experience" in the case of children involves learning about the many issues facing children, families, and communities past and present through sources such as social-scientific studies, testimonies, and stories. Attending to these experiences also involves listening to children's own perspectives or adult memories of childhood.

Contributors incorporate children's experiences and perspectives in various ways. For example, Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara examines sin and evil not

only by building on feminist theology and the ideas of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur but also by reflecting on her conversations and daily interactions with children and their families. She also taps into her childhood memories of reading *Alice in Wonderland* to understand and address children's fascination and interactions with the virtual world. In his chapter on the church, Jesuit theologian Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator draws on Roman Catholic theology, the work of African theologians across denominations, and materials from the United Nations on children's rights and well-being. However, he also mines African proverbs, stories, and novels by Camara Laye, Uwem Akpan, and Chinua Achebe as resources for understanding attitudes toward children and their experiences. Valerie Michaelson, a health science researcher and Anglican theologian, draws on decolonial studies to rethink faith formation, discipline, and discipleship. She also incorporates social-scientific qualitative and quantitative research on the corporal punishment of children and its detriments as well as testimonies by Indigenous peoples about their experiences of abuse and neglect in Canada's residential schools.

As they tap into such sources, contributors recognize the challenges and risks associated with seeking to learn about children's experiences. In particular, they acknowledge the difficulty in finding and hearing the "child's voice" not only in literature, social-scientific studies, and adult memories of childhood but also in conversations directly with children. Children are vulnerable and often want to please parents and other adults. Furthermore, adult preconceptions about children's experiences are bound to influence how adults "hear" children. Even the questions posed to children about their experiences and ideas shape their responses. Cautiously trying to include children as full participants in particular research projects or discussions with adults can easily cross inappropriate emotional or intellectual boundaries, thereby even calling into question how "appropriate boundaries" are defined and defended.

Although no approach can solve these and other difficulties of incorporating the voices of children as serious sources for theological reflection, the contributors and other theologians recognize the significance of striving to do so. Furthermore contributors understand their work as a starting point for constructing child theologies that incorporate more sources and spaces for children's ideas, stories, and experiences. To learn more about children's experiences, scholars and theologians are cautiously beginning to mine other sources, such as children's artwork, graffiti, stories, newspapers, essays, letters, and diaries. They are also learning more about the experience of children past and present by studying material culture, architecture, and medical and legal records.<sup>13</sup> Although imperfect, such attempts are important; they help draw

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<sup>13</sup> See some of the creative ways that those studying the history of childhood are

attention to children as creative moral agents with questions, concerns, experiences, and ideas of their own. Incorporating the “child’s voice” in theology and other disciplines also checks adult preconceptions about children and sparks new questions for investigation.

### **Lessons for Theological Studies and the Church**

Once we acknowledge children’s full humanity and cultivate more multidimensional and biblically informed conceptions of their many strengths and vulnerabilities, we strengthen theological reflection in many ways. Recognizing the full humanity of children helps us reexamine Christian doctrines and practices by raising questions related to human experience across the life span, shedding new light on familiar theological and biblical sources, and opening the door to additional resources. By drawing more intentionally on childhood studies, we discover new dimensions of our common humanity and our relationship to God and the world. Learning about children’s unique challenges and contributions also deepens our understanding of human suffering, alerts us to often hidden injustices facing the most vulnerable, and reminds us of the creativity and potential of all human beings, regardless of age. Consequently, Child Theology can benefit how the church across denominations and cultures reflects on a range of important Christian beliefs and practices.

While robust child theologies strengthen theological reflection on key doctrines and practices, they also benefit the whole church by challenging narrow conceptions of children and strengthening our commitments to them. As we enrich theological reflection by honoring children, we also deepen our conceptions of them. Thus, although they are distinct tasks, child theologies and theologies of childhood closely inform and influence one another. In this way and others, the chapters of this volume provide many additional lessons for the whole church.

