

# **Insights into Child Theology through the Life and Work of Pandita Ramabai**

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## **Abstract**

This paper links two subjects, the life and work of Pandita Ramabai, and Child Theology, with which not everyone is familiar, and so it contains a brief summary of the key elements of each. Next issues arising from the emerging process of Child Theology are identified. These are considered in turn to see what insights the life and work of Ramabai provide for Child Theology.

The paper concludes with some ideas about future developments.

It begins with a prelude in which I describe how I came to be engaged in studying Ramabai, and with the development of Child Theology.

## **Introduction**

It was in 1997 that I first stumbled upon the life and work of Pandita Ramabai. Forty years earlier I believed that God had called me to be involved in some aspect of His mission in Western India. When I finally arrived at Mukti, the community founded by Ramabai I immediately sensed that I should become involved and committed to partnership with her work in general, and the amplification of her voice in India and throughout the world in particular.

In 1999 the eyes of my heart began to open to the discourse that is now known as Child Theology. Two years later, as a result of the tragedy known as 9/11, I found myself being asked to teach it, and I was asked to Chair the Child Theology Movement.<sup>1</sup>

This paper seeks to bring together consider the common ground between these two subjects for the first time. I have proceeded on the intuitive assumption that they are intimately and integrally linked. The one thing that you will discover as you read the article is that my engagement with both is not just a matter of head, but also the heart, and possibly soul and strength.

## **Pandita Ramabai's Life and Work (1858-1922)<sup>2</sup>**

Ramabai Dongre Medhavi (her full married name) came from a devout Brahmin family, and learned the Hindu way of devotion (Bhakti Marga) from both her parents. The spiritual, religious and cultural qualities she imbibed from them during her wandering childhood influenced the whole of her life.

Having seen both her parents die from starvation, she arrived in Calcutta in 1878, where her prodigious knowledge of Sanskrit and the Hindu sacred texts gained her the titles, "Pandita" and "Saraswati". When, soon after this, her husband died, she and her daughter Manorama (Mano), began a geographical, social, cultural and spiritual journey of discovery. Though she had close contact with the Brahmo Samaj, one of the strongest influences on her decision to follow Christ was Nehemiah Goreh (1825-1895).

In England Ramabai and Mano stayed at the Community of Sisters of St Mary the Virgin in Wantage and they were baptised in the local Anglican Church. Ramabai then studied at the Cheltenham Ladies College, led by Dorothea Beale. She was a friend of Professor Max Mueller and engaged in lively theological debate, both in person and by means of correspondence, with Sister Geraldine at CSMV, Dr Gore and Prof Westcott.

In the USA she studied the educational philosophy of Friedrich Froebel, and wrote six grades of textbooks based on his method in Marathi. She decided to found a practical Indian model of education and residential community for child widows. American supporters (American Ramabai Association) provided the “seed-corn” for this venture.

The result was a “Sharada Sadan” (home of learning) established first in Bombay, and then Poona. It was forced to move to the village of Khedgaon, where it became known as Mukti (salvation). It latterly became a refuge where starving and oppressed women could find acceptance, a new way of living, and education that empowered them to serve Jesus Christ in families, professions and evangelism. Although supported by Christians and moderate Indian reformers, this radical project was harshly criticised from both quarters. Narayan Tilak (1861-1919) provided songs and psalms for culturally Indian worship in the chapel. Among the significant events associated with Mukti was the 1905-7 “revival”. Mukti exists to this day (Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission) as an interdenominational ecclesial community comprising schools and kindergarten, hospital, workshops, farm and chapel, serving as a non-hierarchical, non-patriarchal model of living.

Ramabai also translated the Bible into Marathi that was printed on Mukti presses, and devised a method of Bible translation applicable to any language; forged indigenous forms of community, worship and education; and wrote several books (including, *The Duties of Women*, *A Testimony*, *the High Class Hindu Woman*, and *Conditions of Life in the United States*) incorporating radical theological and social insights. She was an Indian reformer, advocating Hindi as a national language, and the first woman to address the Indian Social Congress.

Intellectually brilliant, linguistically gifted, spiritually aware, and intuitively perceptive and sensitive, Ramabai followed Jesus as her guru to the end.

