



CHILD THEOLOGY A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

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CHILD THEOLOGY – A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

Over many years reflecting on the nature of theology, I have come to accept the view that theology is an exploratory rather than an explanatory discipline, and that its pursuit requires a capacity to adopt “inside” and “outside” perspectives, to balance subjectivity and objectivity, to be critic and visionary.

This article attempts that kind of oscillating balance, coming as it does from one latterly drawn into the discussion but with no long-standing engagement in the Child Theology Movement (CTM). It aims to be creatively critical, and to make a useful contribution towards determining the significance of this project within the spectrum of theological enquiries. It will consider child theology (CT) in respect of

- its parallels with, and differences from, other contextual theologies;
- the biblical foundation on which it claims to rest; and
- its potential as a critical and visionary project, capable of illuminating and reinforcing the deepest theological insights of the Christian tradition.

CHILD THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT

... all our talk of God has to meet the test of the child in the midst. As the poor transformed theology in Liberation Theology, and as women transform it in feminist theologies, so in Child Theology it is the impact of the child that transforms theology.¹

The analogy with contextual theologies is here explicit and, as has sometimes been the case with its precursors, the whole idea of CT may, therefore, provoke anxieties about sectional or single issue theology. It is clear, however, that those involved in the CTM are not narrowly focused on one exclusive aspect of theology, but rather concerned with theology as such, sensitive to it as a discipline to be pursued from many complementary angles, while maintaining that that comprehensiveness needs to include the largely neglected aspect of the child. Thus, CT is a further lens for exploring theology itself. It is not the training you need for children’s ministry, nor a theology of childhood. It arose out of a concern to find

deeper theological roots for the massive activism of Christians engaged with children at risk throughout the world, and is parallel to other contextual theologies in highlighting the impact of the child on theology, as the opening quotation indicates. The child becomes a clue to particular theological insights.

It is worth considering, then, the ways in which espousing this further lens for exploring theology is similar to, and different from, other contextual theologies. Each contextual theology has arisen from a particular social location and has offered a critique of conventional ways of doing theology. Liberation theology began the trend with its “option for the poor”; working in “base communities” it discerned in Scripture God on the side of the poor, thus empowering the oppressed and challenging society, as well as the church, with this particular biblical hermeneutic. But the question from the beginning was how far its starting point was Marxism rather than the Bible. The impact of feminism further radicalised the question about origins with its critique of the patriarchal assumptions of the Bible itself, not to mention ecclesiastical organisations: what was the basic source of these theological enterprises? Had (postmodern) secular movements, arising from the struggle for equal rights around gender, ethnicity, disability, for example, infiltrated theology?

CT also has its base communities, and its social location, not least through its commitment always to involve practitioners – in other words, people actually engaged in working with children. It feels contemporary pressures from the secular humanist values of aid agencies, from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, from the plight of children across the globe – their poverty, exploitation, trafficking, etc. There is clearly a parallel social location. But isn’t there, perhaps, a less sharp critique of so-called traditional theology than that mounted by liberation or feminist theologians? The Bible does after all appear to endorse patriarchy and slavery, and it does tend to regard poverty and disability as God’s punishment. Thus, theology has had to respond to deserved critique of the social consequences of traditions apparently validated by Scripture. So how far does CT have a parallel critical edge? For all the work on ambivalent attitudes to children in Scripture, tradition and history, the biggest issue among participants in the movement seems to be a perceived neglect of the child’s place in theological enquiry, together with an ongoing sense that CT is failing to get a hearing in the theological establishment – in this, there is a certain irony to which we will return.

The use of the word “impact” in that initial quotation

¹ Keith White and Haddon Williams, “Our response,” in *Toddling to the Kingdom: Child Theology at Work in the Church*, ed. John Collier (London: The Child Theology Movement, 2009), 19.

alerts us to another important way in which CT differs: the poor, blacks, women and many with disabling impairments become their own advocates, demanding that society and/or the church change, become more inclusive and recognise their rights. The child is not in the same way its own protagonist. The binary adult/child parallels others, poor/rich, male/female, black/white, etc.; but the project of CT would appear to be an adult undertaking, and thus akin to men doing feminist theology, whites doing black theology, able-bodied people presuming to do theology for those with disabilities: I have heard not only blacks protest at whites trying to do Black Theology for them, but also articulate persons with disabilities protesting at those without impairments projecting their standpoint onto them, not to mention disabling them with their charity. Self-advocacy is important for most contextual theologies, yet how is the voice of the child to be primary without exploitation?