For example, the contributors expose several narrow assumptions about children that inhibit us from honoring their full humanity—regarding them as persons who are made in the image of God and who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. They demonstrate how adult-centered our perceptions and priorities can sometimes be. Whether in our homes, churches, or larger societies, we often value the ideas, contributions, and presence of adults above those

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seeking to understand children’s experiences, including publications that came out of the research project “Tiny Voices from the Past: New Perspectives on Childhood in Early Europe” directed by Reidar Aasgaard at the University of Oslo, such as Christian Laes and Ville Vuolanto, eds., *Children and Everyday Life in the Roman and Late Antique World* (London: Routledge, 2017).

of children and youth. Just as we, at times, judge the value of people according to class, race, or gender, we often value people according to age. We also carry thin and flat views of children, whether as cute or strong-willed, innocent or sinful, sources of pleasure or economic burdens, wise or ignorant. For various reasons, we often fail to recognize children as thinking beings with their own agency, growing moral capacities, and spiritual questions and experiences. We also neglect to see how children and youth, like adults, have complex identities and are often deeply affected by multiple injustices related to their socioeconomic status, religion, education, sexuality, gender, ethnic background, nation, or race.

Given these and other narrow views, children often fall through the cracks in both church and society. Children worldwide face malnutrition, lack of adequate education and health care, abuse, neglect, anxiety, and depression. Furthermore, many Christian communities are failing to take seriously the spiritual questions and leadership capacities of children and young people. Instead, congregations of all persuasions are sometimes stuck in common and nonstimulating ruts of religious education. In the North American context, for example, some churches take benign approaches to Sunday school, filled with throwaway crafts and lackadaisical lessons; others take domineering approaches with little room for young people's questions. Consequently, as research shows, many young people who grew up in the church feel they do not belong and hold major misconceptions of Christianity. Many are leaving the church and becoming part of the growing number of "nones"—those who do not affiliate with any religious community and mostly identify as "nothing in particular"—even though many are interested in spiritual questions and long for a sense of worthiness, community, and belonging.<sup>14</sup>

Child theology can strengthen the church's efforts in child advocacy and faith formation by reminding us of the full humanity of children and their significance in all areas of Christian faith and life. If our church leaders and faith communities consistently honored and emphasized the full humanity of children, then we would unleash many creative energies in our homes and congregations for experiencing the abundant life in Christ more fully and for serving others more generously. Research about faith communities and our own experience tells us that children and youth are key to cultivating thriving congregations that pass on the faith and contribute to their communities.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For statistics and resources on the nones and religion, see the Pew Research Center ([pewforum.org](http://pewforum.org)).

<sup>15</sup> As one study says, "growing young" energizes an entire congregation. See Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 23.

When we recognize children and youth as equal members of the body of Christ, we more readily welcome, respect, and care for them. We find that we not only teach, guide, and empower them but also learn from and are energized, inspired, and delighted by them. In our homes and congregations, we are more eager to share stories, cultivate meaningful conversations about faith and doubt, and pray and worship together. We also become more aware of the suffering and injustices facing children, including abuse and corporal punishment, and work collaboratively and more intentionally to protect and foster the well-being of all children.<sup>16</sup> These and other meaningful interactions—made possible simply by honoring children’s full humanity—enrich families, communities, and the lives of children and adults.

### Conclusion

Child theologies can challenge and empower theologians and church leaders to honor children, incorporate child-related concerns in all areas of theological education, and advance child well-being in religious and public life. Many more approaches to the task of Child Theology—as defined and carried out in this volume—can be discovered in some of the neglected work of past theologians, and contemporary theologians in many parts of the world continue to offer new approaches. Hopefully, this volume inspires more theologians and church leaders across denominations and theological traditions to embrace the significance of Child Theology for Christian faith and life and challenge all of us, whatever our cultural contexts or places of responsibility, to honor children’s dignity and full humanity.

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<sup>16</sup> For strong theological and social-scientific grounds for rejecting the physical punishment of all children and fostering healthy approaches to discipline across church and society, see Valerie E. Michaelson and Joan E. Durrant, eds., *Decolonizing Discipline: Children, Corporal Punishment, Christian Theologies, and Reconciliation* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020); for theological grounds, see chapters in that volume by Marcia J. Bunge, “The Significance of Robust Theologies of Childhood for Honouring Children’s Full Humanity and Rejecting Corporal Punishment” and “Rethinking Christian Theologies of Discipline and Discipleship,” 108–122, 152–160, respectively.