

## CHILD THEOLOGY IS BORN

Paper for Annual Forum of CCCF5 February 2002, London, UK

### Introduction

The title of this paper took form during Advent last year. In the run up to Christmas there were the usual tasks – decorations, pantomime practices, Christmas cards, and a few sermons and talks. I wrote my usual article for Children Magazine on the theme of the marginalisation of children, and the editor gave it the headline ‘Left Out in the Stable’. (I never can get the title right and I admire those who can.) I had been wrestling with ‘Child Theology’ for some time and it was as I focused on the child-Christ, the baby in the manger, that the image of birth became a metaphor that seemed particularly and amusingly apt. One day perhaps Child Theology will toddle, go to school, perhaps even become a teenager.....but that line of thought risks becoming allegorical!

The paper is in two parts. First, let me say a few things about each word in the title: ‘Child’; ‘Theology’ and ‘Born’; and then I will seek to outline some of the opportunities, responsibilities and challenges that the process implies for those of us who are Christians living and working alongside children, young people and families.

### Part One: Exploring the title

#### Child

You might think that this forum can skip the need to ponder the word, ‘child’! But we may stand in as much, if not more need, than others to do so. It’s possible to become so familiar with a concept that one no longer pauses to reflect on its meaning. Some use the term ‘kids’. Could I invite you to join me in entering, re-entering a child’s world? Perhaps it is the world of our own childhood, or like Virginia Axline, the world of another child like Dibs, perhaps it is the world of our own children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces.

To do so we need to leave and lay aside adult assumptions of time and space. (It’s not so very different in essence from entering Narnia, or the “darker materials” of Philip Pullman.) Let me do so by inviting you as I did at Coventry Cathedral in 1996 to imagine a child’s family (you choose the family, the dwelling, the neighbourhood, the nationality), and to see it not just as a household or group, but as a kingdom or nation. To a child, a family is a kingdom. For a significant part of childhood, the family is not just one of a number of groups and institutions: it is the world. The family is the child’s kingdom. An ordinary child’s kingdom might look like this:

Mum and dad are king and queen. They make the laws of the realm.

The sovereign territory comprises house or apartment, and garden or balcony.

The kingdom has it’s own unique vocabulary and traditions; it’s own history and myths.

It has its yearly festivals, including birthdays and holidays.

There are links with other family kingdoms through ambassadors called uncles and aunts, or gran and granddad.

Each kingdom has a television/video, and, patterns of life, as well as furniture, are arranged around it as if it were some fixed and holy shrine.

By foreign exchange, goods enter the kingdom, many from the great and imposing neighbouring empires of Sainsbury’s, Tesco, Asda and Safeway.

Daily conferences and summits are held with contemporaries in nurseries or schools...

But it also follows that problems in the child’s family or kingdom, will seem correspondingly huge. The adult world may completely underestimate their scale and

significance. What may seem to adults as local and temporary, for the child could well be about everywhere and affect a lifetime.

- When parents divorce, the whole kingdom is divided. It can seem like civil war with split loyalties.
- When a family breaks up, it resembles an earthquake with great cracks appearing in the very ground of the child's being.
- When a step-parent enters a family, it is like a change of government.
- A burglary can resemble an invasion by a hostile power, leaving scars that remain long after the insurance has covered replacement goods.
- Physical injuries can haunt the memory like war wounds.
- A house move can seem like an evacuation or emigration with the loss of familiar landmarks and territory.
- A broken promise or lie is an abrogation of a fundamental treaty or covenant.
- Abuse is totalitarian aggression and savage oppression.
- Poverty can mean famine.
- A visit to the DSS can seem like a delegation approaching IMF!

