

What's theology got to do with children's welfare?

The 2013 Edward Rudolf Lecture

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19 September 2013

Introduction: What is theology?

I'm tempted to begin this lecture with a game of word association. What, I wonder, is the first word that comes into your head when I say 'theology'?

One American theologian played this game with his student class and his congregation. The words that came up in response to 'theology' included 'boring,' 'self-satisfied,' 'otherworldly,' 'heavy,' and 'irrelevant.' And that was just from people in a Christian college and a church!

If that's the view of theology inside the church – that it's something obscure and irrelevant to daily life and practice – is even less flattering. In the secular media, to say that something is 'theological' is another way of saying it's irrelevant. (If you want to say something is largely irrelevant, you might say it's 'academic'. If you want to say it's totally irrelevant, you say it's 'theological'.)

So what does theology have to do with children's well-being? Before we can answer that question, we need to spend a few minutes considering what exactly theology is. Just as sociology is the study of our social behaviour as humans and psychology is the study of our mental functions, so the-ology is quite literally the study of God. Speaking of God is a daunting and dangerous activity. Because God is so far beyond our understanding, and because humans have such an extraordinary capacity for projection and for delusion, it is only God's self-disclosure that makes theology possible.

Christians believe God's disclosure is personal- he meets humanity face-to-face. In Jesus of Nazareth, God has become flesh, at a particular point of history, and in a particular social group. As Ken Leech observes, in the first-century

Ninety per cent of the population of Galilee were peasants. These oppressed peasants were 'the people' who, according to the gospels, heard Jesus gladly. The burden of taxation was the central economic fact of life, and led to class conflict with the priestly

aristocracies, so much so that in AD 66 rebels burnt the record of debts in the Temple.

There was high unemployment, with many looking for work, and the violence went far beyond Herod's slaughter of innocent children. It was out of this deeply disturbed climate of alienation, upheaval and resistance that the 'marginal Jew' called Jesus came. The climate of colonial rule, oppressive taxation, accumulating debt and bankruptcy, forced migration and revolutionary uprisings, formed the background to Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God.

Too often in theology, we move focus entirely on what Jesus and his disciples taught, without noticing this extraordinary fact about who and where they actually were. How the world looks depends on where you are standing, and Jesus stood with, among – not merely for – the poorest of his age. Where he stood is part of what he reveals.

No other books of the time are written in such popular, common Greek as the Gospels. None are so focused on the 'multitude' (ochlos). The Gospels are written from a unique social perspective, precisely because the world looks different from the perspective of the poorest and most vulnerable.

Jesus' own teaching emphasises the importance of this perspective. In his words and in his deeds, he places the youngest and the poorest at the heart of the Kingdom. He tells his disciples that when they welcome children and when they care for those who lack food or shelter, they are welcoming and caring for him (Matthew 18.5, 25.34-40). But he goes further than this. He suggests that if we are to speak of God – to do theology, as it were – we must adopt their perspective. In Matthew 11, he prays:

I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.

This is why Christian theology must pay particular attention to the perspective of children and young people, and indeed of all who are on the margins of society.

This same point, about the method of theology, the vantage-point from which it is done, is one which our new Pope has been making with characteristic energy and force. In a recent sermon, Francis warned against the 'gentrification of the heart' that comes when wealthier Christians are detached from the experience of their poorest brothers and sisters. In his words, theology is not something we can 'discuss calmly over tea' – rather it must emerge from, and speak into, this context of struggle and injustice.

Now, whatever might have come up in a game of word association, faithful Christian theology cannot be 'self-satisfied' or 'otherworldly.' When we speak of God, we are speaking of someone whom we meet in Jesus, a 'marginal Jew' who lived under military occupation, in a family that fled as refugees to Egypt – a family that knew both material poverty and immediate physical insecurity.

From the exodus of the Hebrew slaves to the life of the church in Corinth, from the cry of the poor in the Psalms to the first reader of the Letter of St James, God's action is seen with greatest clarity by those in greatest need. As St Paul writes to the Corinthians:

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. (1 Cor. 1.26-7)

Theology and children's voices

In the summer, the Children's Society and the Contextual Theology Centre published a collection of essays on theology and child poverty. Called *The Heart of the Kingdom*, these essays begin with the experience of the youngest and most deprived in our society. They bring that experience into dialogue with the Christian revelation. The purpose of this dialogue deeply practical: to see what theology has to say about the well-being of England's poorest children, and to explore what action is therefore needed.

The first chapter, by Tess Ridge, focuses on these children's testimony. Its content echoes that of earlier research by the Children's Society. There is no substitute for hearing this testimony, for itself. We hear the voices of Kim and Martin talking about the way poverty places them on the edge of their social groups:

I'm worried about what people will think of me, like they think I am sad or something.

