

Faith&Thought



Relating advances in knowledge to faith within society

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- Keith J.White
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FAITH and THOUGHT

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Editorial

Our symposium last year was on the topic 'Children's Spirituality meets Christian Theology'. Three of the papers read at the symposium are to be found in this issue of the journal. An audio version of the day's proceedings can be found on our website. Dr. Keith White is director both of Mill Grove and the Child Theology Movement (CTM). He is a writer and Bible translator and also Lectures at Spurgeon's (Baptist) College in London. John Pritchard was formerly rector at Hackney in East London. Dr. Haddon Wilmer is Emeritus Professor of Theology at Leeds University and now a director of CTM as well as being a Baptist minister. Also in this issue we publish a letter to the editor with a reply. We would like to encourage readers to get involved by sending in comments and questions, which will be published in the journal.

Annual General Meeting for 2012

Saturday 20th October, 2012
Kings Cross Baptist Church, Vernon Square, London WC1X 9EW

Council members present:

Rev R Allaway (Chairman)
Rev J D Buxton (Hon. Treasurer)
Prof D W Vere
Dr A B Robins
Prof. Sir C J Humphreys

Also present: Dr A P Kerry (Hon. Minute Secretary)
Eleven other members and one non-member

OPENING Rev R Allaway welcomed members to the meeting

APOLOGIES Apologies had been received from Mr R Luhman, Rev Dr R Holder, and Mr T C Mitchell

MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING The minutes of the 2011 AGM were published in F&T Journal, April 2012 (No. 52) The chairman read a summary which was approved and the minutes were signed.

MATTERS ARISING

- The prize essay competition for 2012 was now closed. There was no outright winner.

ELECTION

- The meeting agreed to the election of Sir Colin Humphreys as President
- The Vice-presidents and Honorary Treasurer were re-elected for the coming year.

ANNUAL ACCOUNTS The annual accounts were presented by John Buxton. A summary sheet was circulated and the full accounts were available for members. The annual report for the Charity Commission has been formally submitted and accepted.

- The accounts were accepted.
- The financial situation is satisfactory.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- The symposium topic for 2013 will focus on cosmology and has a working title '*The Accidental Universe? - No source? No guide? No goal?*'.

CLOSE The meeting closed with prayer and the General Grace at 4:00pm

Children's Spirituality and Christian Theology: Exploring some implications of the work of Professor James E. Loder

Keith J. White

Introduction

It has been my privilege to spend nearly all my life in the presence of children: not just by imagination through literature, or in churches, schools, or counselling rooms, but in my household.¹ I have watched and listened to children every day, week after week and year after year. My writing is informed and infused by my relationships with them. I have heard them laugh and cry, swear and pray; I have watched them grapple with injustice and react to traumas, as well as play un-self-consciously in the natural world, and see them in their angular and unpredictable relationships with each other.

And so it is that I know what it is that draws people to what is called "children's spirituality". But at the same time I find that it is all too easy to read adult interpretations into children's actions and words, despite having been warned by Gibran specifically,² and Wittgenstein, in general.³ It is sometimes wiser not to speak. But you have invited me to speak, and perhaps unwisely, I have accepted! What I have to offer is no more than an initial attempt to clear some ground, and to identify some pertinent questions that may facilitate a conversation.

If I were pushed, I would probably admit that I am an agnostic⁴ when it comes to the term "children's spirituality". Whatever its merits (and it has a large and enthusiastic group of people worldwide who use, and seek to research, it), I am still given cause to wonder if it serves a useful theological purpose.⁵ Although I have tried very hard, not least in many Godly Play sessions,⁶ to understand what it means, it is still such a vague concept that I am uneasy in using it. And attempted definitions, when offered, seem out of place, clumsy, and self-defeating.⁷

Given the title and intent of this conference, we must however, start somewhere and so I have chosen to draw on what others say, notably Rebecca Nye in her book *Children's Spirituality: What it is and Why it Matters*.⁸ The first chapter attempts some definitions, and it quickly becomes apparent that it is impossible not to choke it with too tight a definition on the one hand, or to let it fly away with too loose a definition on the other.⁹

But let us assume that we all have some idea of what it might mean, and if necessary, suspend our disbelief, confident that other speakers will enrich our understanding. Only thus can we begin to explore what the theology of Professor James E. Loder might offer at the interface between "children's spirituality" and Child Theology.

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One other practical point before we set off: I am not going to describe or define Child Theology at this stage. My colleague, Haddon Willmer, will be doing this in his paper. It is enough to know for now, that it is about doing theology which has God in Christ at the very heart of the whole process and content. It takes as its lead, even calling, the action of Jesus and his accompanying words, when he placed a little child in the midst of a theological discussion being held by his disciples, as a sign of the kingdom of heaven, and how they were to enter it. Apart from the child, the two clues he gave them were: that of “becoming humble”, and of welcoming a little child. In that spirit and as part of that calling Child Theology will take good note of the little children. This is why from the start there has been engagement, inter alia, with those working in the field of children’s spirituality. But the ultimate ground and focus of Child Theology is God in Christ. The child is a sign, some might say, a sacrament, not primarily an object of veneration, care or education.

James E. Loder

James E. Loder (1931-2001) was a Christian scholar whom it is almost impossible to describe accurately for anyone who did not know him. He was Professor of the Philosophy of Christian Education at Princeton Theological Seminary for most of his academic career, published three books, and left a manuscript on Christian education when he died. All through his teaching he acknowledged that he was still trying to work out what the true nature of his subject was! Meanwhile he was well versed in mainstream theology,¹⁰ and a counsellor who knew mainstream key thinkers in psychodynamic, psychoanalytic and cognitive psychology intimately.¹¹ He also had a lively interest in philosophy, history and science. He would, on reflection have been welcomed with open arms by the Victoria Institute! For the record, one of his pupils and colleagues was Jerome Berryman.

Thankfully there is an excellent biography of Loder by Professor Dana Wright available online and I commend this to you all. It seeks to cover all his work, and much of that by his students.¹²

Today we focus on a single book by Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit*, written in 1998¹³. Not only does the title indicate that we are closing in on the subject of our conference today: the organisation of the book means that 250 pages are devoted specifically to child and adolescent development, with particular reference to spirit. His method is to examine each stage of human development from first a psychological (“from below”), and then secondly a theological perspective (“from above”).

I will proceed by posing just three of the many questions that arise from his work:

- (i) Spirit or Spirituality: which term is preferable?
- (ii) How far are we talking of children, adults, or humans?
- (iii) How does a focus on children affect our understanding of original sin?

I hope you can see that all have a direct bearing on the subject of our conference, but if not, then perhaps that bearing will become clear as we progress.

(i) Spirit or Spirituality?

It may seem pedantic to question the most basic of terms, but few seem to have asked whether the term “children’s spirituality” stands up to biblical and theological examination. If it does, then well and good, but we do well to scrutinise a term that has no biblical equivalent, and according to Rebecca Nye was, and is, obscure, and placed into the 1944 Education Act precisely because it was argued that no one knew what it meant!¹⁴

The term “children’s spirituality” has developed in a context or paradigm which derives a great deal from poetry, imagination and mysticism, and some religious material and reflection, but without rigorous attention to what a coherent and sustained Christian theological perspective on the subject might offer. Is it I wonder representative of a way of operating for those with Christian beliefs who find themselves seeking to follow Christ in an intellectual, social and political environment dominated by a positivist, scientific, worldview?

It is not my intention today to do more than note the fact that Loder wrote a book specifically addressing such matters, and saw the work of Karl Barth as having echoes in theology with the work of Einstein in physics.¹⁵

The nearest thing to a theological section in Nye’s book, *Children’s Spirituality*, is Chapter Six. It is admittedly brief and does not pretend to have coherence, being entitled, “Christian Imagery and Thought about Children”. And it is at this particular interface where Child Theology, if it has anything to offer, should be expected to bring substantial theological questions, if not insights. Loder’s point is that this will enrich all our understandings, professional, practical and academic. Again this is not the place to develop his argument in detail, but Loder is clear about how he understands the possible relationship between theology and understandings of the spirit of the child.¹⁶

Is it possible that “children’s spirituality” is a tertium quid, I wonder: a compromise that is wholly convincing to no discipline? That might help to explain the difficulty we all seem to have when we try to grapple with it. Loder’s early work was prompted by a concern that

“...alien disciplines have found their way into theological curricula without their being critically evaluated in terms of their relatedness to the classical theological disciplines”.¹⁷

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Now I am not suggesting that the word “spirit” is non-problematical, but at least it is biblical, and theologically mainstream. Have we perhaps found ourselves squeezed into a mould, by risking the reification of something that Jesus warned Nicodemus was so elusive (John 3: 5-8)? It is worth noting that (as far as I can see) Loder never uses the term spirituality. Let’s see where his use of the term “spirit” takes him.

His book is prefaced by a quotation from I Corinthians 2: 10-16 which is as germane to our conference today as it is to his study. It connects God’s Spirit with our understanding of the human spirit:

“For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God...[so] we have the mind of Christ.”

And this has its support in Romans 8: 16 and Philippians 2: 12-13.

If we are to approach the subject of the human spirit from the perspective of Christian theology, then this is obviously a key, possibly even, the key approach. The question Loder asks is, “What is theological about human development?”¹⁸ His response is that it is rooted in God, through the Holy Spirit and in Christ.

We must leave at least half of Loder’s work aside to be true to my title: that which is from the “underside” that is the human sciences and perspective. Suffice it to say that he is passionately concerned that theological insights should be related to, and enrich the physical, and psychological understandings:

“The study of human development is fundamentally the study of the human spirit, embedded as it is in the visible, tangible, and experiential stuff of a human lifetime.”¹⁹

“My argument is...for the human spirit itself: for its reality, its legitimacy, its remarkable genius, its genuine but blind longing for the Spirit of God...”²⁰

Loder seeks to describe God’s act in becoming fully human in Christ, as a response to the outcry of the human spirit. If the human spirit is separated from the divine Spirit then life is ultimately without meaning: full of creativity, questions, reason, and a search for understanding and meaning that cannot be satisfied.