Given all this, her recognition in Indian and in church history is comparatively slight. One possible explanation is that as a devout female Indian Christian living in community, a writer, educator, theologian, single mother, friend of orphans, campaigner for women’s rights and founder of an ecumenical ecclesial community, she transcends existing categories.

## **Child Theology**

Child Theology is a way of studying the Bible and doing theology that takes as its starting point the example of Jesus when he placed a little child in the midst of his disciples (Matthew 18).

It may be useful as a way of understanding its nature to compare it with Liberation, Women’s, and Indigenous (e.g. African, Asian etc) theologies. There are similarities and differences, but they have in common a desire to shed fresh light on the whole of theology, church and mission by using the lens of a particular group or perspective. In the

case of Child Theology it begins with Jesus and taking what he did and said very seriously.

The disciples were having a (theological) discussion about who was greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, and Jesus introduced a child as a vital clue to what the Kingdom of Heaven is really like. This was a great surprise to them, and they do not seem to have grasped what he was trying to say until after Pentecost. Since then the child placed by Jesus in the midst has generally not been paid much attention in the course of biblical and theological studies to this present day.

Starting in this way has led a growing number of theologians, pastors and Christians working alongside children, to read the Bible, and understand Jesus and his teaching with fresh understanding. The significance of children and children's ministry in God's sight has become clearer, and there is much to inform, challenge and encourage children's workers, parents and teachers.

But there are wider implications to the process: the way church and mission have developed and been understood has often been done without more than a passing reference to children. Now Child Theology is enabling biblical and theological reflection on every aspect of church and mission using as a hermeneutic principle the "child placed by Jesus in the midst".

So Child Theology (CT) is of vital importance to all who take Jesus seriously and seek to make him Lord of their lives, whether practitioners alongside children (including parents), or pastors, church leaders, seminary teachers and ordinary Christians. This means that the process of doing Child Theology involves all of these as a matter of principle.

The "Child Theology Movement" is committed to nurturing and facilitating this process worldwide, with particular reference to the experiences of real children and young people, and the cultural and social and Christian traditions of each area where consultations are held.<sup>3</sup>

## **Issues arising from Child Theology**

Four the purposes of clarity and argument these are clustered around two focal points: theological and ideological. It should not be implied from this however that the two are to be taken as separate or unrelated.

### ***Theology, Church and Mission***

(i) CT begins with a particular theological matter: *the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven*, and from this starting point it finds it is identifying an increasing range of theological issues that challenge existing textual, biblical and systematic (thematic) work and theologies.

The way that theology is done and taught is increasingly being questioned by CT, not simply because that is its agenda, but also because of the discoveries arising in the process of exploring the concrete issues arising around the world. The theological component of the HCD Masters course for example engages men and women, academics and practitioners, and uses music, art, sculpture, role play, conversation and discussion, letter-writing, poetry as tools of the process. It begins with theological reflection on existing practice and is determined to avoid “part theology” that creates a false dichotomy between reasoned reflection in the light of Scripture, on the one hand, and practical action and justice on the other. More than 20% of the course is devoted to working on the practical implications of CT for the students’ life and work.

(ii) One of the implications for God’s mission is the discovery that *babies, children and young people, are chosen by God to be partners in His mission* (not merely objects of “children’s ministry”, evangelism and the like).<sup>4</sup> Children’s ministry is becoming seen as a two-way process where children are being considered as ministers and leaders (in child-sensitive ways) not as those who are taught and cared for.

(iii) Then there is the matter of *children and the Bible*. Traditional methods of Bible presentation, reading, story-telling and teaching are being critiqued. The focal issue is how the Scriptures should be properly handled and interpreted with children and young people in mind. This leads to more general issues of hermeneutics.

(iv) Another implication is a fresh exploration of *the gathered Christian community (Ecclesia)*. Children are at the heart of Jewish worship and family life, and yet tend to be detached or semi-detached in Christian communities. How does church look where children are once again at its heart, alongside Jesus? And how are families (“little churches”<sup>5</sup>) to be supported by the gathered community in their ministry to children?