Given this fundamental difference from other contextual theologies, is CT possible at all? Can it avoid projecting all kinds of notions onto the meaning of the child? In the reports of CT conferences, many projections can be identified: of these suggestions “innocence” and “play” appear inevitable, “dependence” and “vulnerability” natural, “trust” and “hope” perhaps less obvious and more significant. Necessarily there is frequent debate about the voice of the child and how it is to be heard. This closely parallels debates in organisations working with persons with learning disabilities: though often thought to be politically correct, it is actually highly problematic and a kind of tokenism to insist on someone with learning disabilities sitting as a member of committees with agendas shaped by the responsibilities of adults for the proper running of helping agencies. So too for a supposedly representative child. CT, then, raises questions similar to those posed by persons with such profound disabilities that they cannot have “impact” except by their existence, their need for protection, their utter dependence. Others have to be their advocate, to interpret their cries, articulate their needs. Those doing CT require appropriate ways of speaking of and for the child, if the child is to have an impact on theology. My sense is that those involved in the movement are sensitive to these issues, and endeavour to pursue their project responsibly.

And significantly this has meant that discussion of the Rights of the Child has taken an interesting turn.

Theologians, including me, have been critical of the discourse of rights on the ground that it conspires with the individualistic and humanist consensus of Western capitalist societies. In the context of child rights, however, what becomes crystal clear is that the legislative frameworks from which the Rights discourse ultimately derives is really about the responsibilities of society to ensure protection. The truth is that that is also the case with respect to race, gender, sexuality and disability. Society accords rights to particular named groups/minorities when it takes responsibility for ensuring they are not harmed, abused, exploited, denied access, disenfranchised, etc., but given dignity and enabled to fulfil their potential. This, I suggest, is an important insight into the fundamentally mutual relationship implied by the discourse of Rights and Responsibilities. The proper location of this language is a community in which everyone recognises that all persons need to participate fully for the common good of all. Ultimately, it is about belonging rather than exclusion; it’s not so much about self-advocacy, or projecting inappropriately onto others, but about becoming advocates for one another in an appropriate way. As the proponents of CT recognise, what is at stake is theological engagement with awareness of the child in the midst, not necessarily with a literal child in an adult world, nor necessarily with a child’s voice amplified to dominate the discourse. As in the case of the person with profound learning disabilities, it takes sensitive interpretation for the discernment of truths neither child nor person with such disabilities could possibly articulate for themselves, insights that emerge from receiving gifts from unlikely givers, recognising their vocation.²

It is perhaps from that kind of discernment that those apparently missing elements of challenge and critique, whether of society, the church or theology, might emerge. For taking a cue from such contexts can offer a reappraisal of what is really valuable in human life, drawing attention to the way in which those with profound disabilities, or indeed desperately vulnerable children, often seem to find the most extraordinary resilience, even smiles, laughter and joy, in the midst of circumstances most of us regard as intolerable – they live the Beatitudes! The literature of the L’Arche Communities and the insights of Jean Vanier demonstrate the importance of simple yet transformative interactions as so-called competent carers discover a recognition of their own vulnerability and deep joy in mutual relationship with those who are

² See the “wise sayings” that emerged from the first theologians’ meeting at L’Arche, listed in *Encounter with Mystery: Reflections on L’Arche and Living with Disability*, ed. Frances Young (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997), xi; and Frances Young, *Arthur’s Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability* (London: SPCK, 2014).

profoundly other.³ As for children, Benigno P. Beltran, in *Faith and Struggle on Smokey Mountain*,⁴ describes his horror and fear as he went to minister to the scavengers on that massive garbage dump in the Philippines and then goes on:

But in the end, I realized that even if I was constantly afraid, I did not have to be dominated by my fear.