For Christians, talk of the human spirit (or “spirituality”) without reference to its ultimate ground in the Spirit of God is to risk dealing with “the loose cannon of creativity”.²¹ Whereas the word spirit allows us, like Jesus, to talk of God as Spirit, we

cannot surely talk of the spirituality of God, can we?²² If we can't, then we may already have driven a wedge, however unwittingly, between the human and the divine spirit.

The term spirituality tends to be static, whereas the Spirit of God, and its creation, the human spirit, is breathing, moving, impelling, rustling, rippling and restless. Let's bear this in mind as we proceed.

If we were to rethink and reconstruct the field using the term "spirit", could we then stay with terms like "relational consciousness"²³ to describe the wiring in humans from the outset? If so we could reserve the word spirit, for all that the Scriptures describe, and which Loder seeks to identify and explore? It may be that we will end up concluding there is some merit in a refined understanding of the word "spirituality" after all, but if so, in the process, we will have rooted and grounded it in the Scriptures and Christian theology.

If we wish to attach children's awareness of the sacred to a definition of spirituality, then we must be careful not to read back into children's actions, including our own, adult categories. This was in fact my conclusion as a result of thirty years of observation of many dozens of children on holiday in North Wales!²⁴

The principles that underpin Loder's book are set out on pages 40 and 41. If you, like me, have put the two books of Rebecca Nye,²⁵ alongside *The Logic of the Spirit*, you will quickly see that although both authors seek to do justice to the knowledge and evidence of children and childhood, it is Loder whose study is rooted in and framed by Christian theology.

He argues that his study of the spirit is:

Christocentric (after Chalcedon);
 focussed on the human spirit and its relation to the Spiritus Creator;
 exploring on the transformational dynamics of the human and Creator Spirit;
 seeing the human sciences as sub-sciences of a Christomorphic approach;
 open about the fact that both the human sciences and theology are necessary
 for an understanding of how the human spirit and the Creator Spirit constitute
 the relational wholeness of Jesus Christ;
 and recognises two different views of time.²⁶

Now we may agree or disagree with Loder to a lesser or greater degree, but what we cannot do is to be unaware of his intentions. He seeks to do justice to the realities and experiences of children, human insights, and biblical revelation.

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(ii) Children, Adults or Humans?

Most psychology of human development focuses on defining and mapping stages. Loder, in focusing on the spirit is concerned with the development within, between, and beyond the stages.²⁷ This is an important clue for any study of the spirit. One of the two questions that run throughout his book is “What is a lifetime?” If we are not careful we simply swallow the camels provided by professionals who are not informed and guided by Christian theology. A simple challenge is provided by the words “child” and “adult”. We are immediately at risk of thinking of a lifetime as lived in certain stages. Human development then is concerned with the progress of a human through these stages, often as expeditiously as possible. (Key Stage One, Key Stage Two and so on.)

Loder challenges this in no uncertain terms: “the whole configuration of human development needs to be reconceptualised”.²⁸ In place of stages of development, or a bell curve (or whatever linear models people have in mind) he offers the notion that human development is more accurately conceived theologically as a wandering in cosmic emptiness, or as walking round in circles. There is change, progress if you will (physical, cognitive, psychological), but none of the changes should be confused with the idea that they bring a person closer to, or farther away from God. They exist on a different axis to God’s grace.

It follows that any thinking or talk of spirituality that is said to relate to a specific age or stage, needs much care if it is to be theologically accurate. This is not to say that Loder dispenses with stages (the book is organised using them), but that the stages are themselves transposed into co-centric rings.

Why is it that humans continue to seek meaning, to wrestle with the challenges of life as the years pass in an individual life? Loder is determined to look behind the stages to explore what the wellspring of motivation is. And it is this that he thinks of as spirit. The human spirit drives or leads a person beyond the blocks and confusion of stage after stage. It is restless until it finds its rest in God, who is its source.

He writes that “human nature is as wired for spiritual insight as it is for mathematics”.²⁹ And we notice that though he pays particular attention to stages, he sees this spirit at work all through a human lifetime. So if we take the four stages of Piaget in a person’s cognitive development³⁰ we can easily miss the truth that transformation (driven by the spirit) is stronger than structure.³¹ This spirit relentlessly expands the horizons of both personal and cognitive competencies, driving it out of egocentrism.³²

With this in mind, Loder proceeds to explore the analogy between the human spirit and the Creator Spirit. He locates his theology in an understanding of the image of

God in humans. It is not hard to see the human spirit as the image of God. The premise of this is typified by the work of George Hendry.³³

It is a fact that humans progress through time in a linear, physical way, and so we can attribute ages, and then stages to human development. There are physical and cognitive developments. But the human spirit is, in Loder's view, a constant always mirroring the Creator Spirit. Neither gives up. The transition from one stage to another is negotiated by and thanks to the spirit. There will be different manifestations, but the same spirit. So talk of the child's spirit or the adult's spirit is not particularly appropriate. This is why such care must be taken with the term "child spirituality". Rebecca Nye acknowledges this,³⁴ but she is of course saddled with the term children's spirituality, which carries its own assumptions and associations.

Before we move on, we should note that for many children in world history, as well as those alive today, sadly a lifetime ended, and will end, in childhood. So Loder's definition of a lifetime as an unfinished act of God's love is an apt reminder of our common humanity and worth in God's sight, unrelated to human longevity, maturity or achievement.

(iii) How does a focus on children affect our understanding of original sin?

There is a curious split when it comes to children and theology: some organisations, like SU invest much time and effort in developing theologies of sin,³⁵ while others seem to speak of children as if they were virtuous, spiritual beings untainted by sin!

But it is a fact that any serious attention to children will challenge several aspects of systematic theology including the doctrine of sin. David Jensen in his pioneering book, *Graced Vulnerability* puts it like this: "much of the classic conception of sin falls short in addressing the reality of children's lives".³⁶ He gives a chapter to a theological exposition of the doctrine(s) of sin, in the light of children's lives both in general, and each as an individual.

How far I wonder does reflection on children's spirituality proceed without reference to the ugly reality of sin?³⁷ It is as if children (but not adults) are somehow pure, pristine and so on. Wordsworth speaks for many: children are born trailing clouds of glory: only later do the shades of the prison house close in. Loder helps to redress this.³⁸ And this accords with my experience of living alongside many children. They are human beings with the propensity to stir me with their insights, and also to shock me with their hurts and hurtfulness.

Loder argues that the spirit of children is not somehow purer or better than that of adults, but that the human spirit, created (inbreathed by God) is floundering if it is cut off from God's Spirit. Starting with God and his Spirit, we know it is theologically true that human reality (including the spirit) is redeemed at any age.³⁹ There is an

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important theological analogy between the repression of the longing for the Face which is the (flawed) foundation of ego development and the story of Adam and Eve's attempt to create their own space by hiding and using fig leaves. The first couple wander the face of the earth seeking to overcome cosmic loneliness, and so do young children, and the human species.⁴⁰

In the case of children as described by Loder up to the age of eighteen months, there is no reference to guilt, shame, good or bad. He argues that sin goes deeper, and is more interwoven with the brokenness of the whole creation and each part of it. The origin of sin is in a project to bury the longing for the face by saying "No". It is a tragic disruption or brokenness of image and relationship. Jensen talks of the "vulnerability to refusal",⁴¹ and it seems to me that he and Loder would, if they could be connected, find a considerable measure of agreement, with terminology that is congruent, even interchangeable.

Loder makes a good deal of the "No" of the young child. And he insists on holding on to a theologically informed view of a lifetime and why we live it in a context where sin abounds, while grace super-abounds.

Do his understandings provide a useful way of receiving and describing all the data, whether of personal insights and global statistics, that we have of children's lives and experiences in a sinful world?

Some implications of this

I assume that some implications have become clear in the process of this exploratory paper. The most basic is that it does not seem credible to me that there should be further work on children's spirituality by Christians without considering at the very least the questions and principles of James Loder. It is my personal hope that the forthcoming publication of the papers given at the Child Theology conference on Loder's work held in Princeton Theological Seminary in March 2012 will make a modest contribution to this.

But you can see that I believe things must go further than this. Not only should we develop our understanding of children in every aspect of their being, with due respect for the warnings of Gibran and Wittgenstein mentioned earlier: we should allow theological insights to challenge and modify conventional wisdom.

I have been touched and moved by what some would term the spirituality of children. I think I can imagine what Rebecca and her many friends and colleagues have in their minds, and have found in their researches. But until we can open this whole field up to genuine theological scrutiny, we may be more indebted to the language and fashions of our own times (or others) than we realise. My sense is that the process will be a painful one, requiring some considerable de-construction of language and

frameworks, but Loder has convinced me, at least, that the rewards are correspondingly great.

Many years ago I read John V. Taylor's work on the Holy Spirit, *The Go-Between God*. It made a remarkable impact on my whole understanding of God, Christ and Creation. As far as I know, Loder did not know of Taylor's work, but they have both had the effect of widening my horizons at the expense of demolishing some of my existing theological assumptions. In short, I do not believe that we will find our understanding of the human spirit (whether in children, adolescents or adults) diminished, but enriched. Not least because it will be reconnected with the Creator Spirit who has been hovering above, and breathing into creation from the dawn of time, and who with the bride will call us home at the end of our lifetime and the culmination of human history.⁴²

¹ This includes four biological children, five grandchildren, and hundreds of members of what is often called the "Mill Grove family".

² K. Gibran, *The Prophet*. On Children:

"Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams..."

³ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus VII* "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

⁴ Stumped for what to say at a conference in Concordia, Chicago in June 2006 about a subject that eluded me, I mused on what resonance or congruence there might be between children's spirituality on the one hand, and the kingdom of God on the other. I went on to suggest that there is some important theological work to be done at this interface, and I still venture to suggest that this remains true. But the focus of my paper today is different.

⁵ I am of course familiar with the way in which the term spirituality has been used to describe many facets of adult life, devotion, faith, prayer, meditation and worship. But that is not the focus of this issue of the Journal, not of my paper.

⁶ Rebecca Nye singles out Godly Play as "a highly sophisticated approach to spiritual nurture" CS page 38.

⁷ It always reminds me of Keats poem *Lamia*:

"Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.

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Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine
Unweave a rainbow..."

⁸ Nye, Rebecca *Children's Spirituality: What it is and Why it Matters* (London: CHP, 2009)

⁹ This is an adaptation of the quotation of Rabbi Hugo Gryn, *CS* page 1

¹⁰ *The Logic of the Spirit*, pages 27-36

¹¹ *TLOTS* pages 20-26.

¹² Talbot School of Theology: Christian Educators (www.talbot.edu/ce20/educators/view.cfm?n=james_loder). Dana Wright is a co-editor of the compendium of papers given at the conference on Loder at PTS convened by CTM in March 2012.

¹³ James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998)

¹⁴ D. Hay and R. Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Harper Collins, 1998, page 5). For the record, the term is still the subject of much debate in relation to National Occupational Standards in Youth Work. David Howell wrote: "It goes without saying that the decision to subsume spirituality within a "Values and Beliefs" Standard (LSI YW14 VO-6) runs contrary to both our needs as a specific sector, and contrary to the general understanding of Spiritual Development. Spirituality is not a "value/belief". It is a more fundamental part of the human experience and, if anything, is a mechanism through which beliefs and values can be reflected upon." (Email: 2nd April 2012) It is, of course mentioned as a right in the UNCRC 1989, *CS*, page 15

¹⁵ *The Logic of the Spirit*, pages 32-33 discuss this starting with a paper by T.F. Torrance, "The Natural Theology of Karl Barth"

¹⁶ *TLOTS* page 32-43

¹⁷ D. Wright, *op cit*, page 8

¹⁸ *TLOTS*, page 27. Nye recognises the theological importance of this in *CS*, page 5: "children's spirituality starts with God".

¹⁹ *TLOTS*, page 12

²⁰ *TLOTS*, page 12

²¹ *TLOTS*, page 10

²² Note that Nye does try this at least once: *CS*, page 7!

²³ Nye, *CS*, page 6

²⁴ This was my conclusion in the chapter I wrote in *Through the Eyes of a Child* (Richards and Privett, CHP 2009) Creation, pages In pages 56/57 I say that the engage with the natural world but do not reflect on it at that time. It is an adult way of construing their play that will impute notions of philosophy, the sacred and so on.

²⁵ That is, *The Spirit of the Child and Children's Spirituality*

²⁶ *TLOTS*, pages 40/41

²⁷ *TLOTS*, page 18

²⁸ *TLOTS*, page 74

²⁹ *TLOTS*, page 73

³⁰ *TLOTS*, page 99

³¹ *TLOTS*, page 100

³² *TLOTS*, page 104

³³ *TLOTS*, page 111. G. Hendry, *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1997)

³⁴ For example, *CS*, pages 7-11

³⁵ Andersen W et al Theology of Childhood: A theological resource framed to guide the practice of evangelising and nurturing children *JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION*, Vol. 46, No. 3, December 2003

³⁶ D. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005) page 66.

³⁷ You will not find the word sin mentioned in Rebecca Nye's book, *CS*, for example.

³⁸ For example, *TLOTS*, page 36.

³⁹ *TLOTS*, page 43

⁴⁰ *TLOTS*, page 123

⁴¹ Jensen, op cit, page 96. This is part of a section dealing with refusal and being refused (pages 93-100)

⁴² Revelation 22: 17

'I was once alive apart from the law.'

John Pridmore

Frank Kendon, poet and pacifist, born in 1893, grew up in a hamlet on a hill in the weald of Kent. He was the son of the headmaster of a little boarding school for boys. Later in life he wrote a beautiful book about what was in many ways an idyllic childhood, a memoir he entitled *The Small Years*. Kendon tells us why he writes about the boy he was. It is 'to wrestle with the angel of childhood till he tells me his secret, and then...to put that down, truthfully, for a particular addition to the joy of the world' (Cambridge University Press, 1950, p 161).

We too 'wrestle with the angel of childhood'. We ask what it is to be a child. We do so for two reasons. First, because we hear the words of one who tells us that, unless we become as little children, we shall not enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 18.3). I must first know who this child is, if I am to shape my life after his or her likeness. Secondly, we hear sterner words still. Jesus warns me that, if I 'cause a child to stumble', it would better for me if a millstone were hung round my neck and I were drowned in the depths of the sea' (Matthew 18.6). To 'cause a child to stumble' is simply to place some obstacle in the child's path, making it difficult or impossible for him or her to come to Jesus.

If we want children to flourish within the Christian family, they need a true picture of Jesus, although even our best attempt at one is bound to be a poor likeness. As an adult, I may find my image of Jesus compelling, but if the picture that pleases me repels the child, or does not make sense to the child, it is a false image. It follows that I must 'wrestle with the angel of childhood' until that angel tells me the secret of how children *perceive*. Perhaps then the image of Jesus – or of God - I offer them may not be such a grotesque caricature.

My childhood is a mysterious realm, which does not yield its secrets lightly. Henry Vaughan reminds us of the sheer inaccessibility of childhood:

'I cannot reach it; and my striving eye
Dazzles at it, as at eternity' (*Childhood*).

14 FAITH AND THOUGHT

We ask what it means to be a child? Where can we go for answers to that question? In this paper I take a route that, so far as I know, has not often been taken. Over the last year or two, under the kindly oversight of Jerome Berryman, the creator of Godly Play, I have been studying published autobiographies of childhood, memoirs like Frank Kendon's *The Small Years*. They are proving a rich resource.

I am looking to these memoirs for light on what it is about children that should inform our Christian discipleship and guide our nurture of children in the church. I search these texts for what they tell us - in one word instead of dozens more - about 'the spirituality' of the child.

Spirituality escapes definition, as do such concepts of 'goodness' and 'love'. But what cannot be defined can be recognised and described. For years I have worked with a broad-brush description of spirituality - a description, not a definition - that has served tolerably well. Our spirituality, I suggest, is our 'moral awareness of the other and the beyond'. Such awareness is not illusory. It is an innate dimension of our human nature. It is how we are. Here is not the place to defend that premise. That has been well done elsewhere, notably by David Hay in his study of 'the biology of the human spirit' entitled *Something There* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006).

The spiritual is an aspect of our nature, there from the start. Extensive empirical research among young children, notably that conducted by David Hay and Rebecca Nye, has shown this to be so (*The Spirit of the Child*, Fount, 2nd ed, 1998). The memories shared with us by the authors of our memoirs are further testimony to the truth that, from our earliest days, the spiritual is an inalienable dimension of our humanity.

So I turn to memoirs of childhood. Mischievously, I turn first to one that may not be felt to be a memoir at all, not least because it is only half a sentence long. Moreover, many would contend that it has nothing to do with childhood at all.

'I was alive once...' St Paul is writing to 'God's beloved in Rome' and he makes this remark in ch 7 v 9 of his letter to them. Of course Paul says a lot more. Paul writes, 'I was alive once apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died...' and the complicated argument goes on much longer.

But I shall stay with those first few words. And I shall make a series of assertions about them, not because I wish my argument to be undistracted by facts, but because time is short.

'I was alive once apart from the law.' There is our mini-memoir. When, nearly fifty years ago, I first slowed down long enough to look at this text closely, certain features about it struck me. I noticed that Paul is using the first person singular. When people

use the first person singular they are usually talking about themselves. If I say, 'I was once a vegetarian,' I *may* mean 'Adam was a vegetarian', but that would not be how you would understand me, if you were asking me round for supper and enquiring whether I had any dietary requirements. So I concluded that Paul's 'I' should have its natural sense. He is here speaking for himself and about himself. He is saying 'I, Paul' – and the pronoun *ego* is there in the Greek – 'I, Paul, was alive once apart from the law.'

Then I worried over this little phrase 'apart from the law' - or simply 'apart from law', for there's no definite article in the Greek. Was there ever a time in his life of which Paul, the zealous Jew, could have said that he was not subject to the law? Yes there was, for in Jewish thought, before a child attains moral awareness, he cannot be held to be a transgressor of God's law. So, I concluded, that Paul's 'once' refers to his childhood.

And what does Paul claim about his childhood? He claims that he was 'alive'. I asked myself, all those years ago, what Paul means by that, by insisting that he was 'alive'? It seemed to me then, as it seems to me now, that he means much more than biological life. He means life in relation to God, being spiritually alive. There is no reason to suppose that Paul has defaulted here to a lesser sense of what it means to be alive than the idea of life that holds elsewhere in Romans.

So I came to these three audacious conclusions about what Paul is saying. I dared to suggest – and here are my assertions - first, that Paul is talking about himself, secondly that he is talking about his own childhood, and thirdly that he is claiming that, as a child, he was - as he puts it earlier in Romans - 'alive to God in Christ Jesus'. In other words, we must give to Paul's statement 'I was alive' the great and glorious weight that the vocabulary of life carries throughout the letter to the Romans. And that is where I still stand on this text.

When these words first lodged under my skin I trawled through lots of commentaries on Romans and I noticed something remarkable. I noticed that I could herd the commentators into two distinct groups. In the first group were the commentators who recognize that, in Romans 7.9, Paul is referring to his childhood. But these commentators refuse to accept that Paul's 'I was alive' could possibly mean 'alive to God'. So they interpret Paul as meaning 'I thought I was alive' or 'I was under the allusion I was alive'. Or they have Paul merely saying, 'I was once "apart from the law"'.

