What is childhood?

Philosophical, cultural and biblical-theological perspectives

ENGLISH

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What is a child? Is there something specific that is unique to children? What is it that makes a child a child, and what distinguishes children from adults? There are many different and disparate concepts of what constitutes 'a child', ranging from aspects of not fully developed capacities to act, to an imaginary state of divine innocence, and complex considerations around adults' rights to make decisions for children. All these ideas profoundly impact how we treat and engage with children, what institutions societies create for them, and how we perceive and practice family structures. If we unpick these layers we can reveal a more detailed picture. A picture that contains contradictions: We are fascinated by children, yet we do not want to be treated as children. This tells us that 'child' is an idea largely conceived by adults, and that childhood is the object of everyday, pedagogical, educational, political and scientific discourses between adults. Thus the child is understood to be the recipient of pedagogical concepts rather than an autonomous subject with its own history and dignity that gives adults the impetus to reflect on their lived experiences and question their views and practices.

Over the last decades, the phenomenon of childhood has emerged as an increasingly relevant discussion point beyond interdisciplinary discourses in the field of childhood studies. Even though children experience widely heterogenous realities, they appear to share one commonality: childhood is a singular status that differentiates them from adulthood. This status necessitates questions around care and education, protection and discipline, and agency and paternalism. Power structures of domination and subjectivation in particular require critical analysis. Historical childhood

studies show that the history of childhood also tells the history of generational dominance, which is often characterised by assimilation, control and moulding the next generation in the image and utopian ideas of the adult generation. Childhood thus can be understood as a political and moral project with strong (including religiously legitimised) concepts of protections around access to the so-called 'under-age' generation. The notion of the child is further defined by a one-sided approach to socialisation: The demand to learn is always on children.

The New Testament offers us an alternative perspective on childhood. It allows for the physiological as well as symbolic voicelessness of children (etymologically, the term 'child' or *infans* relates to the inability to speak) to become a representation of the kingdom of God. Indeed, the gospel explicitly warns against the tendency of adults to dismiss the fact we are born into life as children: "And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'" (Matthew 18:2-3)

From a childhood-oriented theological perspective, in particular, it is imperative to investigate forms of mutual socialisation processes for and within church(es), religious communities and society at large, and to theologically explore such resonant relationships of reciprocal acknowledgement: How can the significance that Jesus bestows upon children for the kingdom of God to come be realised? And how can the role children play for and in God's kingdom be understood more clearly, beyond all images of transfiguration? Answering these questions also requires addressing the precarity and vulnerability of children that has become tragically evident through revelations of abuse within the church and society in recent years. Thus, the aim is to find new ways of facilitating intergenerational interactions within religious contexts that are free of paternalistic, abusive and one-sided structures of religious education.

These questions require a multifaceted re-consideration of the social position of children within societies and religions. Of particular interest in this discussion are the following topics:

- What images and definitions of the child are necessary to establish in line with the times, and what legitimises and justifies these structures?
- How can childhood be approached from sociological, (developmental) psychological, historical, theological, educational and

pedagogical perspectives without undialectically dissolving tensions between autonomy and learning, between freedom and dependence, between new and old?

- Which noticeable transformations in the history of ideas in the field of childhood research currently deserve more attention?
- Which resources do the Bible and theology offer to critically analyse pressing questions of childhood studies?
- Does childhood actually have a particular value? How can theology more clearly define this value and make it more tangible? In what way are the particular values of childhood relevant for different social contexts?
- What do children think a successful life is and how do they develop their own views in different social and cultural contexts? What are the questions, ideas, fears and hopes children have – how can we capture them empirically and how can we integrate them into intergenerational discourses?
- How can we theologically respect 'theologies with / in consideration of / from children' in their own autonomous right and how can we create space in church(es), religious communities and within theology for open theological discussions with children that do not follow structures of one-sided socialisation?
- What are the normativity concepts that govern ideas of a 'developed religiosity' in religious-pedagogical, developmental-psychological and theological discourses? What are these based on?
- How can we understand and treat children as subjects rather than vehicles to secure the next generation (as evident in the often cited saying 'children are the future of the church')? What are the implications of this change in perspective for theological, pedagogical, church and religious-pedagogical practices?

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