

# Drawing a line for unborn children

Orion Edgar looks at a contribution to the abortion debate

**Ethics at the Beginning of Life: A phenomenological critique**  
**James Mumford**  
Oxford University Press £60  
(978-0-19-967396-4)  
Church Times Bookshop £54

IN THIS highly sophisticated book, emerging from his Oxford doctoral thesis, James Mumford asks what is the ethical significance of the fact that human beings do not appear in the world fully formed, but are born.

Offering an outline of a phenomenological approach, Mumford shows that my body always in some

sense precedes me. The foetus is encountered not in a moment of full recognition, but as it develops. Mumford's account of the centrality of time and development for understanding persons is a real strength.

He goes on to suggest that Karl Barth's picture of the recognition of the personal Other as the key to ethics depends so much on formal reciprocity that it becomes unrealistically idealised: it cannot recognise the unborn child as a moral person. Here Mumford's criticism seems forced (Barth might be surprised at the suggestion that his theology supports the case for abortion), and he does not distinguish between ethics understood as a vision of the good and his own legalistic take on the ethical task, as a matter of establishing "what is permitted".

Mumford's criticism of modern liberalism, beginning with its roots in the political philosophy of Locke

and Hobbes, is more successful. He clearly shows how the reduction of complex interpersonal relationships to the terms of contract and exchange does not do justice to the reality of human life, particularly where there is asymmetry of power and status, as in the relation of mother to baby.

He proposes that ethics must always draw a line between those who "count" for ethical consideration and those who do not; and, since human beings do not come into the world fully formed, recognition cannot be granted on the basis of adherence to an adult human ideal. This would seem, problematically, to base ethics on an exceptional case; and, worse, it seems to make the question "Who am I allowed to kill?" central, answering "Not an unborn child," though Mumford is happy to accept "just-war" arguments for the use of force.

In the short final chapter, Mumford offers an alternative, theological basis for human rights, grounded in the understanding of the human being as bearing the image of God. Unfortunately, it is too compressed to deal with the questions how theology can contribute to the shared public reasoning on which the real-life outcomes of the abortion debate depend.

This book is an important contribution to the abortion debate which offers a new perspective on entrenched positions; in the last instance, it cannot live up to Mumford's goal of offering a first-person perspective on pregnancy, but reinscribes a patriarchal prohibition without dealing with the tragic human situations that lead to the termination of pregnancy.

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# Risen from the dead

Henry Wansbrough reads a popular title

**Journey to the Empty Tomb**  
**Paula Gooder**  
Canterbury Press £12.99  
(978-1-84825-571-5)  
Church Times Bookshop £11.70

THIS lovely, short book works through the Gospel narratives till their end, from the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It attempts to establish what happened, using Mark as a basis, but considering also the additions and adjustments of Matthew and Luke, and the very different account of John. It does far more than this; for it embraces the reader personally, helping us to see the meaning and significance of these events for our understanding of Christ and ourselves.

The descriptions of events are graphic and moving; the reader feels present at the scene, experiencing what happened and then turning in and reflecting on how it affects and touches each one of us. It is a book written by a scholar, but not for scholars. So it uses scholarship and assesses with swift clarity alternative interpretations of evidence, facts, and motives, but always in order to involve the Christian believer personally in the events of Jesus's Passion, death and resurrection.

All the necessary texts are given in ample text-boxes, and each section concludes with an explicit meditative passage, and sometimes a reflective poem. At the end are provided plenty of questions for discussion by groups or individuals, and suggestions for further reading. Like the rest of the book, these are delightfully human. The author does not teach or dictate: she simply shares her thoughts with the reader.

One strong emphasis is on the failing disciples. "Gethsemane is a story of human vulnerability" both of Jesus and of disciples. The same continues through the failure of Peter, a sympathetic portrait of Judas, and perhaps an excessively critical assessment of Pilate. The death of Jesus is, in the eyes of contemporaries, an archetype of a "spectacularly bad death", before his time, leaving no children, not buried in the family tomb. Finally, St Mark's Gospel "screches to an undignified end" with the failure even of the women at the empty tomb itself. The book is, however, not a depressing presentation: it is challenging, but full of a sure hope. It is presented as the first of a series; I hope that the others follow soon.