In the other group were the commentators who recognised that Paul's 'I was alive' must carry the same theological weight that it bears wherever else Paul uses such language. But these commentators, in our second group, are precisely those who dismiss any idea that Paul is referring to his childhood. 'Ganz unmöglich,' thunders

the great German theologian Kümmel. ‘Ganz ausgeschlossen!’ ‘Completely impossible – completely inadmissible!’ (W.G.Kümmel, *Römer 7 und die Bekehrung des Paulus*, Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, Heft 17, 1929).

When, all those years ago, I looked at what these learned scholars had said about the Pauline text I realised what they had in common. What united the two schools of thought – those on the one hand who give Paul’s ‘I was alive’ its full force, but who deny that Paul is referring to his childhood, and those on the other hand who recognize the allusion to childhood but drain Paul’s ‘I was alive’ of any theological significance – what these two bodies of opinion had in common was the unchallenged unexamined axiomatic premise that only grown-ups can truly be Christians.

Sadly, that premise has gone unchallenged in Christian theology, at least in the West, down to modern times. So until recently mainstream evangelicalism, with its insistence on conversion, left children in a spiritual no-man’s land, a kind of limbo, in which they were old enough to go to hell, but too young to go to heaven. I used to get into trouble for calling this ‘beach-mission theology’, a theology equivocal about the status of the very ones about whom Jesus makes himself absolutely plain.

Thank God, the Christian mind has moved on these matters. We have begun at least to register Jesus’s estimate of children, unprecedented and unparalleled in antiquity, his affirmation that ‘of such is the kingdom of God’. I simply propose that, in recalling his childhood, Paul has allowed the mind of Christ to shape his own, that he has made Christ’s understanding of childhood his.

More recently, with this talk in mind, I returned to Romans 7.9 and referred to more up to date commentaries. It was, I have to report, a thoroughly depressing experience. Most of the comment was no more than a recycling of what had been said about this text countless times before. Only one commentator I came across allowed the possibility that Paul is looking back on his childhood but for this commentator, Paul’s ‘I was alive’ carries no weight. Paul might simply have said ‘I was’ (Robert Jewett, *Romans: a Commentary*, Fortress Press, 2007).

Why do these commentators fail to refuse to recognise the possibility at Romans 7.9 Paul is referring to his childhood? I suggest that it is simply because Biblical commentaries are written in child-free zones. The child, of which our text speaks, is not noticed because children are rarely noticed by clever grown-ups who write commentaries. Jesus set a child ‘in the midst’ of his disciples. Having a child ‘in the midst’ makes a world of difference, not only to how you understand children, but to how you understand much else besides, including contentious Greek texts. That is what I hear advocates of the Child Theology movement telling me. Alas, there is no sign of a child in the midst of those who write commentaries on Romans.

'I was alive once,' says Paul. We hear many writers of more recent memoirs of childhood saying much the same. And to these, somewhat abruptly, I now turn. Several themes emerge. I mention seven fleetingly, and an eighth marginally less fleetingly.

First, there is the primacy of the present moment. The poet Kathleen Raine tells us that, as a child, she lived 'in a here and now that had no beginning and no end' (*Farewell Happy Fields*, Hamish Hamilton, 1973, p 13). Jean Pierre de Caussade wrote famously about 'the sacrament of the present moment'. The children we meet in our memoirs receive that sacrament. They live in that moment.

Secondly, children reach out in their imagination to other worlds and to unseen friends. They press beyond the boundaries that grown-ups rarely cross. Many children, it seems, already experience that sense of exile that Christians recognise, our painful awareness that we are all far from home. It came as no surprise to me to read about the unseen friends our writers made when they were children. But I was fascinated to find some of them claiming a vivid sense of the friendship of Jesus, a sense of his presence and companionship they enjoyed quite independently of any religious teaching they'd received. That was the experience, for example, of the poets, Richard Church (*Over the Bridge: An Essay in Autobiography*, Heinemann, 1955) and James Kirkup (*The Only Child: an Autobiography of Infancy*, Collins, 1957; *Sorrows, Passions, and Alarms*, Collins, 1959).

A third theme, emerging from our recalled childhoods, is 'spiritual distress.'

'Lord, give to men who are old and tougher,
The things that little children suffer.'
(*The Everlasting Mercy*, John Masefield).

Children hurt. There is the physical and material suffering of children, God knows, appalling enough. But the suffering I register from my reading is intense inward pain, spiritual distress. The primal affliction is fear, fear of what awaits, of who awaits, in the darkness at the head of the stairs. But there is a deeper darkness children experience, so our memoirs testify. It seems that some children, as well as some saints, experience the dark night of the soul.

Fourthly, many recollections of childhood reflect the child's delight in nature and her sense of kinship with living things. Ours is an urbanised age. Half the world's children live in cities. Our own children no longer go out of doors to play as they used to. The consequence is acute spiritual malnourishment. The words of Jesus suddenly take on a new urgency. 'For your very salvation's sake - consider the lilies of the field!' (Matthew 6.28).

Fifth, there are those ‘timeless moments’ of childhood. Children experience what T. S. Eliot called ‘the unattended moment...the moment in and out of time’ (*Dry Salvages, Four Quartets*). Wordsworth called these occasions of heightened awareness ‘spots of time’ (*The Prelude*, Book XII, 208 ff). Abraham Maslow calls them ‘peak experiences’ (*Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences*, Kappa Delta Pi, 1964). Some of these experiences our writers recall sound like the transports of the saint – the adult saint, that is, who has spent a lifetime climbing ‘the ladder of perfection’. Listening to those taken out of time and place in childhood, we will want to redraw some of our boundary lines within which we limit the spiritual potential of the child.

A sixth theme in these memoirs is the troubled relationship of spirituality and religion. We ask why it is that for some children religion nourishes their spiritual life, while for others religion throttles it? The child Percy Lubbock recalls how at Evensong, in his parish church, at the end of a beautiful summer’s day, he experienced ‘a mystical awareness beyond words’ (*Earlham*, Jonathan Cape, 1922).

By contrast, the Belfast story-teller Forrest Reid, who had an equally acute sense of the transcendent, rages against religion. ‘I hated Sunday,’ he writes. ‘I hated Bible stories. I hated everybody mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments, except perhaps the impenitent thief, Eve’s snake, and a few similar characters’. Why did Lubbock love going to church but Reid loathe it? Perhaps it is because Percy Lubbock’s vicar was his beloved grandfather, but Forrest Reid had to suffer the ministry of ‘the furtive she-evangelist Miss Crouch’ (*Apostate*, Constable, 1926).

I begin to understand from these recalled childhoods – here is a seventh theme – something of the importance of language and music for the flourishing of our spirituality. Opinions differ as to whether or not children’s spirituality needs a received religious tradition in which to flourish. But there is little disagreement that spirituality requires language. The spirit answers to words and music. Our writers tell us how stories and songs spoke to them as children. So too, at least to some children, did the language of the Bible and liturgy, whether or not those children grow up to be religious believers.

Words shape us before they are understood. Biblical language that will make sense only much later already feeds the growing spirit. Eiluned Lewis lies in a hammock under the sycamore tree. She repeats words that she has heard for the first time that morning:

“To be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.”

“Carnally minded, carnally minded,” she murmured. What proud, glowing words they were! She saw them as high-stepping, processional horses, caparisoned in scarlet...’ (*Dew on the Grass*, Peter Davies, 1934).

The evidence of our memoirs is that the child's spirit is fed by language. We must choose our words carefully, with an ear to how they sound. For if sounds displease, sense can go begging.

But what struck me most, in reflecting on these memoirs - and now I am slowing down for my eighth and last lap - is this: The adult notion that the spiritual is somehow elevated above the sensory is a mischievous one. The poet James Kirkup had remarkable powers of recall. He remembered even his infancy in sharp detail. He recalls that his early childhood was a world full of wonders - though the things he found wonderful would scarcely have seemed so to adult eyes. He recalls such marvels as the boot-scraper by the front-door of the family home and the treasures hidden behind it, 'a matchstick, a piece of gravel, a pink tram-ticket, a button' (*op cit*). The testimony of our memoirs is that there is a spiritual dimension to those early sensory perceptions. Adults distinguish between the sensory - the sensual too - and the spiritual. It is a false distinction - leading, for example, to catastrophic misreadings of the biblical *Song of Songs* - and children do not make it. Western thought has been dominated by the dualism that opposes the physical and the spiritual with calamitous consequences. For the child body and soul are one.

The psychotherapist Elisaveta Fen was born and brought up in Russia in the early years of the twentieth century. Later she became a British subject. As a little girl she learned to dance. Dancing for her was a single rapturous experience of both body and spirit. 'This was ecstasy,' she writes, 'to be compared only with the dreams of flying. I was...discovering how a state of the body could become a means for attaining the exaltation of the spirit' (*A Russian Childhood*, Methuen, 1961). If we have seen the film or the musical *Billy Elliott*, we shall know what she means. There is a chorus that used to be taught to children in evangelical churches and in Sunday schools. I learned it in my Crusader Class.

*'Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace'.*

That chorus asks the impossible of the child, to separate the spiritual and the sensory. Mystics will claim that there are levels of spiritual experience that rise above the material. Maybe. But it is not mandatory for us to become mystics, at least not just yet. We are, however, required to become children. If I turn and become as a child, the things of earth will not grow strangely dim. On the contrary, they will become strangely bright.

Christian faith and worship are grounded in the principle that the sensory can be charged with the spiritual. This we know by what douses us at our baptism and by what we taste at the Eucharist. Material things can be much more than they materially

are. The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, though not a Christian believer, filled his several houses with *things*, old bottles, hammers, seashells, compasses, and all manner of other objects. This he did because he remained at heart a child for whom nothing was merely ordinary.