(v) *Indigenous theologies and contextualisation* continue to be of critical importance in the globalising world. The issues are well known and continuously rehearsed. One possibility that has been raised is that Child Theology (with particular reference to its way of developing theology) might provide a uniquely sensitive starting point and initial framework. It has the advantage that it embraces all people of the world (everyone is either a child or was a child chronologically, and theologically every person is a child of God; whereas not everyone is a woman, Filipino or economically poor). And it is inherently about contextualised listening and exploration. It does not come with a set of beliefs, or denominational baggage, but is informed by the history of Christian life and thought worldwide.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Contemporary Ideologies and Prevailing Philosophies***

Childhood is inherently a contextualised concept and process: perhaps it is one of the best social and moral “barometers” of a community or society’s wellbeing. CT is finding that it cannot but critique the prevailing educational philosophies and systems worldwide.

(i) With children (beside Jesus) near the centre of its agenda, and seeking always to throw theological light on issues, CT sees *education, nurseries, schools, and colleges operating far too often as an extension of the industrial production line for adults*. They are primarily concerned with producing young adults with identified skills and knowledge, based on models of child development. In nearly every case this is at the expense of exploration, play and spiritual and emotional intelligence and formation. The stress is on the “Not Yet” at the expense of the “Now” (to use terms more commonly associated with the theological exploration of the Kingdom of Heaven).

(ii) Likewise the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*: this derives largely from a model which severs the relationship between a child: seen as an autonomous individual, and a child: seen as related to a heavenly Father. The assumption is that a child is of intrinsic worth, rather than valued because of the relationship with God through Christ.

(iii) *Contemporary political ideologies* are also coming under scrutiny. Democracy is an example, often held to be the arrival point of political systems and development. In its contemporary form it excludes children from participation, may undermine family relationships, and communities and stresses individual preferences rather than the relationships vital to the wellbeing and growth of children.

(iv) Just as feminists have stressed and modelled the need for *new forms of relationship and organisation* free of the ideological tyranny of patriarchy, so CT is discovering the inadequacies of existing models of church and social institutions. If the question of what a child-friendly church, school, community or society looks and feels like is posed it inevitably throws a searchlight on prevailing forms of social relationship.

I hope that this brief overview gives a flavour of the scope and nature of the issues arising from the first four years of the activities and dynamics of CT. And I trust that it is immediately apparent that this is not a discrete set of issues and discoveries sealed off from wider theological discourses and practice. Rather the reverse: it is scratching where the theological itches are around the world.

### **Ramabai’s Insights**

So now we come to the heart of this paper. Is it possible that a person living and working a century ago might provide insights, ideas and models that inform one of the newest forms of theological inquiry and process?

Before continuing with this exploration it might be worth noting that others before me have marvelled at the way Ramabai lived life to the full within her time and place, but did not share the same social and ideological space (the “terrain” to use Gramsci’s term) as her contemporaries. She had “an insider’s empathy” coupled to “an outsider’s critique” (to borrow from Meera Kosambi<sup>7</sup>). She anticipated many of the fundamental issues that later came to the fore in politics, education, welfare and theology. Thus in her relation to CT we are considering one of the areas in which she showed typical prescience, rather than an exception.

### ***Theology, Church and Mission***

(i) Beginning with *the Kingdom of Heaven* (that is God's way of doing things in our personal, family, community and societal worlds), Ramabai saw that because this "reign" had been pioneered and inaugurated by Jesus Christ, the door was open for this way to be modelled in her time and culture. Thus she was instrumental in establishing a community that responded to the practical and concrete realities of her age, but that transcended the ideologies and hegemonies of that age influencing or dominating the spheres of both social, and religious, power relations. Her personal testimony written not only in the book of that name<sup>8</sup>, but in her letters and the community that she founded, shows how she sought in her personal life, revealed and hidden, a determination to do things God's way as revealed in the life and death of Christ.

But this commitment meant that she needed to *examine every Christian doctrine and creed* from this committed standpoint as an Indian woman in the light of the Scriptures. In so doing she became engaged in serious and sustained theological discussion with some of the leading theologians of her day, including Dr Charles Gore and Professor Westcott. In so doing she challenged the gender and ethnic assumptions of her time, and thus contextualised the theological discourse. She was not prepared to dismiss Hindu beliefs and traditions per se, but as with Christian traditions and beliefs she sought to test them against the Scriptures without quenching their spirit. She was alert to textual issues (as befits one who translated the whole Bible herself), and biblical and systematic expositions with particular reference to gender, denominational and ethnic biases. A survey of the major theological issues discussed by Indian theologians since<sup>9</sup> shows that she anticipated many of their discoveries and concerns.

