

# CHILD THEOLOGY

*Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives*

EDITED BY MARCIA J. BUNGE, PHD

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*With heartfelt gratitude for my parents*

*and for those who teach us to see the image of God in all people.*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book seeks to strengthen the church's reflection on key topics in theology as well as its commitment to children. All those who inspired and supported this project recognize that children are one of the most imaginative and insightful yet also vulnerable and voiceless groups on our planet. Project contributors also share this common conviction: honoring the dignity and full humanity of children deepens theological reflection, cultivates meaningful relationships, and enlivens faith communities and their work in the world.

Producing this book has been an international and ecumenical endeavor, and I would like to acknowledge the contributions of several individuals and institutions.

I deeply appreciate the wisdom and dedication of the theologians who wrote chapters for the volume. Coming from diverse contexts and theological traditions, they are united by their compassion for children and appreciation of the significance of rigorous theological reflection for Christian faith and life. In addition to being theologians and scholars, they are also respected leaders in their institutions and communities. Thus, as they were working on this book this past year (2020–2021), they were also addressing a host of personal, professional, and political challenges prompted by the global pandemic. Amid suffering and loss, several mentioned how working on the book was a welcome and meaningful task that aligned with their hopes for children and our world.

I also want to express my heartfelt gratitude to two individuals who supported the vision of this project and generously offered their wisdom and skills over the course of bringing it to completion: John Collier and Megan Eide. During the project's various phases, I worked with each of them in a spirit of true collaboration.

Collier is a writer, child advocate, and retired medical researcher and physician who cofounded the Child Theology Movement. He helped me launch this book project by cohosting the international and ecumenical consultation "Child Theology: Perspectives from Global Christianity." With the help of a grant from the Advocacy Office of Compassion International, directed at the time by Carmen (Menchit) Wong, we were able to bring together theologians, child advocates, and church leaders to explore how rethinking Christian beliefs and practices with attention to children might strengthen both theology and

child advocacy. In addition to some of the contributors to this volume, participants included other theologians who greatly moved our discussion forward: Corneliu Constantineanu (Romania), Mary Ann Hinsdale (USA), Wonhee Anne Joh (South Korea / USA), and Edesio Sánchez-Cetina (Costa Rica). We were especially grateful that Shiferaw Woldmichael could join us from Ethiopia as a consultant. A lawyer by training, he is an internationally recognized child advocate who directed several efforts for Compassion International and later founded the Child Development Training and Research Center in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. His eloquence and strategies for promoting child well-being helped all participants better understand Jesus's compassion for children and the "least of these."

The consultation helped us generate guidelines for this book and a list of contributors, and from the time I received full drafts of their chapters until submitting the entire manuscript to the publisher, Megan Eide served as the project's chief editorial assistant. As a scholar and writer, she applied her outstanding critical thinking and communication skills to the detailed work of the editorial process, including proofreading, formatting, checking references, and offering substantive suggestions for various chapters. Furthermore, as a theologian and pastor who is passionate about issues regarding children and the church, she also understood the significance of a book that explores key topics of theology with attention to children. Thus, she engaged her heart and mind as we reviewed chapters, considered the overall shape of the volume, and coauthored the introduction.

All three of us and the volume's contributors are deeply grateful to our publisher, Orbis Books, and to Paul McMahon, the acquisitions editor who oversaw our project. Orbis Books has a long-standing and highly respected record of publishing works that explore global dimensions of faith, invite dialogue across diverse cultures and traditions, and promote peace and justice. These themes deeply resonate with the aims of this book, and we are therefore delighted that this book is published by Orbis. We want to express a special word of thanks to Paul McMahon. He enthusiastically supported the project from the beginning. A kindhearted person and exceptional editor, he patiently and carefully brought the manuscript into its final form.

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My work has also been nurtured by the child-related activities of several other institutions and individuals around the world. I am deeply indebted to the cofounders of the Child Theology Movement: Keith White, Haddon Wilmer, and John Collier. They introduced me to the idea of Child Theology and placing a child "in the midst" of theological reflection. They also inspired me by their advocacy for and care of children in their midst. Through this movement, I was also introduced to many faith leaders who are advancing child well-being around the world, including representatives of Viva, Compassion International, World Vision, and seminaries in Australia, Africa, and Asia.

Furthermore, I am deeply grateful for the work of many scholars and the collaborative relationships we have built over the years through academic venues focused on children, especially the four-year research project on the history of childhood (*Tiny Voices from the Past*) directed by Reidar Aasgaard at the University of Oslo in Norway, consultations hosted by Gert Breed and Hannelie Yates at North-West University in South Africa, the "Children in the Biblical World" section of the Society of Biblical Literature, and the "Childhood Studies and Religion" unit of the American Academy of Religion. Connections with leaders of several international centers devoted to child well-being have also informed my work for this project, including the Haruv Institute, the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect, the Zero Abuse Project, and the Search Institute.