‘Christians must learn to wonder before they can reign or rest.’ The maxim, from a papyrus fragment found on an ancient rubbish dump in Egypt, is the truth our memoirs are telling us. In some Christian churches much is made of ‘baptism of the spirit’. Nothing less is required of us, I suggest, in becoming a child, than a baptism of the senses.

Ant and Sparrow in Child Theology.

Haddon Willmer

I am privileged to make this presentation of Child Theology to the Victoria Institute, which as I understand it, is interested in questions about believing in God in Christ, as witnessed in Holy Scripture, especially in relation to issues arising in contemporary thought. Many years ago, in Cambridge, I was befriended by the gentle scientist, R E D Clark, who was a member of the VI. He got me to comment on an article of his, which I did in a garbled fumble and both pieces were, I believe, published in the Transactions. Questions about the rare possibility of believing God, fully and joyously, in the world as it is, are basic to the Victoria Institute as to the whole Christian community of faith. Child Theology, I shall suggest, takes us into the acutely threatening heart of such questions. Noticing the child placed in our midst by Jesus does not give us an escape from the Cross at the centre of Christian faith, a cross so deadly that any resurrection of faith in God and in the humanity of God is a precious miracle of extreme precariousness.

Child Theology as I am talking about it here is not the same as the theology of childhood, or the theological basis for holistic child development or theology for children or theology by children. All theology is human talk about and perhaps to, from, with and for God. Child theology is theology which lets itself be disturbed by the presence of the child placed by Jesus as a clue to the way into the kingdom of God. This sort of Child Theology is in some ways a recent development, though it was given to us from the beginning by Matthew 18.1ff, Mark 9.33ff, Luke 9.46-48.

Becoming as the Children – What can it mean?

Jesus put a child in the midst of the disciples who were arguing out of ambition and anxiety about being great in the kingdom of God. Commenting on his act of

centering the child, Jesus said, *inter alia*: ‘ Unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 18.3).

What does becoming like children mean? It is far from clear. In this paper I will follow two clues, to reveal two different meanings, two ways of being human with, before and in God. These two clues are symbolised by the Ant and the Sparrow as they appear in Scripture. With the Sparrow we find ourselves in close company with God, in life and death, where faith stutters and hangs on in ways that resonate with Matthew 18.10 which I consider at the end of this paper.

The obvious way of finding the meaning of the call to ‘become as the children’ is to look at the children. Then what do we see? Do we see anything clear enough for us to become like it? Child is not defined in the text. It leaves us to decide for ourselves what child means. It sets us the task of seeing child as a symbol of the kingdom of heaven. Giving us two unknowns does not make the task easy. Conventional historical scholarship has one way of deciding what ‘child’ in this text means: it gathers limited available information about children in Jewish and Roman cultures and then ventures more or less speculative generalisations. But we cannot assume that what Jesus was saying about child was no more than a particular manifestation of cultural traditions, discerned historically. So this kind of scholarship is of limited use in understanding the call of Jesus.

More commonly, our working pictures of the child are constructed from our own life experience, observation and attitudes. There is very little observation of children which is not affected by experience and attitudes. The words of Jesus lead us to look at children with a view to finding characteristics which fit the vision of the kingdom of God and represent what we value, desire, seek and are transcended and challenged by. There is a personal and spiritual subjectivity in our working concepts of child. Child thus comes into view as ideal being. Child spurs us to seek what we sense we have lost or may never attain to. Qualities like innocence, spontaneity and trust are read into the child and then interpreted as virtues. Our desire to see the ideal in the child conflicts with the realism thrust upon us by living with real children. We are tempted to ignore observations and experiences that do not fit our desire. Alternatively, we grow weary with children and lose desire in cynicism. We adore babies, we are fearful about teenagers; this is neither good nor inevitable, but it is understandable. To match truth with hope is the fundamental work of love.

We are too assured that we know what we are talking about when we say, Child. We know because we all have been children; most of us have continuing engagement with children; there is a welter of research and literature about children and vast industries of care, education and exploitation. So we think we know. In secular and theological contexts, we do not reflect or argue much about the epistemological issues child brings us into.

'Becoming as the children' does not have a plain, immediately accessible meaning. The phrase itself is an invitation to reflection, exploration and learning. It is not an instruction to do something obvious. Jesus was calling the disciples to 'turn' from what they knew by habit and common sense and to move towards the kingdom of God, which was not the natural outgrowth of their present being and way of life. This conversion is not a superficial momentary decision, but a profound translation from one way of being to another, from one life context to another. There are epistemological issues here, not only because the child is mystery, but because we, like the disciples before the turn is completed, are not in a position to see and know what this becoming is or where it is leading to. We lack the capability for it, and are only to be given it as we walk through this world with Jesus.

In view of these considerations, this paper is not an attempt to define child, or becoming as the children. It is a reflection exploring some possible steps on the way. I take the Bible here as an aid to such reflection. It is not to be treated as a manufacturer's handbook, addressed to us as though human beings are like motor-cars, planned, programmed and predictable. Human beings are given finite but genuine freedom, so that their life is inescapably reflective, open to learning, mistakes, decision and renewal. The Bible does not operate as a set of military commands to be obeyed without questions. It is God's talking with people. What we have in the Bible is not restricted monologically to God's side of the conversation. It reports and embodies the two-sided conversation in the historical times of its own production. It continually provokes and provides substance for the conversations in which we now, as the latest generation, are engaged.

The Ant and the Sparrow come up in the Bible's conversations. They are not explicitly linked with the child. It is open for partners in this free conversation to react to its unsystematic suggestiveness and to make new connections and explore new directions. Where there is conversation, there is play.

Ant working his socks off

'Go to the ant, thou sluggard: consider her ways and be wise' (Proverbs 6.6-11). Become like the ant. The ant models an effective life-connecting work, reward and security. Proverbs is concerned to educate and to save the feckless young man from disaster. 'How long will you lie there, O sluggard ... A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a vagabond, and want like an armed man.' Learn from the ant: become like the ant. We are given a model to imitate and clues about how to do it.

The advice makes sense. It is the wisdom of the world, as we see in education and government exhortation. 'If anyone will not work, let him not eat' (II Thessalonians

3.10). That seems fair. Children need to go the ant. They need antlike role models for life, people who work hard and more. And work is cooperative, constructive, loyal and persistent: it incorporates many admirable virtues. Of course ants are not persons with free responsibility. They are not complete models for human beings to imitate, but they exhibit behaviours which lead us to ask questions like: what would human life be like if we followed these behaviours in an appropriately human way? What can we learn from the ant and what humanity can we achieve if we are like the ant?

Such questions may help with the meaning of the call to become as the children. Is the child given to disciples in the same way that the ant is given to the sluggard? Does the child show us what we are to become? Does the child model humanity for us, challenging our adult complacency about our maturity? Sometimes, Christians these days present the child in this way, calling adults to become like the child. The sluggard won't get through the hungry winter, so the disciples will not enter the kingdom, unless they imitate the right models. The Ant and the Child show them how they can make a success of life, by doing what is necessary.

The sluggard often resists all exhortation: he cannot be bothered to go to the ant. A parallel to that, it may be said, is the perennial refusal of adults to attend to the child as a crucial clue to entering the kingdom of God and to finding the fullness of life. Some modern people, including some Christians, believe they are breaking new ground historically by giving primacy to the child and being willing to be led by a child. Some go so far as to kneel before young people in 'symbolic expressions of repentance' for adult sins. I am not persuaded that such practice does realise what is meant by 'becoming as the children'; it rather reminds us that this is a saying difficult to understand and to follow in wise and healthy action.

Sparrow flying in God's space

Matthew 10.29-31: Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows.

Matthew 6.29: Do not be anxious about your life...Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor gather into barns and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

Both ant and sparrow can be taken as models. Both serve to call us to conversion. Both can be deployed in critical and inspiring exhortation. In both, behaviours can be identified which could guide human living. But what they model is significantly different. The ant teaches self-mobilising timely hard work which produces profit and security. Prudential wisdom and life skill produces prosperity. Incentivising goals for

living are identified and make attractive sense within the confines of a life of temporal effort and reward.

The sparrow is quite different from the ant. These sayings about sparrows do not make obvious sense. We can imagine that living without anxiety would be possible provided we had enough gathered into barns, but we cannot see our way in practice to do without barns and without the labour of filling them. Many find that even when they wisely fill the barn with love as well as money, they do not escape anxiety. The text points us beyond what we can gather and hoard to the free grace of the heavenly Father, under whose eye the sparrow flies until it falls.

The sparrow, as Jesus sees him, neither lives to work nor succeeds by working. There is nothing about the sparrow to lever the sluggard out of bed; indeed the sluggard may assure himself that in spirit he is much closer to the sparrow and the flowers of the field than those who exhort him to get to work.

But the sparrow in Jesus' teaching is not a sluggard. Jesus does not deny the limited truth of the Ant. The Unjust Steward and the parable of the Talents show how he saw that the children of this age have a wisdom the children of the kingdom would do well to emulate and surpass.¹ He says, Use the unrighteous mammon, go through it, but do not be limited to it, because the kingdom of God is coming near. That surpassing kingdom is what Jesus proclaims, making it present in signs and inviting people to venture to live in it here and now, even before it arrives fully. Jesus talks all the time with a real sense of the kingdom *of God* – and it is the presence of God and the opening of earthly life to God's transcendence that makes the key difference between Ant and Sparrow. What Jesus was talking about is not to be found by those who are confined within the limits of their own hard work, driven by ambitions and anxiety for self and who are godless, whether or not they profess faith in God. Jesus proclaims liberation to the captives by pointing to and displaying the freedom of life with, from and for God. God – not religiosity.