Her lifelong commitment to the alleviation of the oppression and suffering of child widows is an essential and critical part of that process. She did not accept a divide between the academic and reasoned apologetics of a religion, and the practical implementation of belief. Her theology is revealed by her action as well as her words. As Mahatma Ghandi commented: "A life of service and uttermost simplicity is the best preaching. A rose does not need to preach. It simply spreads its fragrance. The fragrance is its own sermon." The Kingdom of Heaven is about the way things are done and said as much as about what is done and said. It looks with hope to the future "Not yet" drawing from it encouragement and inspiration for practical steps towards that future reign in the here and now. Children, particularly girls were at the core of this endeavour throughout Ramabai's life.

(ii) The whole of Ramabai's work and teaching was derived from Froebel, Jesus and others who stressed *the agency of the students or pupils in the learning process*. The teacher was not there to impart truths or list data, so much as to create the context in which the students by active exploration were able to discover truths and process information for themselves. This was put to the test in a remarkable and seminal way when some of her pupils in the Sharada Sadan in Poona asked if they could be baptised. If Ramabai agreed to their request her whole work would be put in jeopardy, but in the final analysis their agency was the determining factor. She pointed out to them how hard it would be and then supported their decision. It was the resulting storm that precipitated her move from Poona.

In her schools the pupils of some grades became the teachers of others. In the revival at Mukti it was the experiences of the girls themselves that shaped the agenda as much, if not more than her personal views and intentions.

(iii) The *work on a Bible* was, as the work of R.S. Sugirtharajah<sup>10</sup> argues, a radical attempt to empower the girls (and then women) by giving them a tool that freed them to live for Christ in every conceivable area of life without allegiance to institutions and groups other than Jesus and the Bible's own teaching. It is significant that wherever possible Ramabai placed a Bible or whole book of the Bible in the hands of the girls at Mukti. She was also willing (controversially for her time among both Christians and Hindus) for the Bible to be placed alongside Hindu sacred texts. She was prepared for the students to come to their own conclusions about the truth, and to support them in whatever conclusions they arrived at.

(iv) Mukti is *a living ecclesial community* that still gives testimony to the intentions and vision of the founder, Ramabai. It is conceived as a kindergarten (literally a children's garden) where an extensive range of human activities are nurtured. In the middle of that place there is a building that is used for many activities notably services. The whole of Mukti is "church", not just the place and the occasions when the residents gather to sing or pray. It is a place where varied denominational insights are welcomed and integrated into the whole within partisanship, and where the whole of life is seen as "worship", not just religious ceremonies or services. No superior status is given to religious activities or formally ordained ministers over the rest of life or the lay members of this women's community. As people today explore new ways of "being church" where children have their proper place as modelled by the pivotal role of children in Jewish worship and teaching, Mukti provides a contextualised model that has been tested over time, resilient and enduring.

(v) Ramabai was from the outset concerned that Mukti should be *indigenous in its culture, clothing, way of life, worship, movement and relationships*. The fact that it was here that the sitar was used for Sunday worship, and that the great Christina Marathi poet, Narayan Tilak was instrumental in providing Indian settings of the Psalms as well as some of his own Christian songs is remarkable given that the period in question begins in the last decade of the nineteenth century while Queen Victoria was Empress of India and Western missions were at the height of their endeavours including their tendency to despise culturally located and rooted music, genres and lyrics. Given that this was accompanied by deep explorations of Christian thought and theology, and was non-partisan, in that it sought only the best from each and every culture, with personnel welcomed from a variety of nations, it becomes clear that Ramabai offers a living experiment for CT as CT seeks to engage with cultures and traditions around the world with children in the midst.

