



# WHO WE WILL BECOME:

A Survey of Children's Public Lives in Christian Thought

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Many of our most basic social institutions, like marriage and family, are far less centred on the needs of children than in the past and are increasingly stretched and reconfigured to meet the desires of adults. Too often policy-makers respond by codifying notions of children's autonomy that estrange children from the natural relationships that should nurture and protect them.

How might the Christian tradition inform a healthy vision of children's participation in family and community life?

This is a summary version of our full report titled "Who We Will Become: A Survey of Children's Public Lives in Christian Thought." The purpose of the report is to inform our understanding of the Christian tradition,

identify sources for further study and reflection, and raise questions regarding our engagement with issues concerning children in public life. We acknowledge that the report is a broad survey of themes and that space limits our engagement with the rich and diverse history of thinkers and traditions within the Christian faith.

The full report provides an overview of the themes around children found in Scripture, and a survey of the history of children in Christian thought. It explores the nature of children and the relationship between children, their families, and their communities within the Christian tradition. Finally, the report considers entry points for discussion between Christian thought and contemporary theories informing children's rights and advocacy for children's autonomy in public life.



Jesus Blessing the Children, Gustave Dore

In the Gospels, Jesus welcomed children as participants in the reign of God. The humble posture of children serves as a model of spiritual humility. Serving children is a faith-forming act and a vocational calling of family.<sup>3</sup>

## CHILDREN IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Historically theologians have addressed children in relationship to family and the church, rather than specifically reflecting on childhood itself. However, there is much to explore regarding children in the Christian tradition.

### CHILDREN IN SCRIPTURE

The treatment of children in Jewish and Christian communities distinguished these societies from the surrounding cultures. Children are image bearers of God, possessing full human value and dignity. As a gift from God, children were understood to be a sign of his blessing. Parents are endowed with the responsibility from God to care for and instruct children in faith.

Another observation by some theologians is that the triune relationship between father, mother, and child reflects the triunity of the Godhead.<sup>1</sup> Further, theologians note the significance of the incarnation of Christ as an infant as a sign of the dignity and value of children.<sup>2</sup>

### EARLY CHRISTIANITY AND THE CHURCH FATHERS

The treatment of children in the early church stands in stark contrast to the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. Compelled by love of neighbour, early Christians advocated for children as fully human, image bearers of God. In contrast, children in Greco-Roman culture occupied low social standing in an era when abortion, infanticide, and abandonment were common practice.<sup>4</sup>

The early church fathers viewed children as a reflection of moral simplicity. It was St. Augustine who firmly articulated the impact of original sin in children, although he

1 Bruce A. Ware, “The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: The Trinity as Theological Foundation for Family Ministry,” *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2011): <https://www.sbts.edu/family/2011/10/10/the-father-the-son-and-the-holy-spirit-the-trinity-as-theological-foundation-for-family-ministry/>.

2 W.A. Strange, *Children in the Early Church: Children in the Ancient World, the New Testament and the Early Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

3 Judith M. Gundry-Volf, “The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 29–60.

4 O.M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, trans. Brian McNeil (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

acknowledged a progressive accountability for sin as children matured.

Family was the key institution in the formation of virtue. St. John Chrysostom viewed the family as a little church, charging parents with the vocation of revealing the image of God in children. He argued that parents were responsible for developing faith and virtue in their offspring.<sup>5</sup>

## THE MIDDLE AGES

St. Thomas Aquinas embraced and modified the doctrine of original sin in children. Aquinas could be considered more optimistic than earlier thinkers, as he affirmed original sin but emphasized the role of divine grace in completing rather than correcting nature.<sup>6</sup>

In the Middle Ages, childhood was conceptualized in seven-year segments based on the developmental ability to reason. The first seven years of life were considered infancy, while childhood encompassed the next seven years, from ages eight to fourteen. Puberty and the maturing capacity to reason elevated what we would now consider adolescence into majority status with increased autonomy and responsibility.