The children were something else. They laughed with such heartbreaking sincerity that I forgot my terrors for a moment, their smiles like tender raindrops falling upon a parched earth. I was never afraid of them, even when those with terrifying skin diseases touched my hand to their foreheads. I was expecting that the horrors of living in a garbage dump would be visible in the children, that the squalor would sculpt their faces, chisel their bodies into angles of rage and dread, and paint a morbid sheen of desolation in their eyes. Instead, I was surrounded by smiling faces, their eyes calm pools in which were reflected the depths of a gentleness like a flight of butterflies in the moonlight. These were the same kind of children's faces I saw in the dump sites of Mumbai and Johannesburg; among the poor in Anacostia and Washington, DC; in Roxbury, Boston; in Nairobi, Kenya, and in many other slum areas I visited.

The gentleness of the gaze of these children and their smiles condemn us all.

We may surely add to that that they are a sign for us of what is true worth. For vulnerable adults along with children offer a challenge to the values of our society. Life for the majority is oriented towards success, achievement in business, academia, sport or show business; even the Paralympics conspire with such aspirations. From relationship with those who cannot compete, however, come the true human values that Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). The report from the CT meeting in Quito voiced one very significant shift. Noting how stories from Christian projects were told in terms of the secularised framework of success and progress, it suggested that this contained many dangers: life continues, what about future failure? Now, it said, we are looking for stories of virtue, courage, forgiveness, reconciliation. To do theology with the realities of the vulnerability embodied in child or person with profound disabilities is to offer a critique of the success values that dominate our culture, and inevitably

infiltrate the church. It is this, of course, which makes the movement's desire for acceptance by theological institutions ironic: it betrays its own possible capture by the need for success in achieving influence.

There is one other way in which CT goes further than other contextual theologies: it embodies a call to identify with the child. What that might mean is a recurring subject of discussion, but here we just note that a call to identify with the poor or the marginalised involves a certain artificiality – the prince pretending to be a pauper is a classic folktale motif, but the prince can always escape! With respect to those of another gender, ethnicity, race or religious commitment, the claim to identification might likewise be regarded as bogus, despite our common humanity, the possibility of empathy and the potential of creative imagination. Of course, imagination and empathy can enable people to have some sense of identity with others, not least a compassionate sense of solidarity with those less fortunate themselves, but how much more in the case of children! – for we have all been children and have memories of experiencing childhood. The Gospels themselves suggest that only by changing and becoming like children can anyone enter the kingdom of heaven, where the greatest is the one who humbles himself and becomes like the child placed in the midst by Jesus (Matt. 18). In large measure CT has been an extended meditation on that incident. So let us turn to the second strand of this paper.

THE CHILD IN THE MIDST

The story of Jesus placing a child in the midst runs through the conversation and publications of the CT movement. It is a “theological clue”.⁵ In Matthew's version (18:1–5) the disciples approach Jesus and ask who would be the greater one in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus calls a child, sets him/her in the midst of them and says,

Truly I say to you, if you do not turn and become as children, you certainly will not enter the kingdom. Whoever lowers him/herself as this child, he/she is the greater one in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in my name, receives me.

The incident is reported with slight variations in the three Synoptic Gospels, and it is worth drawing out the similarities and differences found in the three versions. All three Gospels tell the story in response to the disciples' enquiry or dispute about who would be the greater in the kingdom. In Mark (9:33–37) and Luke

³ The L'Arche Communities were founded by Jean Vanier in the 1960s. People commit themselves to living in community with those with learning disabilities. Rooted in the Christian faith, these communities are now worldwide, ecumenical and multifaith. Jean Vanier's writings, too many to list, are regarded as spiritual classics by his readers.

⁴ Benigno P. Beltran, *Faith and Struggle on Smokey Mountain: Hope for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 34.

⁵ Collier (ed.), *Toddling to the Kingdom*, 22.