Jesus' sparrow differs from the proverbial ant in two ways. First, the sparrow does not produce his own life by getting out of bed and working. He is fed by the Father of all and flies freely in the generous space of the Father's creation. In this way of thinking about human being, the Father is not a religious add-on or a moral backstop, but is the ground and giver and heart of all being, in freedom, joy and generosity. God is not a merely possible being whose existence can be argued for, but is the One in whom we live and move and have our being. Thus creaturely being is received as a gift of superlative generosity. It has been given from the beginning and is always there waiting for us, not to earn it, but to enter it and let it embrace and brace us for living in God's space.²

Father and falling

The sparrow ³ reveals an active joyous self, free from the anxiety and ambition which are intrinsic to the project of self-development and self-fulfilment. The sparrow flies and feeds in the freedom of the space given by the Father. The sparrow does not mobilise the lazy self to sow prudently for a harvest, seeking to become secure in pride and possession. In the eyes of such wisdom, the sparrow is foolish.

In this way, the sparrow sets up an eye-opening moment, in which we may find ourselves shocked into awareness of what surpasses, spices and sustains humdrum levels of well-being (for which we should indeed be grateful).

The Sparrow's being consists not only in his flying but also in his falling to the ground. The ant works prudently (with rational fear) towards security in an insecure world; 'falling' is not mentioned in his C.V. because he hopes by working hard to prevent it. But the Sparrow's falling cannot be omitted, because he is given to show us what our human being in the Kingdom of God is like. The Sparrow flies in the Father's freedom – for a time. Then he falls to the ground cheaply and yet 'not without the Father'. So do we.

Ant and Sparrow, like child and adult, are temporal beings, pilgrims and sojourners on earth. They share the same life-problem, how to live well even though time is short, how to be joyful and free in the face of the fear of death which makes for life-long bondage ⁴, how to be generous when time is not. There are many ways of dealing with the problem.

Jesus saw an Ant-man. He worked hard and got so rich he had to build new barns to store all his wealth, find new instruments for all his pension funds. Then he said to himself, Soul you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry. Jesus commented: 'But God said to him, Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' (Luke 12.13-21). Luke tells this story as the introduction to Jesus' discourse about living without anxiety, which closely parallels Matthew 6.25-33. In his version, Luke cites the birds as well as the lilies and the grass, but he has ravens rather than sparrows. Does the choice of the species of bird make a significant difference to the meaning? Both witness to life in the freedom of God, but it seems only Matthew's sparrows draw attention to disposability and mortality: there is no mention of ravens being sold or falling to the ground.

Falling to the ground betokens the ultimate failure of any self-interested quest for security. Eliminating or postponing falling to the ground is not the key project and goal of the sparrow's life. He both flies in his given day, without anxiety about

tomorrow and then he falls, 'with the Father's In Martin Luther King's last speech before he was killed, we hear the voice of the sparrow:

Well, I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life - longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land. And so I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Child

The sparrow symbolises the spirit of the kingdom of God as Jesus expounded it in the Sermon on the Mount. The child is presented as a clue to the way in to the kingdom (Matthew 18.3) for the child is 'of the kingdom of God' (Matthew 19. 14). Sparrow and child thus share one meaning, though Matthew does not link them explicitly. Together they disclose a specific spirituality which runs like an underground stream through his Gospel. Child and sparrow both have their existence in the earthly manifestation of the kingdom of the Father and, without speaking, they enlighten and invite us to live in it.

Child and mother and father go together naturally. The fatherhood of God is a major and obvious theme when the child is taken into theology and devotion. Thus one key feature of the sparrow, her being 'with the Father', is even more strongly present in the child. But what parallel to the fall of the sparrow is to be found in the child? It is tempting to ignore it: our goal in good childcare is to see that no harm comes to her. Death is not part of the programme. But we cannot and should not deny the finitude of children or conceal from them or ourselves the truth that sooner or later, one way or another, they with us will fall to the ground. Since they are of more value than many sparrows, the threat and the event of any dying and disposing of the child, is grievous. If the child were merely one of many cheap and meaningless temporal beings, who follow the course designed for them by an indifferent nature, we might resign ourselves carelessly to the way the world is, with its giving and taking away, its struggle for survival and its extinctions. We might take in our stride the removal of one generation to make way for the next. We might say, 'Individuals die, but life goes on; persons are no more than meaningless gene carriers; our complex brains may wish for a world where there is never loss, where no rose ever fades, but that is not how it is in reality; nevertheless, so long as we do not care too much about any particular thing, or try to hold on to what we have, we can live in the changing world

as it is. Complaining does no good, so why bother. What is a wish, in the last analysis, if nothing has meaning and differences present no choices worth making?⁶

With God we are bound to speak differently. It is a blessing that human being has the capacity to get through deserts times devoid of meaning. But it is a limited blessing, frail and always under threat. Heart and mind cry out at least for oases of meaning, value, water and beauty, for a meeting place and a staging post on the journey. The oases prevent us from consigning all being to the rubbish bin, as without meaning. But the occurrence of meaning and value in the world make the fall and passing away of being harder to bear, sometimes even intolerable. For falling to the ground is now not a mere falling apart of a worn out, used- up machine but a loss, feared before it happens, felt and suffered by survivors who see it. The fall, the 'dying of the light' calls us to rage⁷, not so much because the fall is, in itself, cruel and painful, like a bad death, but because it fails to value what is valuable. It is insulting, trashing what is of worth. The more value is placed on or truly discerned in any being, the more its fall will be rightly felt as devastating loss. Making an absence where there was a presence may be softened with the lying fatalist word: All things pass away, that is natural. Or with the bracing progressive message: Ring out the old, ring in the new, the best is yet to be. Or with the voice of the despiser: What does not survive is weaker and does not deserve to be. What has gone was rubbish anyway. You who value it are mistaken. If you hold on to what is proven unworthy, you show yourselves unworthy.

Those who love and who value the fallen often do not need any vocal despiser outside themselves to hear this message in their loss. They work it out for themselves. The loss sucks the worth out of being. What is life if thou art dead?⁸

The sparrow leads us to this *memento mori*, this reflection on our end. Does the child? I suspect that there is not much serious thinking about this in contemporary Christian talk about children or work with children ⁹ Child is new life, like the sparrow flying free. The vulnerability of children is often talked about, as an evil that should and can be ended. And so it should – but even if all preventable hurts were prevented, and all healable hurts were healed, falling would still be a component of the life and being of children as human beings. To bring up children as though they are not already touched by falling in some way and do not need to be informed and prepared to fall as well as fly is to fail them. There is no Christian faith or way of living that forgets we are on a pilgrimage, which takes us through the valley of the shadow of death. With children, we too often bowdlerise Christian faith – and indeed we do it for adults. We baptize but without dying and rising. We have sanitised Communion so that we celebrate our loving togetherness in almost total forgetfulness of what the Last Supper was in reality.

Our reading of Matthew 18 on the child is sanitised if it stops at verse 5. Go further and find that the child in this discourse has the doubleness of the sparrow in Matthew

6, being of the Father's kingdom and vulnerable to falling. These two conflicting characteristics of little ones are brought together in 18.10: Watch out, that you do not *despise* one of these little ones, for I tell you that their angels in heaven always behold the face of *my Father in heaven*.

Do not despise

We should watch out for the full meaning of despise. The despiser looks down on little ones, and counts them as of little value. The despising is rooted in his distorted being, in his secret thinking and valuation. Then he externalises and enacts his despising in any number of ways, so that little ones are exploited, violated, undervalued, lost, broken, or merely marginalised as of no value. The despiser is rarely alone; he has companions; he conforms with social practice and his evil is cloaked and confirmed by culture. The despiser sometimes hides for fear of being exposed and sometimes he is brazen in his dominance. The victims of the despiser are broken in their spirit by what they suffer and lose. They are oppressed and shamed by their weakness and what becomes of them through it. When they cannot get free of the despiser, and cannot fight him off, they often lose hope as the spirit breaks. Then they seem to be disconnected from the Father and all goodness. What evidence to the contrary gives them a foothold on hope? Despising makes its home and seedbed in their own being.¹⁰ Then the despiser can point to them and say, Look at them! Is it not right to despise them? They don't value themselves – so why should I? What beauty is in them that anyone should desire them?¹¹ They are trash.

In the view of Jesus, just as no sparrow falls to the ground 'without the Father' (Matthew 10.29), so the despised little one is always, through all things, represented by their angels before the face of the Father. This text does not assure us that God *insulates* the despised so that they do not feel despised - the fire never touches them.¹² The warning against despising little ones is serious, because they are often really despised and it is a tempting possibility to others to despise them. This text reckons with the reality of this present world where we are called to live. Despising grips and beats its victims down. We cannot be in denial, because God is God. God who became vulnerable even to death on a cross does not give such universal immunity. When despising is real, loss is cruel and hard, God seems remote, unhelpful, unable to help. Despised people give up on God and despise him because he does not help. Little ones who believe are thus caused to stumble by the apparent godlessness of the world. Stumbling may take the form of becoming despisers of God, as some contemporary atheism seems to demonstrate.

The Gospel, as it is indicated in this text, is not that God comes with external earthly power to stop the despiser, the oppressor and exploiter. It is good when external power is exerted to do what it can to make for justice, peace and freedom. The state

is a good thing, though very limited. It can curb some sorts of despising sometimes, but it leaves much untouched and does not get to the roots of the problem. And God takes no quick easy way to do it, it seems. God in Christ is forever against the despising and for the despised, but only by coming into the world and being despised with the despised. Only thus is hope given to the despised. And in the same action, God in Christ calls the despiser to a profound conversion, not to some transcendent God of religion, but to the God who comes into our being despised, and, as the Despised, raises the question, Who stands by God in the hour of his grieving?¹³ Turning to God in Christ is impossible for the despiser if he does not come to respect all the despised with whom God identifies himself, and whose angels always stand in his presence. God's upholding the despised is what the despiser is required to acknowledge and appreciate.