### ***Contemporary Ideologies and Prevailing Philosophies***

In my studies of Ramabai I was (like Meera Kosambi before me) astonished by her knowledge and grasp of the way in which discourses and ideologies form, operate and are

in turn reformed into new paradigms. Although she did not use the vocabulary of twentieth century philosophers and sociologists (like Kuhn, Marx, Gramsci, Foucault, Greer and so on) there is no doubt that Ramabai understood the way in which power relations functioned at every area of life, personal and public, local and (inter) national. Her detailed knowledge of Indian religion and culture, institutionalised and structured by patriarchy, class and power, was matched by a corresponding interest in Western ideological history with particular reference to the practice of burning or drowning witches in Europe, and the oppression of slaves and Indians in North America.

(i) It comes as no surprise in the light of this that Ramabai should offer such clear-sighted *critiques of prevailing educational policies and systems*, while at the same time offering radical new models for their transformation. It is one of the tragedies of Indian history that her educational model was suppressed under the British Raj, and that it remains unrecognised and unclaimed to the present day.

Ramabai studied various educational systems as well as trying more than one for herself (for example the gurukul in India, and Cheltenham Ladies College in England), and lighted upon the philosophy of Friedrich Froebel after much reading and thought. One of the contemporary objections to Froebel's system was his emphasis on play, movement, music and dance as integral to the learning process. This did not fit neatly with the emerging Protestant ethic and notion of "school-work" "home work" and the like. It was also possible outside traditional settings such as school buildings, and preferred natural settings as well as valuing the role of mothers in the whole process.

It may well be that in accepting and accommodating conventional methods and systems of education (whether in theological seminaries or Sunday Schools) Christians have swallowed a camel while being concerned with straining out gnats from the details of the system (concern with Creationism, curriculum design, streaming and the like). Ramabai felt it was worth devoting much of her life to an alternative system. It is now becoming clear that radicals such as Jerome Berryman with his *Godly Play*<sup>11</sup> have much more in common with her underlying philosophy than the prevailing ethos. The circle replaces the lines of desks; dance and story are at the heart rather than rote learning; movement rather than categories of thought and discipline are the key to the process.

(b) As a challenge to the idea of an autonomous individual Ramabai established *a community in which everyone was respected and played their age-appropriate part*. And like Froebel she saw that the respect for a child depended on an underlying philosophy or belief system in which each child has a proper place, where there is a perceived unity within creation and in which unity and its appropriate relationships a child is seen as giving and receiving (rather than deserving of rights or seen primarily as a consumer whether of information or materials). The fact that the learning process always took place in the context of a living community is of great significance. The teachers shared this life-space and modelled respect and humility guided by reverence for the Creator God and a sense of the unity of the whole universe. The purpose of education was not to produce autonomous individuals who would become a certain type of adult, but to connect the soul of each child and groups of children with the whole universe.

(c) Any philosophy of learning presupposes *a view of the overarching worldviews or meta-narratives*. The education of children is not a discrete and self-contained entity. In Ramabai's time there was a major contestation between world-views: the excitement of the Enlightenment as it reached India (first in Bengal); the dominance of the British Raj; the rise of Swaraj; conservative Hinduism, Christianity, and so on. She carefully considered the merits and demerits of each, and steered her own course, reflected in the life and worship at Mukti, and her own writings. Just at CT throws light on prevailing systems from the perspective of a child and young people; so Ramabai contemplated the social and political world from her commitment to girls and young women. Mukti stands, at least in its latent form, as a radical alternative way of living. It is *sui generis*, not partisan. It is non-denominational; welcomes the contributions of people from different cultures and backgrounds; celebrates Marathi culture, but seeks the best from other cultures; promotes excellence, but does not lapse into elitism, and so on. Ramabai was shot at from different sides as she pursued a line deriving from her determination to follow the life, teaching, example and death of Jesus as her model: never married to the spirit of her age.

(d) Ramabai pioneered *radical new forms of relationship* and challenged existing institutions all through her life. This included her out-caste marriage; her refusal to accept conventional widowhood; the lifelong commitment to her daughter Mano as a single mother; her sisterhood that included several American women; but especially the Sharada Sadans and Mukti. The latter places were determined and calculated attempts to create new forms of social space, and specifically to model these forms so that they could be read, adapted and then transferred throughout India. CT, as we have seen, challenges conventional understandings of social organisations including concepts such as status and hierarchy whether in church or state. Ramabai therefore provides a living example of how this might be done in context with children placed by Jesus in the midst. Despite the all too cursory nature of this exploration hopefully it becomes clear how Ramabai's life and work might provide insights into the nature and process of CT that are culturally and theologically aware. This paper is the first part of a process in which the links and potential can be developed.