(9:46–48) what Jesus says focuses on receiving one of such children in his name as a way of receiving him (that is, Jesus himself), and so of receiving the One who sent him. Matthew alone speaks of the need to become like children and to humble oneself, otherwise one cannot enter the kingdom, thus drawing out a more obvious response to the context (that is, the dispute about greatness). Elsewhere, and not in relation to the story of “the child in the midst”, Mark and Luke speak similarly of receiving the kingdom as a child otherwise it is not possible to enter it, and that implies becoming childlike, as suggested by Matthew. The implications of these two themes, “receiving the child” and “becoming like a child”, have dominated the discussions of the CT movement. Many facets and potential meanings have been drawn out, especially in the book *Entry Point* by Haddon Willmer and Keith J White.⁶ Their discussion of the implicit critique of the disciples vying for position in the kingdom is subtle and nuanced, as it faces up to contemporary discomfiture with humility as an ideal, and the false romanticism of the idea that adults can or should return to childhood. The child as a sign, pointing to key aspects of discipleship, as well as the unexpected nature of the kingdom, is associated theologically with both Jesus and the cross. Taking their discussion as read, I will here reinforce a couple of points, and offer a further insight into the significance of this key story.

THE “UPSIDE-DOWN” WORLD OF GOD’S KINGDOM

The sign of the child teases the disciples’ assumptions, points to a reversal of normal values and says something about the “upside-down” world of God’s kingdom. Particularly in the context of the disciples’ desire for status, it upsets usual expectations in pretty much every human society and certainly traditional societies prior to what has been called our child-focused age. Nor is this the only instance in the Gospel material, or indeed in the New Testament writings in general, where hints of an upside-down world are to be found – for the first shall be last and the last first (Matt. 20:16). There is much in the epistles about being humble and preferring others, classically Philippians 2:1–4, while passages in the Gospels speak of becoming a servant of all (Matt. 20:26), and urge the poor, lowly and downtrodden to come up higher (Mark 1:43–44; Luke 14:7–14). The classic text is, of course, the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1–11) where it is the poor and humble, the merciful and mourners, peacemakers and persecuted who are blessed. Whether we emphasise receiving the child or becoming a child, the fundamental point would seem to be about relinquishing

the need for status, being open to those who society generally ignores and puts down, and ensuring that a sense of vocation does not turn into an ego trip. The kingdom of God is a challenge to hierarchies, and the fruits of the Spirit transform social relations with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22).

In my experience, a contemporary sign of the upside-down world of the kingdom is found in the L’Arche Communities, where people commit themselves to living in community with those with learning disabilities, the most disadvantaged and excluded group in most human societies, discovering there that they receive as much as they give – rather than top-down charity, there is profound mutuality. Nor is this sentimentality – it is worked out in the hard reality of physical caring, of washing, dressing, feeding, of dealing with challenging behaviour and facing vulnerability and mortality. Such has been my own experience through 45 years of caring for a son with profound learning disabilities. Blessed are those who mourn; it would be dishonest not to confess the years of deep mourning – not just the initial loss of what my son might have been had the placenta not failed to deliver the required nourishment and oxygen for his normal development in the womb, but the succession of losses consequent upon his failure to learn and develop according to the normal pattern. Yet those years have also been years of abundant blessing. Theological motifs may arise from such experiences that prove parallel to the key insights deriving from CT, though differentiation is important:⁷ arrested development may seem like permanent childhood, but the reality is actually an important warning against simplistic ideas of remaining or returning to a childlike state, as is the second childhood of old age. Yet CT, along with the writings of Jean Vanier and my own exploration of my son’s vocation, significantly discovers the same fundamental features in the Gospel record of Jesus’s teaching: the upside-down world of God’s kingdom.

THE SIGN OF THE CHILD AS A PARADIGM FOR THE CHURCH IN MATTHEW

In Matthew’s Gospel the story of “the child in the midst” heads up a chapter (Matt. 18) that figures as the fourth great discourse, or sayings collection, of the five that punctuate this Gospel, the five often being regarded as significant in paralleling the five books of Moses. This particular discourse seems to be a collection of material concerned with the proper ordering of the church

⁶ Haddon Willmer and Keith J. White, *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18* (London: WTL Publications, 2013).