The text is phrased as a warning to any would-be despiser, who is ready to take advantage of those who are little, relatively weak and vulnerable. It does not tell them they *cannot* despise because God will stop them by a power greater than theirs. It tells them they *should not* despise because the little ones are truly valued by God as they are represented in his presence by their angels. It thus invites the despiser to revise his valuation, to learn the true value of little ones by respecting the Father, instead of despising God as another little one who can be ignored, marginalised and disrespected. This text looks for the conversion of the despiser, not his mere prevention or punishment. It appeals to us all, as hearers of this word, to come into line with the Father. This text is not primarily directed *against* the despiser and his despising, as Matthew 18.6 seems to be. It is *for* the despised, both little one and Father, by witnessing to their unailing togetherness in the life of God. They are together despite the distance between earth and heaven. That distance gives the despiser his chance to oppress; it is his freedom in the world. But greater than the despiser is the protest of God in Christ, with and for all those he is numbered with. The light of heaven indirectly exposes the valuation of the despiser for the evil falsity it is by directly shining on the angels representing the child. God affirms and vindicates the despised by acknowledging their claim and right, which is represented by their angels. And thus the despiser is called to 'turn' from despising. So the light which is the light of human being shines 'through everything'.¹⁴

Matthew 18.10 is an act of faith in the Father, even when the Father is distant in heaven, and seems to be no more than an inactive and indirect observer of what the little ones are subjected to on earth. The despiser exploits the distance and puts the despised in the place where they can only walk by faith because their view of the Father is blocked. They are represented by their angels but they do not stand immediately in the heavenly presence. The despised pray for the Kingdom to come, because they know it is not here and now. Read in this way, this verse brings us another sight of the underground stream that runs through Matthew's Gospel. In the Sermon on the Mount (6.1-18) we are told to shape our living as a hidden relation

with God, where what counts is what God sees, judges and rewards, rather than what we can publicise. God's action in secret must be respected and not corrupted by desiring to be seen and rewarded by men. This was a difficult message in the time of Jesus and it is still difficult for us now, shaped as we are by cultural assumptions that link identity with reputation and social acceptance. Perhaps this is one of the points which makes what Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount seem impracticable. We cannot even begin to live this way without being called and enabled by a discipline of spirit in the Spirit.¹⁵

The God before whom we live in secret is easily despised; by his hiddenness, it seems that God has reduced himself almost to non-existence. A perennial temptation for faith, in all ages, is to fail in faithfulness to the invisible God and instead to find some way of making God visibly impressive like an earthly power. When Moses went up the mountain and disappeared into the invisibility of God the people were fed up and got Aaron, an obliging engineer of religion, to make them a golden calf to be counted as 'the gods who brought them out of Egypt' (Exodus 32). It is not only child abusers and oppressors of the poor who are despisers. Religious Ants and rich fools may be too.

End in Beginning

The falling sparrow, the crucified God, the despised child merge to symbolise the futility of our being. 'Time like an ever-rolling stream bears all its sons away; they fly forgotten as the dream dies at the opening day'. But there is an opening day: 'New every morning is the love our waking and uprising prove'. Sparrows still fly, though in some places their numbers are drastically falling. Children are still being born, still making their parents lift up their heads with joy and determination and new vision. Christ is raised, once for all and one for all. None of this stops the world being as it is. We cannot delude ourselves that somehow there will be no more falling, dying, despising. It is a call not to be anything like the sluggard who has given up: 'save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore'. It is a challenge to go to the Ant, but not to try to save ourselves without the Father; rather, to work assiduously with God, and from God as the source and giver of light and life. It is a call to live by faith, not by indulging in religion as a substitute for living, but by taking the risk of living under a king whose kingdom is patchy because it is not yet. In the patch of God's daylight, sparrows fly and children chuckle and 'hearts are brave again'¹⁶ So we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who encourage us to run the race set before us, looking to Jesus, despising the shame.¹⁷ Becoming as the children means beginning again, always being at the beginning, eagerly entering into the enlivening grace of a new start in freedom. The child in the rule of God is little and vulnerable, but more, is the power of new life, the startling arrival of fresh possibility in an old and dying world.¹⁸

¹Luke 16.8

² I have been newly awakened to the thought this paragraph is inadequately trying to express by reading chapter I of Francis Spofford's *Unapologetic: Why, despite everything, Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense* (2012)

³ I recognise that this biblical sparrow is a poetic symbol derived from observed sparrows. Sparrows are busy little creatures who have to work as hard as ants for their crumbs. The Gospel without embarrassment takes the freedom to envisage the sparrow in the light of God. The sparrow might therefore lead us into discussion about the relation between scientific, poetic and theological language and understanding, but this is not the place for it.

⁴ Hebrews 2.14,15

⁵ The Greek in Matthew 10.29 says that not one sparrow falls to the ground 'without your Father', from which I derive the bare converse, 'with the Father'. Translators and commentators seem ill at ease with this bareness and add, without the Father's will or knowledge and they expatiate on providence. They can appeal to the context in the Gospel and to theological reason to justify this elaboration but at the cost of blurring the confrontation with God, the Father, which is suggested by the Greek expression, whose sparseness brings us to the place where we are 'naked and open to the eyes of him with whom we have to do' (Hebrews 4.13).

⁶ Rachel's refusal of comfort cannot be silenced (Jeremiah 31.15). It interrupts and protests against the prophet Jeremiah's long term vision of hope for the people (chapters 30-31) in which he argues that the destroyed city will be rebuilt in the future and the lost children will be replaced by another lot of children playing in the streets. Rachel simply witnesses, My children are not replaceable. There is no substitute for them. There is loss without comfort here. It is part of the greatness of Jeremiah as a prophet that he could report this interruption without trying to blur its stark challenge. We know from elsewhere that his own experience had this complexity. For substitution and representation, see Dorothee Soelle, *Christ the Representative*

⁷ Dylan Thomas, 'Do not go gentle into that good night'

⁸ Alan Jenkins, *Orpheus*, <http://www.clivejames.com/poetry/jenkins/orpheus>

⁹ David H Jensen *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland, 2005) engages with the issue, as does Frances Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (1985/1990)

¹⁰ Emma Jackson, *Exploited: A 13-year-old girl groomed and trafficked by a child sex gang* (Ebury, 2012). This true terrible story (unhappily not unique in Britain today) helps us to understand, if we need help, what the word 'despise' points to. Sustained maliciously clever exploitation by others brought Emma into the depth where 'I felt even more worthless than usual, like an animal in a zoo, a thing and not a person.....How much lower could I go? Maybe there wasn't any lower.' (p 228).

¹¹ Isaiah 53.2-3

¹² Psalm 121; Daniel 4.25; Mark 16.18.

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Christians and Pagans', in *Letters and Papers from Prison*

¹⁴ Matthew 18.10 puts in what may be too succinct an image what is spelt out in Romans 8.12-39

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

¹⁶ From the hymn, 'For all the saints who from their labours rest'. This hymn celebrates the whole company of God in heaven and earth, in traditional terms, naming soldiers of faith, apostles, Evangelists, martyrs, but not mentioning children. Of course, there are other hymns for them, such as 'I sing a song of the saints of God' and 'tell me the stories of Jesus', but they should also have been included amongst 'all the saints'.

¹⁷ Hebrews 12.1ff.

¹⁸ Haddon Willmer, 'Karl Barth – Child Theologian?' <http://www.childtheology.org/new/articles.php?type=1>

Letter to the Editor: Theistic Evolution.

The term “theistic evolution” appears regularly in *Faith and Thought* and *Science and Christian Belief* to denote the belief that evolution is a natural process in a universe that is sustained by God. But is it right to call such evolution “theistic”? In ordinary usage, “theism” denotes the belief that God acts in the world and reveals himself to human beings supernaturally, as opposed to “deism” which holds that he does not. The term “theistic evolution” therefore suggests that God intervenes supernaturally in the process of evolution. But this is precisely the position taken by advocates of Intelligent Design (“progressive creation”). What is called “theistic evolution” is more accurately described as “deistic evolution” since sustainment of a universe evolving naturally only requires God to keep it in being (i.e. not act to take it out of being), which is something a deist God can do.

P.G. Nelson, Hull

While it is true that deism teaches that God created the universe and does not intervene thereafter, evangelical Christians who advocate theistic evolution or evolutionary creation want to distance themselves from deists who generally deny the Trinity, special revelation and the possibility of miracles. Denis Lamoureux, for example, maintains that, “These Christian evolutionists are first and foremost thoroughly committed and unapologetic creationists. They believe that the world is a creation that is absolutely dependent for every instant of its existence on the will and grace of the Creator.” (see article *Evolutionary Creation: Moving beyond the Evolution versus Creation Debate* Crux 39 (2) 2003 and his book *Evolutionary Creation-A Christian Approach to Evolution* (2008) Similarly, theistic evolutionists belonging to ‘Biologos’ state, “At BioLogos, we view evolutionary creation as a description of how and when God brought about all the creatures on earth. We do not see God as distant from this process, for God did not just set up the universe at the beginning and let it go. Instead, he upholds the universe moment by moment, sustaining all things by the power of his word. The regular patterns in nature that we call natural laws have their foundation in the regular, faithful governance of God (see Jeremiah 33:19-26). Thus we believe that God created every species and did it in such a way that we can describe the creation process scientifically. The scientific model of evolution does not replace God as creator any more than the law of gravity replaces God as ruler of the planets.” These scientists believe that evolution is the method of creation but do not deny that God can and does from time to time perform miracles. (See websites of Denis Lamoureux and Biologos)

Editor.