Aquinas argued that the significance of the parent-child relationship was derived from

natural law. Rooted in love, parents and children had unique obligations toward one another, with parents obligated to meet material needs and guide the formation of virtues. In return, children were expected to honour their parents with their obedience.<sup>7</sup>

Aquinas argued that parents were the primary authority over children, which superseded the authority of the community. At the same time, parental authority was exercised within robust relational networks. While not all sacraments were open to children, baptism came to mediate the relationship between family and the church. Baptism also connected children to the broader society through the institution of the church. In this way, baptism was not only a sacrament but also a vehicle of social connection.<sup>8</sup>

## THE REFORMATION

The doctrine of human depravity motivated a renewed focus on spiritual formation among some Protestant Reformers. The pre-puberty years were understood to be a critical time for intellectual, spiritual, and moral development, an urgency that motivated Martin Luther among others to advocate for the universal provision of education.

Parents continued to be responsible for the formation of children. Luther identified parents as apostles and bishops in the home, who were

5 Vigen Guroian, “The Ecclesial Family: John Chrysostom on Parenthood and Children,” in Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*, 61–77.

6 Cristina L.H. Traina, “A Person in the Making: Thomas Aquinas on Children and Childhood,” in Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*, 103–33.

7 Traina, “A Person in the Making”; David H. Jensen, “Adopted into the Family: Toward a Theology of Parenting,” *Journal of Childhood and Religion* 1, no. 2 (2010): <http://childhoodandreligion.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/JensenApril2010.pdf>.

8 Janet L. Nelson, “Parents, Children, and the Church in the Earlier Middle Ages (Presidential Address),” in *The Church and Childhood*, ed. Diana Wood, Studies in Church History 31 (Oxford: Ecclesiastical History Society, 1994).

to ensure family worship and devotion. Fathers were expected to take a more direct role with very young children, previously considered the domain of mothers.<sup>9</sup>

The church encouraged parents in their vocation, but also provided spiritual formation through catechesis as a contribution to the common good.<sup>10</sup> One of the motivating factors was the importance of raising children to be productive citizens. An emphasis among Reformers on establishing distinctive religious and political communities started with the proper formation of children. Christian thinkers understood the important role of families in creating vibrant societies.

### EARLY MODERN CHRISTIANITY

The Enlightenment reconfigured the concept of childhood. Children were viewed as morally untainted but vulnerable to corruption. New consideration was given to children's autonomy. Additionally, social and economic changes altered the role of families and community in the lives of children.

The Puritans among other religious movements chafed against these shifting philosophies. The Puritans remained committed to the doctrine of original sin but brought renewed focus on the nature of children, as evidenced by Jonathan Edwards, who preached directly to children.

Children were held up as exemplars of virtue and faith, and were full participants in the revivals on both sides of the Atlantic.

Although the Christian home remained a central influence, a greater portion of education occurred outside the home during this period. Christian reformers focused on universal education, particularly for the poor. As educational institutions increased, the role of formation became a shared venture between home and school. As the eighteenth century progressed, the state became increasingly involved in the provision of formal education.

### LATE MODERN CHRISTIANITY

Significant cultural and economic shifts continued to reshape childhood. The Romantic idealization of the nature of children, particularly among the upper classes, created a sentimental view of childhood.<sup>11</sup> The study of child behaviour emerged as greater emphasis was placed on the influence of home environments.

Christian educators such as St. John Bosco (1815–1888), Charlotte Mason (1842–1923), and Maria Montessori (1870–1952) profoundly shaped the understanding of the child and were innovators in education. At the same time, others such as John Dewey (1859–1952) advocated for distinctively secular visions of personhood that remain influential in education today.<sup>12</sup>

9 Jane E. Strohl, "The Child in Luther's Theology: 'For What Purpose Do We Older Folks Exist, Other Than to Care for . . . the Young?'" in Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*, 134–59.