[My classmates] go into town and go swimming and that, and they play football and they go to other places and I can't go... because some of them cost money.

And, in stark contrast to the narrative of feckless scrounging, we hear the way children are forced to take far more responsibility than they ought – the way they seek to shield their parents from the impact poverty is having. Here is Courtney:

Well I don't like asking Mum for money that much so I try not to... I just don't really ask about it...It's not that I'm scared it's just that I feel bad for wanting it. I don't know, sounds stupid, but, like sometimes I save up my school dinner money and I don't eat at school and then I can save it up and have more money. Don't tell her that!

The testimony of these children reinforces a key finding of *The Good Childhood Report*, produced by The Children's Society a few years earlier. This report, the fruit of many thousands of conversations with children and young people, found that both their central concern and the factor with the greatest impact on their well-being was relationship. All too often, discussions about child poverty become polarised and

unproductive debates: debates between those (usually on the right of politics) who emphasise the importance of family relationships and personal responsibility and those (usually on the left) who emphasise the importance of economic and material conditions. The testimony of children and young people re-integrates what we adults so often pull apart: they speak of the interplay between these social and economic factors. And research bears this out. Economic and social exclusion are connected.

To take one concrete example, research by UNICEF shows the importance of parents spending time with their children. Although Britain remains one of Europe's wealthier countries, a UNICEF report shows us to be the country in which the average child has the least amount of undivided attention from a parent or carer. Churches and mosques have played a central role in Citizens UK's Living Wage Campaign because they understand the link (which UNICEF has also highlighted) between low pay and parents having too little time for their children.

In my first parish (a founding member of London Citizens) we heard testimony from parents who had to make the agonising choice between having enough time for their children and having enough money. It is an agonising choice because (as Tess Ridge's work shows) each of these choices has an impact on the child's relationships, whether in the home or among their peers. Relationships matter more than money, certainly. But the way money is distributed has a profound impact on relationships.

Embodying love: the message of the Bible

The message of these children and young people finds a striking echo in the Scriptures. For in the Bible too, we find that relationships are the primary focus. Once again, the use and misuse of wealth is a key ethical issue, precisely because of its impact on the way we relate to one another.

At the heart of both the Torah and the Gospels is a vision of relationship – of human beings called to love of God and neighbour. The Bible takes our material nature seriously. In its teaching on both personal and economic relationships, the central question is how our physical interactions are going to embody faithfulness, generosity and love. We can exploit one another's bodies – viewing other people simply as instruments of our own pleasure and power – or our physical interactions can help us grow into the love of God.

Those who care for children know that love has a physical, material cost. My wife and I are expecting our first child in December. Friends who already have children keep saying (rather ominously) that we should read the all books, watch all the films and visit all the places we want to now, because there will be very little time for all that in the years ahead.

Martin Luther defined sin as 'the heart closed in upon itself.' It is through others – and in a very particular way through the vulnerability and dependence of children – that we hear God's summons to grow beyond ourselves; beyond the prison of the solitary,

self-absorbed ego. It is through our fellow human beings, of all ages, that we learn the art of generous self-offering. The care and nurture of children is just one example. The New Testament indicates that, in this and other forms of self-offering, we find God to be both present in those for whom we care (Matthew 25.40) and in the bond of love between us.

It is at this point that Christian theology makes one of its most distinctive and audacious claims. For the doctrine of the Trinity says, not only that God loves, but that God is love (1 John 4.16). As Ken Leech writes:

That is the meaning of the symbol of the Trinity: that in God there is social life, community, sharing. To share in God is to share in that life. (True Prayer, p8)

It is interesting to note that the word 'charity' used to be almost indistinguishable from the word 'love'. If you look at 1 Corinthians 13 – St Paul's great hymn to love – in the King James' Version of the Bible, you will see that it reads

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not;
charity vaunteth not itself, [and] is not puffed up

Likewise, if you attend a Communion service which uses the Book of Common Prayer, you will hear an invitation addressed to

Ye who do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours...

In both of these texts, 'charity' is understood, not as something one group of people does to another, but as a relationship of mutual care and responsibility.

To talk of 'mutuality' is not to deny that relationships among humans have appropriate inequalities. The capacities and therefore the responsibilities of different people are obviously very different. The relationship between adults and children provides an obvious example: here an inequality in responsibility is inevitable, and indeed healthy. Nonetheless, the Bible is clear that there is a process of mutual learning and blessing in the relationship. Adults help children to grow into maturity, both physically and spiritually (Luke 2.52; 1 Corinthians 14.20). Children have a distinctive insight into the Kingdom of God, which adults need to be humble enough to receive (Matthew 11.25; Luke 18.16). Children are taught by adults and yet are also our teachers. That is the experience, not only of parents or of schools, but of the wider church as together we seek to be a place that helps children to grow and flourish.