Book Reviews

Andrew J. Goodliff *'To such as these': The Child in Baptist Thought* 2012 Regent's Park College, Oxford Pb.. 94 + xii pages. £12 ISBN 9781907600036.

I originally reviewed this book for the *Baptist Ministers' Journal*. Its title is misleadingly broad. Goodliff actually focuses on how Baptist ministers conduct services of 'Infant Presentation' (his preferred term) and the theology underlying them. Although it started life as an MTh thesis, it is readable!

Chapter 1 surveys such services in Baptist service books, from Gould and Shakespeare (1905) to *Gathering for Worship* (2005). Chapter 2 examines scripture used in such services, and in particular Mark 10:13-16, which is common to them all. Chapter 3 asks 'Who is the Child?' There are many good observations here, although he does not interact with, for example, the stress on children's importance in Matthew. Keith White has highlighted this elsewhere, as have I.

'Theologies of Sin and Salvation' (Chapter 4) is dismissive of the view that, while children share the sinful tendencies of all humanity, God does not hold them responsible till they reach an age of accountability. I am astonished that he nowhere deals with Deuteronomy 1:39, the classic 'proof text' of that position. Instead, he finds assurance of children's eternal safety in Karl Barth's view of election. (All people are elected to salvation in Christ. Barth scholars disagree on whether or not he thought anyone could reject that salvation.)

Chapter 5 surveys four different Baptist views of how children relate to baptism and communion. Through the diversity, he sees a common thread of viewing children within the church's fellowship as 'catechumens' [those under instruction, in preparation for baptism]. This begins with their 'infant presentation'.

Chapter 6 asks how this theology might be worked out in the way Baptists do 'infant presentation', later given practical expression in an actual liturgy (Appendix 2).

Chapter 7 makes a plea for genuinely 'all-age' worship. Goodliff added this chapter to his original thesis, when preparing it for publication. In it, he breaks free of the thought of other Baptist ministers, to deal with wider practitioners of, for example, Godly Play. He rightly stresses that children learn from experiencing the worshipping Christian community, in all its activities. Might it not be better, then, for him to describe children within the fellowship as 'novices' (those sharing in the life of a religious community to see if it is their calling) rather than as 'catechumens'?

The drawbacks of his approach become plain in Appendix 2. An already verbose service from *Gathering for Worship* becomes even more verbose as he clarifies its

theology. I wonder what sense all this would make to the parents with whom I deal? But then, I see this as primarily a service of Thanksgiving and Blessing, welcoming parents and children as Christ did, as a demonstration of his grace.

If I have a major criticism of this book, it is its failure to get to grips with more of the Biblical material relating to children. It could be objected that it is about 'the child in Baptist thought', not 'Biblical thought'. But the Baptist Union's Statement of Principle says 'Jesus Christ ... is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, *as revealed in the Holy Scriptures.*' So Baptist thought should be a discussion of Scripture, especially the gospels.

Nevertheless, as a Baptist, I welcome this book. At least it should challenge us to review our own theology and practice with regard to children.

Reviewed by Rev. Dr. Robert Allaway

David H. Glass *Atheism's New Clothes* Nottingham Apollos IVP 2012 319pp.
pb.£16.99 ISBN 9781844745715

Since the publication in 2006 of Richard Dawkins' notorious book, *The God Delusion* numerous critiques have been written and one may wonder why there should be the need for a further one. David Glass justifies his publication by pointing out that his publication is not featured solely on Dawkins nor restricted to a theological critique. In fact he focuses on, in addition to Dawkins, the works of the 'new atheists' - Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris. He is well qualified for the undertaking having a doctorate in theoretical physics, a masters degree in philosophy and currently teaches Christian apologetics.

Unlike the new atheists he does not condescend to or to ridicule his critics, but carefully and courteously analyses their work and both praises and criticises it while also giving a powerful defence of the Christian Faith. Unlike traditional atheists the new atheists see no need to investigate the claims of religion because they believe that religion is irrational, unscientific and delusional. They claim that believers are mad or psychotic and religion is evil and teaching religion to children is a form of child abuse. Glass surprisingly finds support for his position from atheists who want to distance themselves from Dawkins and his cohort. Tony Eagleton, for instance, likens Dawkins to someone criticising biology whose only knowledge of the subject comes from reading a book about British birds and Michael Ruse considers his treatment of religion as pathetic and makes him ashamed to be an atheist. Ruse is quoted as saying, "They are a bloody disaster and I want to be on the front line of those who say so." For the new atheists religious faith, unlike science, is belief without evidence and Harris even goes so far as to assert that Hebrews 11.1. proves this by defining faith as

belief in something hoped for , for which there is no evidence! Glass contrasts this with the diverse views of Aquinas, Swinburne, Helm and Plantinga who all show that faith involves evidence (belief that) but also involves trust (belief in).

The new atheists believe that only science can lead us to truth and will one day explain everything. For them Christianity is the enemy of science and hence also the enemy of truth. Glass points out that this is false. Many scientists were and are Christians and that modern science developed out of a belief that the world is intelligible and that an orderly universe explicable in terms of mathematics points to an intelligent creator. The author discusses in detail the reasons why Christians believe that scientific evidence regarding the universe points to an intelligent creator. As philosophers have pointed out the existence of the universe itself requires an explanation. The origin of an expanding universe is best explained in terms of Big Bang cosmology which implies a beginning. Theories to avoid this conclusion are shown to be speculative. He also uses the fine-tuning argument and the Strong Anthropic Principle as good indicators of design in the universe. Dawkins rebuttal to this is his contention that if God existed as the ultimate creator/designer then he must himself have a highly organised complexity that requires explanation and that it is better to explain all existence in terms of a multiverse than in terms of God. Glass rebuts this argument by pointing out that it only establishes that God could not have come into being by chance if God consists of parts, which Christians do not claim. A chapter is devoted to evolution and the origin of religion. In spite of the new atheist's commitment to evolution as the ultimate explanation of our existence they cannot avoid Darwin's 'horrid doubt' that because mind is the product of evolution it may not be trustworthy. Beside which a scientific explanation of the origin of religion cannot tell us whether it is true or false.

One of the major criticisms of the new atheists about religion is that religion is the source of evil. Without religion the world would be free from conflict. Dawkins claims that no atheist would bulldoze Mecca, York Minster or Notre Dame. This 'myth of secular tolerance' flies in the face of the evidence and, in order to justify his statements, he responds by claiming that Stalin and Mao were political religionists! More difficult to refute are the atheists' claims that the Bible itself advocates beliefs and practices that are morally unacceptable such as hell, genocide, slavery and the unacceptable treatment of women and homosexuals. Glass responds by pointing out that not everything mentioned in the Bible is approved by it, and that the Bible must be seen in its context. He quotes the illustration that a visitor from another planet, where there is no disease or death, observing a surgeon operating might conclude that the surgeon is evil or that inflicting suffering in the form of torture is acceptable. He could only know the truth by seeing it in the larger context of the existence of disease and the ability to rectify it by surgery.

Glass does not seek to defend religions generally but only the Christian faith so he devotes the penultimate chapter to the Gospel accounts of Jesus and especially the evidence for the resurrection. The final chapter contrasts what Christians and atheists claim about the purpose of life. The atheists see humans as a by-product of natural selection. Nature is indifferent and callous and gives no basis for purpose or for an objective morality. Any purpose such as the alleviation of human suffering depends on humanity having a value, which in the light of natural selection, is only wishful thinking. David Glass said the aim of this volume was to explore the issues dealt with by the new atheists and to show where he thinks they are mistaken. In this I think he has been fully successful. But he has done more than this by also giving a concise justification for accepting the Christian faith as true.

Reviewed by Reg Luhman

Mark J.Boda & J. Gordon McConville (ed) *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets* 2012 Nottingham IVP 966 pp. hb £ 39.99 ISBN 9781844745814

This volume brings to completion the excellent series of 'black' Bible Dictionaries published by Inter-Varsity Press. Unlike other books in this series this one is unique. There are, of course, many books dealing with the OT prophets and prophecy in general but none like this that covers such a wide remit. Containing 115 articles by 94 contributors it becomes an almost impossible task to adequately review. As one would expect it includes detailed consideration of all the prophetic books. Each article relating to a prophetic book deals with questions relating to authorship, date, historical setting and an outline of its content and theological import. For many of the books there is also a valuable survey of the history of the book's interpretation from the inter-testamental period (including the Dead Sea Scrolls), the New Testament and from the Church Fathers through to modern times. Complementing this, there is a series of articles on the general topic of prophecy including a comprehensive history of prophecy, prophecy and eschatology, prophecy and society, prophecy and tradition as well as the psychology of prophecy which includes a consideration of some of the more bizarre acts performed by OT prophets. The article relating to prophecy and eschatology in Christian theology contains a consideration of millennialism and dispensationalism, so beloved by evangelicals. All of this is set in its historical background with articles relating to Babylon, Israelite history and especially the relevance of the exile for understanding prophecy.

There are also numerous articles relating to Bible imagery, cosmology, spiritual beings, the law, the Messiah and the 'Day of the Lord', the sacrificial system and theological topics such as faith, forgiveness, justice, death and the afterlife. The various forms of criticism that are used by scholars, such as form, canonical, textual,

redaction and feminist are included as well as less familiar ones such as rhetorical criticism, intertextuality and conversation analysis. The section on feminist criticism, together with that dealing with female imagery; is particularly enlightening. There is also a section dealing with the Dead Sea Scrolls and their relevance to the interpretation of the prophetic books and two more technical articles dealing specifically with the Hebrew and Aramaic languages as they are used in the prophetic books, the latter being confined to the Aramaic of Daniel.

The dictionary is remarkably comprehensive and up-to-date and should provide a source of reference for many years. It is a book that is to be heartily recommended.

Reviewed by Reg Luhman

NOTES

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