You can do the rest for yourselves, if you stoop low enough to enter the child's kingdom. But the public world of adult institutions cannot do this. It marginalises and even overlooks the significance and meaning of this world that is so central in a person's development, and so resonant with the Kingdom of Heaven – God's way of doing things. And to help us adjust to the child's world here is the immortal opening of *The Little Prince* by Antoine De Saint-Exupéry:

“Once when I was six years old I saw a beautiful picture in a book about the primeval forest called *True Stories*. It showed a boa constrictor swallowing an animal. The book stated: ‘Boa constrictors swallow their prey whole without chewing it whereupon they can no longer move and sleep for six months digesting it.’ I then reflected deeply upon the adventures in the jungle and in turn succeeded in making my first drawing with a colour pencil. My drawing No.1 was like this: I showed my masterpiece to the grown-ups and asked them if my drawing frightened them. They answered: ‘Why should anyone be frightened by a hat?’ My drawing did not represent a hat. It was supposed to be a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. So I made another drawing of the inside of the boa constrictor to enable the grown-ups to understand. They always need explanations. My drawing No.2 looked like this: The grown-ups then advised me to give up my drawings of boa constrictors, whether from the inside or the outside, and to devote myself instead to geography, history, arithmetic and grammar. Thus it was that I gave up a magnificent career as a painter at the age of six. I had been disappointed by the lack of success of my drawing No.1 and my drawing No.2. Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves and it is rather tedious for children to have to explain things to them time and again.”

Why are we doing this? To awaken the child in us; to sense again the wonder, changing, fragile and yet infinitely real and poignant essence of childhood. Lest we become so dulled by conventional terminology that the child in each of us loses the ability to laugh, to smile, to weep, to dance as children, and with children.

Here is a poem by Jane Clements, a teacher in the Bruderhof Schools, that captures the implications of this for the teacher/child relationship:

Child, though I take your hand

and walk in the snow;  
though we follow the track of the mouse together,  
though we try to unlock together the mystery  
of the printed word, and slowly discover  
why two and three makes five  
always, in an uncertain world –  
child, though I am meant to teach you much,  
what is it, in the end,  
except that together we are  
meant to be children  
of the same Father  
and I must unlearn  
all the adult structure  
and the cumbering years  
and you must teach me  
to look at the earth and the heaven  
with your fresh wonder.

These insights may be exceptional but there are indications that a major shift in our understanding of childhood is underway. J.K. Rowling, J.R.R. Tolkien and Philip Pullman, in building bridges between the worlds of the child and the adult all represent an aspect of this change. The sociology of childhood began less than ten years ago – it's in its infancy! Children's Commissioners, Children's Rights Officers, and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child are all aspects of this paradigm shift. We are beginning to try to listen to children...

There have been a significant number of representations of childhood. Among them are: *Boy*, by Roald Dahl, *Paddy Clarke, Ha! Ha! Ha!*, *Coram Boy*, by Jamila Gavin, *A Boy Called It*, *Once in a House on Fire*, *Angela's Ashes*, and so on. What they have in common is a lack of sentimentality, as they capture and recapture the essence, influence and significance of childhood. The success of the philosophical works of Jostein Gaarder (e.g. *Sophie's World*) and Peter Høeg (e.g. *Borderliners*) confirms that we are seeing an international rather than a merely North Atlantic phenomenon. And these works are challenging our cherished notions of education, childhood, and the construction of time itself. In the UK the murder of Jamie Bulger has acted as a major catalyst for such reflection, as have the reflections of a generation of evacuees.

But this very process is revealing that we don't, and perhaps can't, fully understand childhood: we don't know how to engage children in our adult-institutions (e.g. political and professional processes). We have seen children as objects to be educated or protected rather than as agents and signs of the kingdom with unique views of relationships and their environment. We have forgotten that "play is the business of childhood" (Patio Project, Rotherham). We have allowed a desire to protect and to keep safe our children to override their own stated desire to take risks, to explore and to engage in adventures (*The Dangers of Safe Play – Research Briefing E.S.R.C. Number 22, December 2000*).

The result of years of public concern over child abuse according to Dr. Michael Fitzpatrick writing in *Living Marxism*, is "the increase in state power and authority over family life. This does nothing to help abused children, but it reinforces the grip of a

decadent establishment over a demoralised society.” (Quoted in Penguin Book of Childhood, ed. M. Rosen, 1994, page 202.)