This, of course, is how The Children's Society began: in mutual face-to-face relationships within the local parish. The Society's founder Edward Rudolf was confronted with the brutal effects of poverty on children through his service as a Sunday school teacher in south London. Rudolf's work was a natural extension of the

life of his church: of people, seeking to live 'in love and charity with their neighbours', responding to the grace and love poured out in Jesus Christ.

So what does this all mean today? How does this theological vision help us promote children's well-being?

Perhaps appropriately, I have a threefold answer.

- Firstly, it has implications for our economic order
- Secondly, it has implications our social welfare systems, and
- Thirdly, it has implications for the life of the local church

I will look at each of these in turn.

Children and the economic order

First, let us look at the economic order. This is a subject about which the Bible and the Christian tradition have a huge amount to say.

Decisions which are made about our economic order have a profound effect upon our common life; and in particular upon the flourishing of families and children. For Christianity – a religion of the word made flesh – these material questions have an undoubtedly spiritual dimension.

This is why the Scriptures mandates government to take action to address the inequalities in wealth and opportunity that arise in all societies. Throughout the Bible, and in the later practice of the churches, such action for the common good takes different forms – from the 'Jubilee Year' in Leviticus to the voluntary sharing of goods among Christians in the Acts of the Apostles.

Theology cannot tell us how to run our economy, but it has a great deal to say about the standards by which we might judge an economic system. The theologian Stephen Long gives us a set of questions Christianity should ask of any economic order:

Do our exchanges point us to our true source? ... Christian[s] ... cannot be faithful if they fail to ask and answer this question: How do our daily exchanges promote that charity which is a participation in the life of God?

How do our daily exchanges promote that charity which is a participation in the life of God – that mutual love which both mirrors and shares the life of the Trinity? The way we interact in the workplace and the marketplace must, for the Christian, be forming us more and more into human beings who can love. Our daily exchanges – in the shop and the factory, the call centre and the boardroom – shape who we are, for good or for ill. Economic systems which encourage us to objectify and instrumentalise each

other; systems which force parents to choose between having the time or the money to care for their children; systems which deny young people such as Kim and Martin the chance to participate to the full in their community – such systems are found wanting by this Christian standard.

But how can things be changed? What is the practical impact of this theological vision? The work churches have done to secure a Living Wage – winning respect from politicians of all stripes – is a very good example. Interestingly, many employers are now speaking of a business case for the Living Wage. Models of economics which treat workers simply as commodities – as costs to be minimised while their outputs are maximised – they are not only ethically deficient, they are practically false. What companies such as KPMG and Barclays Bank are now telling us is that their staff work better if their loyalty and goodwill are cultivated. People respond well to being treated as the human beings they actually are, a complex mix of virtue and vice, with loyalty and goodwill as well as selfishness and sloth.

There are a range of writers, on the right as well as the left of the political spectrum, who are developing these themes. In both cases, much of the freshest thinking is informed by theology, and in particular by the rich tradition of Catholic social thought. Theology is proving its worth, not as a matter of abstruse debates about angels and pinheads, but as a subject that casts important light on the nature and vocation of human beings. It can do this because it understands that we are first and foremost creatures, created by and for the God of love.

Children and the welfare system

It is not only the economic order that must be interrogated by theology. Stephen Long's question –how do our daily exchanges help or hinder the growth of true relationship? –that question can be asked of the welfare system as well as the economy. What kind of welfare system will help young people like Kim, Martin and Courtney to flourish; will take them and their families seriously as people with dignity, with gifts and responsibilities as well as needs?

In his essay in *The Heart of the Kingdom*, John Milbank argues that these questions pose a challenge for people across the political spectrum.

He warns that a focus on the State as the answer to all our economic and social ills

often means losing focus on interpersonal relationships, and losing focus on the notion that you treat recipients of charity as human beings. It is because the Christian vision keeps people's humanity central that we accord them the dignity of demanding something from them. The problem with the dominant alternatives to this vision is that they are devoid of this social concern and therefore deeply impersonal. We either get the pure market theorists who think welfare will trickle down in a perfect economy and it will all sort itself out, or else you get a left-wing version of the same impersonality.

Michael Young and his colleagues carried out detailed research on the impact of the welfare state on one part of the east end. Their findings – published as *The New East End: Family and Kinship in East London* – reinforce some of Milbank’s worries. They suggest that impersonal forms of welfare provision have gone undermined existing traditions of mutual support and responsibility within both the Cockney and the Bengali communities. One of the most important challenges, on left and right alike, is to develop a welfare system that encourages mutual responsibility – but does not use the rhetoric of mutuality as a cover for abandoning those in greatest need.

