Editorial

What is childhood?
Philosophical, cultural and theological perspectives

ENGLISH

‘Childhood’ is not a pertinent question of theology – at least at first glance. Looking closer, however, the term ‘child’ appears in many theological texts and contexts, particularly with regard to what it means to be a child and the concept of ‘children of God’. While these references are often used in a metaphorical rather than investigative sense, this issue of LIMINA – Theological perspectives from Graz specifically seeks to extract and extrapolate aspects of childhood(s) and child-being that may inspire as well as irritate theological thought and research.

One things that is clear, is that childhood is a particular status different from adulthood. This status necessitates questions around care and education, protection and discipline, as well as agency and paternalism. Images and ideas ascribed to and defining childhood range from that of ‘not yet fully developed’ humans to the romantic idealism of purism and innocence – all of which are intricately enmeshed with strong normative implications. By drawing on childhood-oriented research and insights from the fields of sociology, philosophy, history, pedagogy and education, and (developmental) psychology, we can render these problematic interferences visible within theology and examine the sentimental naiveté of underlying assumptions and beliefs.

Power and authority play a central role in these phenomena and therefore deserve particular attention. Historical childhood studies suggest that the history of childhood also tells the history of generational hegemony – a hegemony that often manifests itself in assimilation, control and the moulding of the next generation according to the ideas and future ideals of adults. Thus, childhood can be understood as a political and moral project

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rooted in far-reaching (including religiously legitimised) rights to govern the so-called 'under-age' generation. The notion of the child is further delineated by a one-sided approach to socialisation and education. We have to ask (us), whether these concepts still hold normative validity and legitimacy today. At the same time, the idealising 'apotheosis of the child' in both secular and religious discourses is loaded with aporias that also affect social relationships.

The desideratum of a childhood-oriented theology is to understand childhood not only as an early phase of life, but rather as a relational space that is essentially shaped in the interplay of recognition, power and subjectification. In this context, reciprocal processes of socialisation are not linear, they emerge in asymmetric interactions in which social, religious and pedagogical ideas of humanity can be constituted as well as investigated. Especially in light of abuse scandals, the category of closeness no longer holds positive connotations by default. Instead, its ambivalence between providing fertile ground for learning and holding potential for violence has come to the conscious fore. The experience of being a child paradigmatically exemplifies the precariousness of human existence – it reveals an unavoidable vulnerability that we need to recognise and protect. Thus, childhood becomes a pertinent question for a theology that wants to face the tensions between power and responsivity, between protection and freedom, a theology that acknowledges children as active agents in shaping the world, not passive recipients.

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.

Issue 8 (2025) 1 of LIMINA – Theological perspectives from Graz sets out to bring childhood into theological focus. It compiles and provides a plethora of relevant perspectives, questions and approaches on the subject of childhood from various disciplines that each enrich theological thought on the matter.

The articles present varied views that – in combination – reveal common threads within the broader picture. They highlight the particular vulnerability of children, but also shine a critical light on the idealistic, glorified images and discussions on childhood. What becomes evident is that childhood is not merely a biological category, it is a social construct. This opens

up – as well as demands – the necessity to examine the frames of reference and defining principles within which the child 'appears'. The various contributions and analyses demonstrate the importance of child autonomy. Undialectical positions are insufficient in addressing this need. Rather, it is adults, parents and governments as constitutive institutions that shape and create conditions of 'coming into the world'. The role of adults in prioritising child welfare, addressing issues of autonomy and wellbeing in a digital culture, and imparting religious education in increasingly pluralistic family constellations thus becomes a central and complex question.