We have become so de-sensitised that we fool ourselves into thinking that we can tinker with and amend adult structures and frameworks in order to make them child-friendly! ‘This is your review’ is one of the sadly ironic weasel phrases as a young person in the care system sits in a room of professionals holding papers and files with LAC forms shaping and restricting all conversation. It is, of course, nothing of the sort. Most children would prefer to play or communicate by mobile phone and text messages! We have also allowed cynical commercialism to take advantage of the inquisitiveness of children so that things and products replace love and commitment. We give permission to go on planned (insured!) trips but do not “give permission and training to the imagination of children.” (A quote from a Norwich church’s advert for a young people’s worker – Jan. 2002.) We have lost of the art of “communicating with them in the language of faith and imagination!” (Same advert.) The world we have created in which children grow and develop is anything but child-friendly – perhaps it is hindering children in such a way as to incur the wrath of which Jesus taught in Matthew 18. Children are seen mostly as “adults in waiting” or “human becomings”. We have lost touch with the insights of those who intuitively grasped the unique qualities of childhood – Blake, Wordsworth, Froebel, Montessori, Dockar-Drysdale, Korczak and so many others. Teachers and carers are swamped by documents and documentation seeking outcomes, performance indicators. And it is vital that those of us responsible for children’s services, care and development never lose touch with the real, unsentimental world of children.

I must share with you a short section from a grandfather’s letter to his grandson as the child reached school age (British school age that is!)

“I enjoy watching you grow – I think I watch you more than I watched our children when they were your age. I am amazed not only at the many things you learn in a few years, so that you are so different now from a baby, but also at the processes of your learning, insofar as I can infer them from what I see. I see your learning new words, sometimes when we tell you a new word, sometimes picking them up as you overhear them – and then playing with them. I see you making a spoon into a bridge for your motorbike to drive on. I hear you now telling yourself stories, dramatising materials you have gathered from many sources.”

A grandparent in touch with a child’s world!

Perhaps you sense that I would rather like to stay pondering the mysteries of children and childhood...but I must move on.

Theology

Can I try and be clinically brief at this point? Put in a nutshell what we all take to be ‘theology’ (whatever our particular denominational or cultural traditions) is in fact a particular western, or European, construction. It is ‘part-theology’: largely cerebral and done with words (often very long ones completely alien to the world of the ordinary adult let alone the child). It is based on Greek concepts and principles and assumes a hermeneutic of the Scriptures that often does not do justice to the significance and seriousness of the created world, to real life, poverty, gender, sexuality, history, war, work, play...

Throughout 2,000 years children and childhood have been marginalised ('left out in the stable' was as you recall my editor's phrase) in three ways. First they rarely figure in systematic theology. Take my word for it – I have looked through the indexes of many such works! Second they have not been part of the process of theology. The way theology is defined and done excludes children completely.

But another contribution to this exclusion has been the role of the 'activists' if I can call us that – the Christian child care organisations. We have tended (and many like us world wide) to get so involved in delivering services and developing responses to government standards and initiatives, as well as to fund-raising, that we have rarely engaged in genuine theological activity, reflection and debate. Just look at our annual reports, our activities, our libraries and you will see that theological reflection is as marginal to many of us, as are children to systematic theology!

When Thomas Barnardo met Jim Jarvis, one of the first children for whom he cared, he wanted to know above all whether the boy had heard of Jesus. How many of us here today have a similar concern or would feel that this is now relevant or politically correct? How many have been placed in situations, contracts and roles where we could not ask the question of a young person? But, I ponder, is there anyone I would rather introduce a vulnerable, suffering young person to, than Jesus?

And when it comes to the Bible itself most of those we seek to help – children, young people and families have little or no knowledge of it and few feel it of any relevance. But do we really believe it is irrelevant – that the stories and the message have passed their sell-by date? (I'm not talking about the style or presentation, but about the essence of the Good News, and the continuing testimonies and experiences of the followers of The Way.)

Since Medellin 1968, Vatican II, Lausanne, the growth of Pentecostal, Restoration and Charismatic movements, theology has been undergoing huge challenges, paradigm shifts. Local theologies like African, Asian, Black, Urban, Rural. Women's theologies have emerged. They are not bolting on another section to, but challenging the very foundations of, western theology. There is no time to develop this now but let us pause to reflect on what is still missing in all this. Yes, you've guessed it! Children and childhood. They still tend to be at the margins of these new theologies!