⁷ I appreciate Haddon Willmer’s claiming my writings about Arthur as CT, not least because Arthur is, of course, my child, and will remain so for as long as he or I shall live. But I must also voice this caveat: it is not right to characterise adults with learning disabilities as trapped in lifelong childhood.

community, the word “church” appearing twice in 18:17, uniquely here in the Gospel tradition apart from Matthew 16:18, where Jesus promises to build his church on Simon, renamed Peter, the rock.

The discourse in chapter 18 is introduced with the passage quoted earlier, and then constructed from (i) a group of sayings about not causing offence to, nor despising, one of the least of the believers, with further sayings about the problem of offences (“scandals” or stumbling blocks); (ii) a parable about seeking the one lost sheep and rejoicing over it more than the 99; (iii) a group of statements about dealing with sins and disagreements within the church; and (iv) Peter’s question about forgiveness, the challenge to forgive 70 times seven, backed up with another parable. I suggest that this context is significant for understanding Matthew’s take on the story. It is fundamentally about the church as a society in which relationships are ordered in a way that is profoundly different from most human social groups, and which is grounded in the values embodied in the kingdom of heaven announced by Jesus, the upside-down world of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. Not only does all this imply an attitude of sitting light to one’s own claims or rights, but it suggests a level of mutual regard and of expectant receiving from one another, with openness and respect, not unlike the attitude enjoined by Paul in Philippians 2. It also expands the emphasis on discipleship in *Entry Point* to consideration of communion in community.

THE CHILD AS ESCHATOLOGICAL SIGN

To receive the child is a way of receiving Jesus himself – indeed in Mark and Luke it is a way of receiving “the One who sent me”. Why might this be significant? What I want to suggest is that the action is more of a prophetic sign than has perhaps been realised hitherto.

This Gospel passage is perhaps best understood in relation to Isaiah 11:6–9. Following on from the messianic prediction of a stem from David’s royal line, a sprout from an old tree stump, who will rule with justice and integrity, these verses sketch an extraordinary picture of a new natural order, where wolves and sheep live together in peace, calves and lion cubs feed together, and a little child shall lead them. The lion will eat straw like an ox and a baby can play alongside the den of a poisonous snake.

The child surely represents new creation, and so the sign should be read in the light of material such as the parable of the mustard seed – the tiniest of all seeds but with potential to produce a great tree in which birds can

roost: indeed, the very tree of life in the symbolism of the Ancient Near East. To welcome the child is to discern the signs of new creation beyond anything expected, and it is this vision that puts the disciples’ competitive self-interest into damning perspective.

In other words this key passage has eschatological ramifications, and the sayings that immediately follow in Matthew may signify the potential for the Eden narrative to be replayed without the Fall in the life of each little one, with dire warnings for those who might contribute to that not happening. For the child represents the return to Paradise and the renewal of the whole earth. This reinforces the challenge offered to the ways of the world, and to the assumptions that the disciples have about success and power. But it also suggests something rather different from a focus on the particular child, or the average child, or the special child, or children in general. The child is first and foremost a sign pointing beyond itself.

I suggest that this approach differentiates CT from other contextual theologies, and aligns it with the deep critique of the ways of the world that appears in many different guises in Christian theology, despite the fact that Christian history has rarely embodied that critique. Matthew’s instinct to place the sign at the top of a collection of sayings sketching proper relations in the church tends to obscure the eschatological overtones, but might actually heighten the sense of “now” and “not yet”: the child, the church, the L’Arche Communities are signs pointing to a reality not yet realised. Fundamentally the key narrative for CT is about new creation and the return to Paradise.

THE CHILD IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN⁸

This is borne out, I suggest, by what happens to these traditions in the Gospel of John. In his book *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, Jean Vanier reflects on Peter’s resistance to Jesus washing his feet. He sketches out the way in which “all groups, all societies, are built on the model of a pyramid”, with the rich, powerful and intelligent on top, and immigrants, slaves, servants, unemployed, people with disabilities and illnesses excluded and marginalised. Jesus takes “the place of the person at the bottom”, but for Peter this is impossible. He does not understand that

It is an essential part of his message of love. It is the revelation that in order to enter the kingdom, we have to become like little children; we need to be “born” from on high to discover who God is and who we are called to be.⁹

⁸ For this section I am grateful for a conversation with David Ford.