I dedicate this book to my parents and primary spiritual mentors, Myrene and Richard Bunge, and to those who teach us to see the image of God in all people. My father was a Lutheran pastor, and my mother a teacher and school counselor. They were loving and wise parents as well as powerful and public witnesses to God's love for the world. Through their words and deeds, they embodied biblical mandates to love the neighbor, seek justice, and contribute to the common good. As a young couple, they welcomed Lithuanian refugees into their home, and they carried on this legacy of service throughout their lives. My father passed away when he was fifty-seven, and my mother, now ninety-nine, still offers her ten grandchildren, my siblings, and me a listening ear and strategies for negotiating life's challenges. The example of my parents and other mentors informs what I seek to pass on to my own two children and shaped my passion for this project.

Marcia J. Bunge, PhD  
April 2021

## INTRODUCTION

### Strengthening Theology by Honoring Children

*Marcia J. Bunge and Megan Eide*

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>2</sup> For an overview, see Marcia J. Bunge, "The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understandings of Children and Childhood," *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 4 (2006): 549–578.

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

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

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

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

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

### Theological Challenge

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

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

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

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

### The Primary Aim

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



### Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives

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

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

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

#### *The Bible*

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *Christian Tradition*

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

### *Other Disciplines*

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *Experience*

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Lessons for Theological Studies and the Church

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Conclusion

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

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

## LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

**Dr. Marcia J. Bunge** is Professor of Religion and the Bernhardson Distinguished Chair of Lutheran Studies at Gustavus Adolphus College (Minnesota, USA) and also serves as an extraordinary research professor at North-West University (South Africa). She earned her PhD in theology from the University of Chicago. She has written widely on religious understandings of children and childhood and has edited and contributed to five volumes on the subject, including: *The Child in Christian Thought* (Eerdmans, 2001); *The Child in the Bible* (Eerdmans, 2008); *Children and Childhood in World Religions: Primary Sources and Texts* (Rutgers University Press, 2009); and *Children, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

**Rev. Dr. Wanda Deifelt** is Professor of Religion at Luther College (Iowa, USA). She earned her PhD from the Joint Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and Northwestern University Doctoral Program (Evanston, Illinois). She was recognized with an honorary degree in theology from the University of Oslo (Norway). Her primary areas of study are Lutheranism, creation, Christology, and liberation theology, and she has contributed to several volumes on these subjects, including *Voices of Feminist Liberation* (Routledge, 2014); *New Feminist Christianity: Many Voices, Many Views* (SkyLight Paths, 2012); and *Theologies on the Move: Religion, Migration, and Pilgrimage in the World of Neoliberal Capital* (Fortress, 2020).

**Rev. Megan Eide** is an ordained minister with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and a rising scholar in the fields of media and religion, as well as religious understandings of children and childhood. She graduated from the innovative and accelerated MDiv program, MDivX, at Luther Seminary (Minnesota, USA). Eide studies the representation of diverse religious traditions in children's visual media, and her article "Religion in Children's Visual Media: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Preschool Holiday Specials" was published in the *Journal of Media and Religion*.

**Dr. Ivone Gebara** is an Emerita Professor of Philosophy and Systematic Theology at the Theological Institute of Recife (Brazil), one of Latin America's

leading theologians and philosophers, and a Roman Catholic nun. She earned a Doctor of Philosophy from the Pontifical Catholic University (São Paulo City, Brazil) and a second doctorate in religious sciences at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium. During her career, she taught at the Universidade Católica de São Paulo and at the Auburn and Union Theological Seminaries in New York City. She has published numerous articles and eleven books, including *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Fortress, 1999) and *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Fortress, 2002). Her current work focuses on feminist and ecological perspectives.

**Rev. Dr. Rohan P. Gideon** is Associate Professor of Christian Theology at United Theological College (Bangalore, India) and an ordained deacon in the Church of South India. He earned his PhD from the University of Manchester. His research focuses primarily on postcolonial and liberationist hermeneutics, child-related theologies, and children's rights. He has published several articles and is author of *Child Labour in India: Challenges for Theological Thinking and Christian Ministry in India* (ISPCK, 2011) and *Children-at-Risk: Towards Inclusive Communities* (Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore, 2017). He also conducts workshops on human sexuality and Christian theology.

**Rev. Dr. Perry T. Hamalis** is the Cecelia Schneller Mueller Professor of Religion at North Central College (Illinois, USA) and an ordained deacon in the Orthodox Church. He earned his PhD from the University of Chicago and was awarded a Fulbright Senior Research Fellowship (2015). He is the co-editor of *Orthodox Christian Perspectives on War* (Notre Dame, 2017) and has published numerous articles and contributed chapters to several books, including *Thinking through Faith: New Perspectives from Orthodox Christian Scholars* (SVS Press, 2008); *The Orthodox Christian World* (Routledge, 2012); *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration* (Fordham University Press, 2013); and *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine* (Fordham University Press, 2017).