Let's not been too hard on ourselves – this is true in other fields like, for example, sociology – where the sociology of childhood is only 8 or 10 years old! But I ask myself, how come children are so marginal in our theology when they were so central to the biblical visions of the Kingdom of God (God's way of doing things), and especially in the life and teaching of Jesus? That's the bit I struggle with.

I have written elsewhere of some of the effects of this. Children are given poor and inaccurate 'Bibles' and Bible Stories'. (There is a revealing study of this genre, *The Bible for Children*, by Ruth Bottigheimer, Yale 1996.) They are routinely marginalised in church life and worship. Young people feel alienated from the life and rhythm of church life. And my belief is that our vision of social and physical environments is impoverished as a result. We lack the playful, questioning and adventurous contribution of children in the social construction of our worlds. They tend to be objects of our love, our concern, needing education and protection rather than fellow human beings with unique contributions and insights (as well as needs).

Recently my lectures have begun with a few extracts from Children's Letters to God. It takes time for students to attune their minds to them, but the result is quite dramatic. We are finding they encapsulate crisply questions at the heart of things like life, death, and relationships. They are beginning to indicate one of the forms of "child theology": letters and questions by children themselves.

Born

This word in the title is possibly more controversial because it requires definition and defence. I offer it as a playful metaphor as I have said (in the spirit of my dear mentor John V. Taylor). There have been some references to children in Christian thought; there have been some excellent studies and reports. Children in the Way and Unfinished Business, produced by The Consultative Group on Ministry among Children, are two exceptional British examples.

There is good material on children's ministry, education and worship; there are lively children's and youth sections in the major denominations; but there has been no significant impact at the heart of the theological process. While male stereotypes have been challenged, the archetypal subject of this discourse is the adult.

So why use the word 'born' now? Has anything significant happened? I believe it is happening and here are a few signs.

There are new diploma and degree courses on children's and youth ministry (e.g. C.Y.M.) that are engaging with core issues in hermeneutics and theology. Since the publication of John Bradford's book, *Caring for the Whole Child* (T.C.S. 1995), there has been the evolution of courses on 'holistic child development' in different parts of the world. A major reader, *Celebrating Children* is being completed. I had the privilege of teaching the theological component on a Masters' Course in Malaysia, in November. An international conference in De Bron, 2001 raised over 200 theological questions: all from Christians engaged in work with children at risk. But this activity can still exist without the mainstream theologies being aware of it.

Another development is the growing attention theological institutions and journals are devoting to 'Child Theology'. *Theology Today* had a whole issue on Children (January 2000) and *Interpretation* too (April 2001). They had some major theologians and papers. And the book referred to in the current CCCF's newsletter, *The Child in Christian Thought*, represents a 'wake-up call for theology'. One of the useful functions of this book is to bring together some very beautiful insights into the nature and significance of childhood that have been overlooked for years by mainstream theology. Karl Rahner's essay, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood" is a real gem, and significantly enough for us today it was given on October 1st 1962 at a conference of SOS Kinderdorf (that is, among child care practitioners). Some will find the novella by Schleiermacher, "Christmas Eve: A Dialogue on the Incarnation" (1806) equally inspiring and fresh. And Jurgen Motlmann's essay "Child and Childhood as Metaphors of Hope" is already part of the Asian theological reader. It may well be that as African and Asian theology becomes more accessible in Europe we will find rich resources from those who come to Jesus and the Scriptures instinctively more like children, than their more cerebral European counterparts.

The Children's Rights movement has gone ahead of theological reflection and theology must now catch up. No doubt there is much of which I am unaware, but the signs of life

are appearing. Perhaps these early papers will one day seem like the cries of a newborn baby. But they are at least being uttered!

There will be a 'Child-Theology' brainstorming session in Malaysia in June and the first person signed up is a Professor of Theology (a grandparent) who admits he had not done any serious thinking in this area throughout his academic career! If you are aware of resources, groups, individuals, in this area do pass their details on.