⁹ Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004), 226–29.

At first sight this might jar as an import from the Synoptics into reflection on John's Gospel, but the implicit cross reference to John 3 might put a different complexion on it. The discussion with Nicodemus is almost a Johannine commentary on the child in the midst: Jesus insists that no one can enter the kingdom without being born again/from on high (the Greek word *anōthen* is ambiguous). It is one of the few places in John's Gospel where the phrase "kingdom of God" is used, and it implies an eschatological rebirth – becoming a child again. It is often noted that what replaces the kingdom in this Gospel is "eternal life" or "the life of the age to come". This eschatological life is both now and not yet, available in anticipation through water and the Spirit (implicitly through baptism), which enables new birth as God's children (John 1:12). The Johannine Gospel reminds the kingdom language, deepening the emphasis on the upside-down world, where the humility of the child (or slave – the Greek word *pais* could mean either) is modelled by Jesus himself, as indeed in the Pauline hymn in Philippians 2, which makes explicit the connection with the cross.

THE POTENTIAL OF CHILD THEOLOGY AS A CRITICAL AND VISIONARY PROJECT

Contextual theologies create binaries: poor/rich, black/white, men/women, able/disabled, etc. So child/adult? The very debates about "receiving" and "becoming" imply a transcending of the binary, and the eschatological associations just unearthed suggest that even more clearly. It is no accident, I suggest, that Jean Vanier's theological reflections on the L'Arche experience have led him not into disability theology, but into theological anthropology. That surely is where CT also leads. It is not just about the child. It is a clue to things that are absolutely fundamental to understanding humankind in Christian theology, namely complementarity, mutuality and solidarity – community and communion.

By exploring the implications of "the child in the midst" for discipleship and the cross, *Entry Point* goes some way towards discerning this. But surely we can go further. For it is this that could provide a deeper critical edge than we have found so far as we have assessed CT in relation to other contextual theologies. The upside-down world revealed by considering "the child in the midst" alongside other material in the Gospels, as well as the rest of the New Testament, not only aligns it with the feminist critique of patriarchy, which suppressed children

and slaves as well as women, but it also invites a critique of the kingdom language itself, something already occurring perhaps in the Gospel of John. The kingdom language, after all, comes from premodern societies, just as does patriarchy, and it jars with contemporary democratic assumptions. It is significant, I suggest, that the Russian Faith and Light movement uses the icon of St Menas as the centre of its simple devotional life;¹⁰ one of the oldest Coptic icons, this depicts Christ and St Menas alongside each other with Christ's arm around the shoulders of the saint, known as Jesus's friend. This, surely, is the obverse of the Christ Pantocrator that dominates Orthodox churches. It embodies the critique potentially offered to the Christendom of the past, not to mention the triumphalism endemic in some Christian circles in the present, by the upside-down world discerned in the Gospels by Jean Vanier and CT. The fact that Paul and John use the kingdom language sparingly may be precisely because it is subverted by the way of the cross, and by the insight that Jesus no longer called his followers disciples but friends (John 15:15), and washed their feet.

Such a critique has similar sharp overtones as liberation theology in that it challenges the very language of much of Scripture itself, not to mention the hierarchical and authoritarian nature of most church traditions – indeed, it calls in question the infantilising of the laity, not just women and children. But as with Jean Vanier, a critique is also offered to contemporary societies, for relationship with a child or with a person with learning disabilities challenges modern claims to individual autonomy. Human beings are fundamentally social animals, and the dependency of both child and vulnerable adult is a sharp reminder of the fundamental need for community and of the potential even for "power relations" to be transformed by mutual giving and receiving. That this is fundamental to the Gospel is an insight potentially reinforced by CT. Paradoxically it could also be applicable to the valuation of the elderly, infirm and senile – another area of concern in our fragmented modern societies. This, like childhood, is a path we all tread, but theologically it is hardly addressed. The kind of comprehensive theological anthropology demanded by CT could surely embrace second childhood as well.