**Dr. D. J. Konz** is Associate Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Head of the Theology Department at Alphacrucis College (Australia). He earned a PhD in theology from the University of Aberdeen (Scotland). He served for several years as the Executive Director of Child Advocacy at Compassion Australia, responsible for championing the value, needs, nurture, and potential of children to Australian church and government leaders. He is the author of several theological articles and coeditor of *Theology, Mission, and Child: Global Perspectives* (Regnum, 2014).

**Dr. Valerie Michaelson** is an assistant professor in the Department of Health Sciences at Brock University. Before transitioning to health sciences, she worked for over twenty years as an Anglican priest. She earned her DMin from the Toronto School of Theology. Her research is focused on the health and well-being of children and adolescents and the social determinants that impact their health. Her current research projects focus on violence, spirituality, mental health, and decolonization and reconciliation. She recently coedited the volume *Decolonizing Discipline: Children, Corporal Punishment, Christian Theologies, and Reconciliation* (University of Manitoba Press, 2020).

**Rev. Dr. Kenneth Mtata** is the General Secretary of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches and an ordained pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe. He earned his PhD in theology from KwaZulu-Natal University (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa). Mtata served as Executive Study Secretary for Lutheran Theology and Practice at the Lutheran World Federation (Geneva, Switzerland), directing projects related to Lutheran hermeneutics, social transformation, and religion and development (2010–2016). He continues to work for the Lutheran World Federation as a project developer and serves as Executive Secretary of the Zimbabwe Heads of the Christian Denominations (ZHOCD). He speaks and publishes widely on religion and development policy, and has organized and directed several national and international public policy projects.

**Rev. Dr. Craig L. Nesson** is the Academic Dean, the William D. Strenge Professor for the Education and Renewal of the Church, and Professor of Contextual Theology and Ethics at Wartburg Theological Seminary (Iowa, USA). He received his MDiv STM from Wartburg Theological Seminary and his ThD from the University of Munich. He is an ordained minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He has taught courses on child maltreatment and advocated for child protection policies within the church. He is coeditor of the journal *Currents in Theology and Mission*, and his publications include *Shalom Church: The Body of Christ as Ministering Community* (Fortress, 2010); *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation* (Fortress, 2010); and *The Vitality of Liberation Theology* (Wipf & Stock, 2012).

**Dr. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, SJ**, is a Jesuit priest and the President of the Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar. He earned his PhD in theology and religious studies from the University of Leeds (England). He is the author of several publications, including *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Orbis, 2008); *Religion and Faith in Africa: Confessions of an Animist* (Orbis,

2018); and *The Pope and the Pandemic: Lessons in Leadership in a Time of Crisis* (Orbis, 2021).

**Rev. Dr. Dirk J. Smit** is the Chair of Reformed Theology and Public Life at Princeton Theological Seminary (Princeton, USA). He holds a DTh from Stellenbosch University (South Africa) and honorary degrees from Umeå University (Sweden) and the Protestant Theological University (Groningen, Netherlands). Other current appointments include honorary professor at the Humboldt-Universität (Berlin, Germany); extraordinary professor at Stellenbosch University; fellow of the Institute for Advanced Study (Berlin, Germany); and member of the Academy of Science in South Africa (ASSAF). Smit has written extensively on the legacy of the Reformed tradition and its relevance to contemporary theological, social, and political questions. He was also a prominent and influential voice in the church's repudiation of apartheid and one of the primary authors of the Belhar Confession (Dutch Reformed Mission Church, 1986).

**Rev. Dr. Michael Welker** is a senior professor of systematic theology at the University of Heidelberg (Germany) and the Executive Director of the Research Center for International and Interdisciplinary Theology (FIIT). He received his PhD in systematic theology from the University of Tübingen and a Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Heidelberg. He is an ordained minister of the Protestant Church in Germany. He has written, edited, and contributed to a vast number of publications on Christology, the doctrine of creation, anthropology, eschatology, biblical theology, and the dialogue between theology and the natural sciences, including *God the Spirit* (Fortress, 1994); *Creation and Reality* (Fortress, 1999); *The Theology and Science Dialogue: What Can Theology Contribute?* (Neukirchener Verlag 2012); and *God the Revealed: Christology* (Eerdmans, 2013). In 2019, he delivered the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh.

**Dr. Amos Yong** is Dean of the School of Mission and Theology and Professor of Theology and Mission at Fuller Seminary. He earned his PhD in religious studies and theology from Boston University. He has authored and edited numerous volumes on the Holy Spirit and Pentecostal theology, including *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Baker Academic, 2005); *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination* (Eerdmans, 2011); *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Eerdmans, 2011); *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity* (Baylor University Press, 2014); and *Mission after Pentecost: The Witness of the Spirit from Genesis to Revelation* (Baker Academic, 2019).