Part Two: Exploring the Implications and Challenges

It would be as invidious to pre-judge the outcomes of this process, as it would to predict the future identity and development of a baby. But there are some implications with which we must wrestle apparent already. Let me try to address a few by looking first at likely developments if we do not develop child theology adequately.

- Mainstream western theology will continue to go its own way cut off from a vital theme throughout the Scriptures and more specifically, as if Jesus had never made becoming like a child a condition of entering God's kingdom.
- Young people will increasingly perceive theology and Christianity as alien to them as well as detached from the real world and real environment.
- Churches and Christian communities will continue to die.
- Secular and secularising movements, professional and bureaucratic, will continue to develop nationally and internationally and Christians involved in them will lack adequate resources to contribute to, and challenge, them from informed perspectives.
- Christian child care organisations will continue to be squeezed into contemporary moulds and be shaped by prevailing discourses, unable to find a bridge between the faith community and the professional world-view.

(The Catholic Child Welfare Council mission statement shows the extent of the dilemma. It reads, The Council is a federation of the Roman Catholic diocesan agencies and religious congregations concerned with child care. Its mission is to promote the care and welfare of children and families by providing a forum for co-ordinating resources, offering advice, guidance and training and encouraging high standards of professional practice. The work of the Council is founded on Christ's message of faith, hope and love and the Church's teaching and its commitment to the dignity and sanctity of human life.' You will see immediately that there are three sentences, representing if you like three separate 'worlds'. The challenge of child theology is to find a way of bringing them together. Without such a process there is the inevitable risk of compartmentalisation.)

- The rich and creative Judaeo-Christian visions of the created world, and how harmonious life might look on this planet, will continue to lie neglected. We will opt for protection, education, and risk assessment while children's longings for play, shalom, relationships with the created order go unheard and unrequited for vast numbers throughout the world. We will lack any coherent vision of how children are part of a world-view. "Education" and "care" will continue to be English words legitimating institutions that divide children and social life up into sections, like school, home, mind and emotions.

- A whole prophetic role goes by default. We risk mistaking material ownership and educational attainment with God's Kingdom – His way of doing things!

Sadly I believe that this is by and large a description of the situation as it is. If you say this is a rather bleak picture, I can only respond by saying I wish it were not so, but fear that for many children and families it is. Inside I weep when I ponder what on earth we

are doing to our children, and the legacy we are leaving the next generation, while at the same sensing the hope and spontaneity of the children and young people themselves. And so we come to the challenge that lies before us. Why us, you say? Some might still be thinking that the subject of this paper would have been more suited to a theological college, audience or journal.

Because like those Rahner was addressing in 1962 we are in touch with and alongside children, young people and families; because we know something of the realities of their lives and this experience is vital in any child theology. Can I underline this? Traditional theology started from (or thought it did!) “the Text” and worked through systematic principles to proposed ethics or courses of action. Since 1968 we have all come to see that this is an inadequate hermeneutic. We all must (and do) start with the ‘Text of life’ – our own culture and context. We have nowhere else to start from! That is how God created us.

And so we must reflect on the realities of our time and place, our experiences, and crucially, the actual experiences of children and young people in order to bring these to the Scriptures. Real theology involves hard questions; silences; clouds of unknowing. (The 200 questions already mentioned from Christians hurting alongside suffering children are the stuff of real theology.)

We are all theologians. As Christians there is no option but to be! A community of humans, called by God to serve Him, by continuing the work and ministry of Jesus. We cannot do that without theological reflection.

At the Westminster Launch of the CCCF we considered the mission statement of CCCF. You will find it in each issue of the newsletter.

Can I remind you of the challenges we articulated before closing with some practical suggestions?

- To discover and articulate a vision of contemporary society in which children and young people have a rightful place, aware that some things need to be turned inside out, and upside down (e.g. work and family).
- To find ways of understanding children as whole beings, rather than as incomplete adults.
- To work out more effective ways of supporting local parishes and congregations in their care of children and families.
- Cross-cultural and inter-religious exchanges and sharing. (I take it that post September 11 this is now axiomatic for us all.)
- Pioneering new (old?) forms of Christian community, new ways of “being church”.
- Challenging professional and secular agencies in their standards, values and policies; and also the cynical and hypocritical exploitation of children and young people, direct and indirect, by the commercial engines of our times.