CT also has the potential to challenge widespread assumptions about obedience. One of the characteristics of our postmodern outlook is that each person is free to live life as they see fit, that obedience is enslaving and passé. Quite apart from the dominance of the prime value of personal choice in a culture of individualism, this is in large part a reaction against

¹⁰ Foi et Lumière (Faith and Light) is a parallel organisation to L'Arche, also founded by Jean Vanier, with Marie-Hélène Mathieu, and emerging from a Lourdes pilgrimage in 1971. It is formed of local groups of families and friends that include persons with learning disabilities; groups meet on a regular basis for mutual support and spiritual encouragement; and like L'Arche, Faith and Light has spread around the world. For my contacts with Faith and Light in Russia, see the relevant chapter in *Arthur's Call*.

the authoritarianism embodied in the church and enshrined in Scripture. Dealing with children, however, soon reveals the fact that for their own good, learning obedience remains important – they need structure and boundaries. So does society – anarchy produces chaos, law structures relationships, so that community is made possible. Paradoxically obedience is what permits freedom. For the Epistle to the Hebrews, obedience lies at the heart of Christ’s sacrifice (Heb. 10:5–7 quoting Ps. 40:6–8), and the epistle’s call to progress from immaturity to perfection (Heb. 5:11 – 6:6) implies following in the way of Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. If Jesus “learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8), we too learn and grow through a response to life’s exigencies shaped by the same unself-regarding commitment to the love for others demanded by God’s love. Besides, Matthew’s Gospel enjoins a righteousness greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees. Thus, the New Testament as a whole points to a new covenant in which law and rules, their keeping and breaking, are rendered irrelevant, not because they are enslaving and passé, but because a change of hearts and minds delivers obedience and more. The thrust of CT points to a more balanced view of obedience as constitutive of human community and of communion with God. There is an appropriate submission to “others”, not to mention the One who is the very source of our being. And that might restore to us the value of kingdom language in relation to God.

Finally, CT has the potential to challenge widespread readings of how God relates to the world, and common understanding of the meaning of the cross. It is all too easy to see the death of Jesus as the Father punishing the Son instead of us, sinners. Punitive attitudes to child-rearing have been endemic in many cultures, but punitive behaviour would now be treated as child abuse. This should challenge certain atonement theories, not to mention some traditional “types” of the cross, such as the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Also to be challenged are assumptions about divine omnipotence,

that God is in charge, not to mention neat ways of explaining away suffering, or defending God through the philosophical sophistications of theodicy – for how can God allow the extreme suffering of some of the most vulnerable on earth, innocent children? Such enormous theological questions are implied in CT, as in Christian theology in general, and some standard answers are outlawed by taking the child into account.

An initial response to all this is implicit in *Entry Point*, and in the saying that “whoever receives one of the least of these little ones receives me and the One who sent me”. It is, indeed, the Jesus who took the way of the cross to whom the child points. The move to associate “the child in the midst” with the cross may thus seem straightforward, yet it is paradoxical. It becomes clearer, surely, when taken in association with the many pointers to the upside-down world found elsewhere, especially those provided by Paul. If Philippians 2:1–4 speaks of preferring others and humbling oneself, the following verses ground that in having the mind of Christ Jesus, who did not think equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself, became a servant and was obedient unto death, even death on a cross. 1 Corinthians 1 dares to see in the cross the foolishness of God, insisting God’s wisdom is other than human wisdom. The whole story of Christ embodies the Isaianic words, “My ways are not your ways, neither are my thoughts your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8). Ultimately the only theodicy in the Christian tradition is to be found in the cross, while the only atonement is God’s loving action in Christ to recreate a gone-wrong world and establish a covenant that truly turns much conventional human behaviour on its head. The new creation in Christ is an upside-down world, glimpsed in part by those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, a world into which we will all be led by a little child. Thus, CT may be both critical and visionary.

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