Debates about the future of welfare need to go beyond media stereotypes and personal prejudice. They need to be informed by the life and experience of those on the sharp end of an unjust economic order and a decidedly un-mutual welfare system. That’s what makes Tess Ridge’s research, and the Good Childhood Reports, such important contributions.

Throughout my ministry, I have had the good fortune to work in east London parishes involved in community organising. So I have seen the gap between the media caricatures and the reality of life in some of England’s poorest neighbourhoods. Through community organising, people in these churches have built alliances with neighbours of other faiths and none. What they want is not handouts and dependency, but dignity and power. They want a stake in their own future. I have seen young people taking a lead in CitySafe – a campaign for safer streets, and an end to gang violence. I have seen unemployed people taking a lead in organising Jobs Fayres and fighting for extra apprenticeships. I have seen cleaners and security staff, whose low pay had to be topped up by benefits, campaigning for a Living Wage which doesn’t require such handouts.

It is time that our poorest citizens – whatever their age – were heard for themselves, not stereotyped and spoken of by others. Already, through The Children’s Society and Citizens UK, churches are taking action to make this a reality. I hope this lecture has helped to explain the theology behind such action, and the reasons it remains one of the church’s central tasks.

Children and the local church

But there is one further area we must look at. And that is the church’s own practice. We cannot call for a culture that listens to children and young people, which listens to rather than talking about the poorest in society, if we are not living that out in our own congregations.

That’s why *The Heart of the Kingdom* ends with the story of an inner-city parish, and its day-to-day struggle to embody this vision. Adam Atkinson and Andy Walton describe life at St Peter’s Bethnal Green. This church has been involved in many of the community organising campaigns I described above, but is also trying to practice these values in its own life. The ethos has been very simple: a conviction that children

are not just tomorrow's church, or tomorrow's human beings. They are a vital part of our church and community today. Adam and Andy continue:

One of our most important decisions has been to appoint a youth and children's work leader. We did this despite tight resources – and with the help of a grant from the Churches and Communities Fund – because we want to practice what we preach! In the short time he has worked for the church, Bob has led our outreach with young people; helping them to feel part of the congregation, helping those on the margins feel they have a home in our church and visiting those who aren't comfortable in church at all... He is also helping us to audit every bit of our life, inside and outside the church's walls – our worship and governance, pastoral care and community engagement – so that more and more of what we do reflects the fact that children and young people are indeed a vital part of today's church. This has taken us in some surprising directions, and challenged some stereotypes. For example, we want to create an environment where children can express themselves, but also one in which they can be still and prayerful before God. We believe silence is a rich treasure for all ages – and that children are short-changed if we don't help them to experience it.

There are a number of features of this story which are worth highlighting. The first, of course, is resources: taking children and young people seriously involves looking at the way we spend time and money in church, as well as in the wider society. How seriously do we invest in the formation and care of children? How does this compare with spending on the needs and priorities of adults? The second is perspective: What would be the implications for each of our churches, and for the national church, of doing the kind of audit Bob is starting at St Peter's? The third is spirituality: We may have moved beyond thinking children should simply keep quiet for adults in church, but how often do we simply keep them contained or entertained? St Peter's' desire not to 'short-change' children has led to the patient cultivation of spiritual disciplines in church and home alike. To use John Milbank's phrase, this 'accords them the dignity of demanding something from them,' something which helps them to encounter God at a new depth.

As Adam and Andy are the first to say, St Peter's is only at the start of its journey. It has learnt a great deal from good practice in churches across the country. But these three aspects of its story – how resources are deployed, how the perspective of children and young people is voiced and engaged with, and how their spiritual lives are patiently and seriously nurtured – these provide an exciting and demanding agenda for every congregation.

Conclusion

So there it is: a surprising amount, it would seem, that theology has to say about the welfare of children. Indeed, I have only really scratched the surface of three specific areas – our economic order, welfare provision, and the life of the local church.

People sometimes talk of 'making theology relevant' or 'making theology accessible.' In reality, Christian theology begins as a deeply relevant, accessible subject. How could the maker of all things – the One in whom we find both the meaning of our lives, and the grace to live them well – how could God be anything but relevant? And as for accessible – well, we have heard Jesus' own words that it is not to the wise and learned, not to the rich and powerful that God has made himself known, but to little children. The real question to ask is not how we can make theology relevant to children and their wellbeing, but how we got ourselves into a state where it seemed remote. What wrong turnings have we taken – why has theology become something that seems so detached from our day-to-day lives, from the lived experience of Christian discipleship? The good news is that, whatever wrong turnings we have taken, the God we meet in Jesus Christ does not need to be 'made relevant' to the welfare of children, by me or you or anyone else. He invites us to serve him in, and learn more of him through, their lives, and in their welfare to find our own.