That’s a huge agenda and helps to explain why CCCF is growing and why we sense a need to draw alongside one another, and how difficult it is to know where to focus our attention!

In conclusion a few practical suggestions to start the ball rolling:

- CCCF’s newsletter devotes some space every time to theological reflection
- Christian agencies consider AGM’s/ conferences/ meetings on this theme
- We press our denominations and traditions with questions

- CCCF links with theological colleges and courses offering our experience
- CCCF engages in current theological processes
- CCCF collates a dossier of factual experiences of children in order to be a prophetic witness to the realities of their lives as distinct from statistics and “spin”
- We initiate and collate children’s letters, questions, poems and paintings and encourage them to describe their visions of how the world should be
- We meet the CGMAC as a matter of priority to discuss the recommendations of their two reports
- We consider piloting and testing the new Bible for children and families
- We are prepared to collate and compare our mission statements to see if
- We commission people and groups to work at this
- We meet with government and comment on relevant documents and legislation
- We draw up a resource list of people and resources

#### Coda

For twenty years I have been inspired and moved by the life and work of Janusz Korczak, the Polish child care pioneer, and author of *King Matt the First*. He gave his life alongside the Jewish children for whom he cared. Recently I discovered that Jim Harding had been similarly inspired, and NSPCC had published a selection of quotations and comments under the title *A Voice for the Child*. Here are a few for you to take away and ponder.

Know yourself before you attempt to get to know children...First and foremost you must realise you too are a child, whom you must first get to know, to bring up and to educate. (Page 1.)

The market value of the very young is small. Only in God’s sight is the apple blossom worth as much as the apple... (Page 7.)

A baby can hold a very complicated conversation without being able to talk. (Page 23.)

A child can read his parent’s face in the same way a farmer reads the sky to predict the weather. (Page 29.)

An educateur (there is no word for this in English!) can nurture the whole child. She could be the sculptor of the child’s soul. (Page 51.)

It is really children who are the princes of feelings, the poets and thinkers. (Page 55.)

The child thinks with feelings and not with the intellect. That is why communication is so complicated. And speaking with children is a difficult art. (Page 59.)

His farewell speech to each child leaving the orphanage makes me wonder what British equivalents might look like today:

“Unfortunately I can give you nothing but these few poor words. I cannot give you God, for you must find Him in quiet contemplation, in your own soul. I cannot give you a Homeland, for you must find it in your own heart. I cannot give you love of Man, for there is no love without forgiveness, And forgiving is something everyone must learn to do on his own. I can give you but one thing only – A longing for a better life, a life of truth and justice: even though it may not exist now, it may come tomorrow. Perhaps this longing will lead you to God, Homeland and Love. Goodbye. Do not forget.”(Page 144.)

#### Summary

This paper began with some hints and allusions to the magical world of childhood. Let me leave you with the conclusion of a novel I was reading on Saturday morning. Called *As it is in Heaven* by Niall Williams, it tells of a love relationship between a man and a

woman, each with traumas in their pasts, and the effect that the birth of their baby girl has on them both and on their relationship.

“In the evenings...he could not look at her without seeing God, He did not deserve her, he thought, and then held the child in his arms in the tenderest embrace while the stars rose in the skylight overhead. She became the clock of the cottage. Her wakes and sleeps dictated the rhythms of their days and nights...He carried her around...like the smallest parcel of hope and though her eyes could not see that far, he pointed out the garden and the sea...”

At the end the three are together, mother and father with the child between, and through the child the father comes to understand that “though we live in the impotency of our dreams to make better this world, the earth and its stars spin through the heavens at the rate of our loving and is made meaningful only in the way in which we give ourselves to each other.” (Page 310.)

If this all seems like the start of something, full of allusions and intimations, rather than a polished and rounded paper, I have conveyed correctly a sense of how things are! The time for living in separate compartments is over. The Forum has been born, and is toddling. Among its tasks, it now has to explore the world of child theology, risking as all toddlers do, tumbles and spills, getting egg on the face of oneself and others...but without which there can be no growth or maturity.

Keith J. White