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# Significance of the 'child in the midst'

John Pridmore finds depth in a study of one short NT passage

**Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18**  
**Haddon Willmer and Keith White**  
WTL Publications £12.99  
(978-095647573-2)

HADDON WILLMER and Keith White have spent much of the 21st century discussing the first 14 verses of the 18th chapter of Matthew's Gospel. This signally important book is the product of their conversation.

They describe their collaboration as "an attempt at doing Child Theology". Child Theology is not the same as "the theology of childhood", and our authors are anxious that we do not get the two muddled. The theology of childhood seeks a Christian understanding of what it means to be a child. Child Theology invites us to explore what theology has to say about all the great matters with which theology engages when the child's presence is recognised, there "in the midst of his disciples", where, according to Matthew 18.1, Jesus places him or her.

This book is neither a commentary on Matthew 18 nor an essay in

ANDREW WILLIAMS writes from experience in **Working with Street Children**: his intentions are to strengthen and equip those working in this field; to inspire and prepare others to do so; and to urge others to act and speak out for street children (Russell House Publishing, £14.95 (£13.45); 978-1-905541-80-5).

Sister Francesca Kelly has revised **50 Masses with Children** to take account of current RC liturgy. For each theme, she suggests symbols, prayers, scriptural readings in child-friendly language, and sometimes other pieces (Columba Press, £13.50 (£12.15); 978-1-85607-771-2).

systematic theology. It is, to use the authors' image, "a borehole". Willmer and White have driven deep into the text of Matthew 18, mining its strata for the disturbing truths about discipleship which confront Christians who attend to the child in their midst.

We have seven chapters, their themes suggested by the movement of thought in the opening verses of Matthew 18 — Child, Kingdom, Temptation, Disciple, Humility, Reception, Father. If we supposed from these anodyne headings that we were in for a safe journey, we could not be more mistaken. Our authors probe beneath — and frequently undermine — the common ground of our agreed common-places.

Two examples of how Willmer and White offer a fresh reading of a familiar text are particularly unsettling.

Jesus sets a child in the midst of his disciples to challenge the false ideas of the Kingdom of God which they find so tempting. It is, thus far, an uncontroversial interpretation of the text. But Willmer and White invite us to reread these verses, and to do so in the light of the temptations that Jesus himself suffered; for Jesus, too, was enticed — and not only that once in the wilderness — to settle for a less costly understanding of his task.

The disciples' temptation was his as well. Was "the child in the midst" there for his sake too? Was he or she there in their midst, but also at his side, as "good company in his quest . . . (and) an abiding reminder of his calling"? Willmer and White would have it so.

A yet more radical rereading of Matthew 18 is that "the child in the midst" bears silent witness to the call to take up the cross. Willmer and White go so far as to claim that the child witnesses to "a faithful dynamic equivalent of 'cross'". I hear our authors telling me that the child I must become is "the child on the cross". I find their novel argument entirely persuasive and utterly terrifying.

*Entry Point* was more than a dozen years in the making. Such sustained engagement with a single



"They say, and I believe, the world is old; it still must be diverted like a child": so said Jean de la Fontaine, and his *Selected Fables* have now appeared in a new translation by Christopher Betts, with illustrations by Gustav Doré: this is the wolf in shepherd's clothing, a rascal caught out by a detail (Oxford, £14.99 (£13.50); 978-0-19-965072-9)

snippet of scripture is almost unheard of in contemporary Christian writing. (There are none of the hallmarks of haste here — the flaccid writing, the recycled pieties, the tired anecdotes — familiar to us from the work of many a Christian writer desperate to get on with his or her next book.)

Not the least benefit of the time that they gave to their project is that it allowed them to take account of earlier writers, George MacDonald among them, for whom the child was crucial — "crucial", notice — to their understanding of the mission of Jesus. (Our authors refer us to MacDonald's astonishing but problematical "unspoken sermon" *The Child in the Midst*, but there is much "child theology", too, in MacDonald's novels, in *Sir Gibbie*, for example.)

Here is an original and deeply serious study. What Willmer and

White call "their fragile theological search" is immensely worth while — but to journey with them is far from comforting.

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