The first article in this issue offers a first analysis and frame of reference for what shapes childhood(s) today. *Johanna Mierendorff* and *Marie-Christin Linde* evaluate theoretical frameworks for investigating the phenomenon of childhood. They show how different perspectives guide particular interpretive models of childhood, identify central characteristics that govern current viewpoints and highlight dynamics that influence current transformations in childhood experiences: the mutual interplay between family and everyday life, the increased pressures of education, as well as the far-reaching consequences of the digital world on children's worlds.
Following on, the second article also looks at particular notions of the child and their implications. *David Novakovits* offers a theological re-reading of influential religious images of the child. Using Ockham's thesis that children play an essential role in messianic redemption as a starting point, he critically examines established concepts of the child (the innocent child and the competent child) and demonstrates that these ideas risk misunderstanding and misattributing the 'redemptive potential' of children. The results of Novakovits' critical analysis form the basis for a new perspective on how theology can honour children's potential for renewal, while also reflecting on the implications of this new approach.
The next article equally seeks to define what characterises the particular category of children and introduces a change in perspective: *Gottfried Schweiger* looks at the ethical and legal status of children through a socio-philosophical lens. At the heart of his investigation is the tension between the vulnerability of children – necessitating protection and a heightened dependency on parental care – and their capability for autonomy. Schweiger impresses on us the complex challenges that arise in the provi-

sion of child welfare within this context. He also demonstrates that both the guarantee of children's rights as well their limitation can be ethically legitimised if responsibly balanced between protection and self-determination. The article further illustrates that philosophical reflections – particularly in view of justice and equity – offer valuable guidance in broadening the political scope to include children's participation in society alongside their protection in their normative responsibilities.

Johannes Drerup offers a categorisation and evaluation of figures of thought and (anti-pedagogical) objectives that demand the 'liberation of children' from the norms of an adult-dominated world. He traces the historical roots of movements that proclaim the need for liberating children from traditional pedagogical and social power structures to current approaches that seek the same. As an example, he investigates the concept of 'childism', which sees children as a socially oppressed and marginalised group. The analysis concludes that this approach does not sufficiently address the challenges of parenting, education and the protection of children, and that childism's radical demands tend towards the utopian and are often theoretically vague. This underlines the pertinence of a theoretically grounded and ethically informed discourse on questions of childhood.

Anna Lazzarini develops a philosophical approach for the subject of childhood inspired by the works of Walter Benjamin. She reconstructs an outline of Benjamin's views on childhood and reveals how his writing, in particular *Berlin Childhood around 1900* offers a new interpretation of history and a new perception of time through the eyes of children, thus illustrating the transformative power of childhood. Childhood embodies a time of possibility and awakening that has the potential to change the world and open up new perspectives.

Martin Eleven demonstrates the importance of not idealising childhood by correlating Melanie Klein's psychoanalytical theories with Augustine's teachings on original sin. Both authors describe the destructive potential of people as their *conditio humana* and determine that envy is a central element in the human condition. In the combined analysis of both approaches emerges a healing potential of childhood by specifically and consciously not ignoring the destructive capacity of children.

Christian Feichtinger examines childhood in a culture of digitisation. In particular, he highlights the impact of digital media, smart phones and apps

on mental and physical health, as well as child and teen development. Feichtinger asks whether Jonathan Haidt's prediction that these technologies create an 'Anxious Generation' is indeed true or an exaggeration. He presents different studies and perspectives to weigh up both negative and positive effects of digital media and conducts an ethical-pedagogical reflection that addresses the intersection of autonomy, harm avoidance and care.

The final article responds to questions of raising children in a (religious) pluralistic world given that ever more children grow up in religiously plural families or bi-religious family constellations. The research was undertaken by an interreligious and inter-denominational team of authors: *Katharina Gaida*, *Agnes Gmoser* and *Mevlida Mešanović*. Together, they investigate the possibilities and challenges of interreligious or religiously open forms of parenting. In interviews with parents who are open to pluralistic approaches in raising their children, they extract motivations and objectives that underpin such upbringings. They then offer definitions of the concepts of interreligious and religiously open parenting. Incorporating insights from developmental psychology, the article highlights implications for the raising of children, discusses possible effects on children and outlines prerequisites for parents. The aim of this contribution is to offer a theoretical perspective on alternative forms of religious parenting and inspire further research and considerations.

We hope you find the articles in this issue on childhood to be interesting and engaging, and that LIMINA – Theological perspectives from Graz can be an enriching resource for you.

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