10 Jeffrey R. Watt, "Calvinism, Childhood, and Education: The Evidence from the Genevan Consistory," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 439–56.

11 Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005).

12 Ellen Roderick, "'Living in the Condition of Love's Gift': Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Anthropology of Childhood and Its Significance for the Form of Human Freedom" (ThD diss., Washington, DC, The Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family at the Catholic University of America, 2014), 52.

Industrialization among other factors widened the gap between the private household and the public sphere. A growing emphasis on child welfare was influenced by Christian philanthropy. Despite this Christian involvement, secular social institutions were a growing presence in childhood.

In summary, some broad themes can be identified within the Christian tradition. The inherent value and dignity of children as image bearers of God has compelled Christians to promote child well-being, including protection from neglect and harm, as well as literacy and universal education. Theologians have debated the nature and extent of sin within children, but agree on the importance of instilling virtue for the good of children and society. Finally, there are various understandings of the interrelationship between family, church, and state, often influenced by cultural forces. Yet the tradition affirms the primary role of family in the lives of children, with church and state serving a supporting role.

## CHILDREN IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Academic interest in children and their well-being increased during the twentieth century. Cross-disciplinary work focused on child development and the welfare of children. Internationally the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1998) symbolized decades of focused attention on children's welfare.

As scholars in other disciplines were doing, theologians and religious scholars began to



reconsider children within their own fields of study.

Political discourse during the latter half of the twentieth century in the United States witnessed diverse and sometimes conflicting approaches to child welfare. University of Chicago practical theologian Don Browning sought to navigate this discourse by critically examining historical Christian thinking on children and childhood. One outcome of this project was a book of essays edited by theologian Marcia Bunge called *The Child in Christian Thought* (2001). This substantial work clarified and challenged previous conceptions of Christianity's view of children, including how the faith has understood the spiritual nature of children. The book applied historical Christian approaches to understanding parental, community, and state responsibilities toward children.

An adjacent project at the Center for Law and Religion in the School of Law at Emory University resulted in a book project edited by Patrick McKinley Brennan called *The Vocation of the Child* (2008).<sup>13</sup> The project applied a Christian lens to the exploration of the interconnected relationships of responsibility between children, family, community, and the state. The project engaged the contemporary focus on children's rights and other aspects of law and policy.

13 Patrick McKinley Brennan, ed., *The Vocation of the Child* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

These contemporary projects grappled with notions of children's autonomy that have grounded much of the conversation on children's welfare over the last few decades. There remain complex challenges for Christian thinkers to navigate as public policy continues to explore the place of children in society.

## CHILDREN IN OUR CULTURAL MOMENT

Children have always existed in a world centred on adults. Certainly, the welfare of children has improved over the last two thousand years. Christianity has contributed to this progress. The modern focus on autonomy and increasing secularization has provided thoughtful Christians with new challenges. As the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child revealed, contemporary debates grapple with the role of family, community, and state actors in the lives of children. As we write in the full version of our report, "Contemporary debates contend with the notion of child autonomy within the context of these structures. Greater emphasis has been placed on the protective and choice rights of children. How might understanding children as image bearers inform our understanding of autonomy and rights? How should we conceive of the relationship between freedom, autonomy, and dignity?<sup>14</sup> What are the implications for understanding children in relationship with family and society? And how should we consider the interrelationship between these actors?"

We believe these questions have important implications for public-policy issues such as education, child welfare, and supports for families and children in the early years. We seek to apply the foundational claim that children are image bearers of God, possessing full human dignity, to pressing contemporary issues, and to considering the role of families, social institutions, public structures, and faith communities in serving and welcoming children.



<sup>14</sup> Bennett and Neil argue that dignity is inherent in the human person and challenge contemporary notions of dignity defined as autonomy. For a further discussion on freedom, autonomy, and dignity see Andrew Bennett and Aaron Neil, "Who Are You? Reaffirming Human Dignity," Cardus, October 28, 2019, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/law/reports/who-are-you-reaffirming-human-dignity/>.



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