### **Future Possibilities**

In closing we note a few of the potential avenues for exploration.

A simple task might be for CT to convene with Mukti a consultation based in the Khedgaon community aimed at examining the theoretical and practical links between her work and CT. This would have the merit of rooting and grounding the reflections in a real and concrete setting, and allow people to imagine a range of additional options for partnership, while also enabling them to understand and where appropriate critique the model as it currently operates.

As Ramabai studies continue to develop, with the 2005 conference in Pune as a spur<sup>12</sup>, it is possible that one line of enquiry will be the very subject: her contribution to the nature and process of CT. Research students may well be pointed in this direction.

People and groups wishing to explore the connection may also consider the possibility of transferring aspects of Mukti into their own contexts with the added benefit of the growing body of knowledge and experience of CT. Pepe projects in Brazil, a church in Kuala Lumpur which has a Montessori School and is developing Godly Play, are some of the emerging examples of practical experiments in CT which have much to gain from further insights from Ramabai through her writings and living residential model.

Inter-faith conversations may well be possible within the context of exploring the implications and relevance of Ramabai's insistence that Hindu and Christian texts, as well as committed Hindus and Christians could exist and live happily side by side, in a mutually enriching way without syncretism or division.

OCMS might consider a reformation of its priorities to incorporate some of this thinking and experience into its programmes and reference base.

And that is probably a good place to stop.

## Conclusion

As the very notion of childhood comes under increasing scrutiny worldwide and informs discourses in a range of different disciplines including theology, sociology, child development, education, economics and political sciences, the importance of CT prompted by, and in intentional obedience to, the example and teaching of Jesus will become steadily more appreciated within church and possibly wider society. As this happens the life, and example, of Ramabai is likely to be an increasingly valued source of practical experience and wisdom. It is not impossible that her time is still to come as her remarkably insightful analysis and far-reaching model of life, learning and empowerment become better known in India as well as the rest of the world.

Her contribution to the thinking and practical resources of those willing to hear her voice will not be restricted to CT of course, but it may be through the international process of CT that her voice is amplified. And for its part, as long as CT is true to the leading of Jesus Christ and committed to operating God's way (the Kingdom of Heaven) it would be remiss, if not downright foolish, to ignore or spurn the legacy of this devoted disciple of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on the Child Theology Movement see [www.childtheology.org](http://www.childtheology.org)

<sup>2</sup> Source for this summary: Keith J. White entry in forthcoming *Dictionary of South Asian Christianity*; "Pandita Ramabai" 2003, University of Wales, PhD.

<sup>3</sup> See: Keith J. White and Haddon Willmer, *Introducing Child Theology* (Penang: Child Theology Movement, 2006)

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<sup>4</sup> See Psalm 8:2. Also Keith J. White, “Rediscovering Children at the Heart of Mission” in G. Miles and J-J Wright (ed) *Celebrating Children* (Paternoster: Carlisle, 2003) pages 189-190

<sup>5</sup> This was the view of John Chrysostom. See Vigen Guroian, “The Ecclesial Family: John Chrysostom on Parenthood and Children” in M. Bunge (ed) *The Child in Christian Thought* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2001) pages 61-77

<sup>6</sup> At this time tentative plans are being considered to call together Christian leaders in Cambodia and Nepal respectively to explore the contours of indigenous theologies, church and mission starting with Paulo Freire type circles sitting on the ground and working from the local story, issues and context.

<sup>7</sup> Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai through her Own Words* (Oxford: OUP, 2000) page 30

<sup>8</sup> Pandita Ramabai, *A Testimony* (Mukti Press: Khedgaon, 1992, 11<sup>th</sup> edition)

<sup>9</sup> In my thesis I analysed her work with particular reference to the theological issues identified by Indian theologians in M.M. Thomas and P.T. Thomas, *Towards Indian Christian Theology* (Tiruvella: CSS, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001)

<sup>11</sup> See for example Jerome Berryman *The Complete Guide to Godly Play Volume One* (Living the Good News: Denver, 2002)

<sup>12</sup> At the time of writing the papers from this conference held at UBS in 2005 have still not been published.