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The Given Child

The Religions' Contribution to
Children's Citizenship

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I Introduction

The Other Child as Gift?

A Historical Challenge for Religions in Late Modernity

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I. A Paradigmatic Challenge for Religions

From a moral point of view global society owes full cultural and social citizenship to all its children. We think this is evident and obvious, but at the same time: Empirically we know it is not. Many children still lack cultural and social citizenship, they are not included in the basic standards of universal human rights. This is both a moral and political scandal. Still, the question is: How to improve the situation?

The global struggle for universal human rights is often a struggle with religions. Even if world religions recognize universal human rights and give important contributions to the development of citizenship for the less included, religions also have their problems: Human rights are universal and secular, religions often argue from a particularistic and explicit religious point of view.

Still, universalism is no longer the dominating paradigm in late modernity, similarly in the field of children's rights and citizenship (among many titles, see: Kymlicka: 1995, Aleinikoff/Klusmeyer: 2001, Castles/Davidson: 2000, Korsgaard: 2004). No one doubts the political and moral importance of universal human rights. But the question today is: How to achieve such rights for everyone, including children?

This is one important discussion in the international citizenship dialogue. There is a growing interest in the contributions to including citizenship and human rights from particularistic traditions and practices. But this is not a very simple and easy road to follow. It is true that late modernity has seen a growing critique of the abstract, Kantian rights of high modernity. Whatever the authors are, communitarians, phenomenologists, deconstructivists, religious or any kind of combination of them all, they do not look at traditional religion with much enthusiasm. So there is no easy way to follow for world religions.

It is true that the universal and secular human rights movement are experiencing a theoretical and empirical challenge in these years. But this does not mean that there is once again space for traditional religions. They are also challenged with the rising of new paradigms. If religions are to be able to contribute and take different kinds of fruitful initiatives in the struggle for excluded children worldwide, they also have to change and adapt to the new discussions.

We think religions should be a place to take care of the otherness and difference of children. The human rights movement today is under heavy critique, due to this movement's lack of awareness of otherness and difference. But there is also often the impression that much of the same critique could be raised towards parts of the traditional religious discourses and practices as well. The challenge could be summarized in one word: gift. Some religions tend to talk about children as gifts of God. Due to influences from Marcel Mauss (2002), Jacques Derrida (1992) and Jean-Luc Marion (2002), the gift discussion has also entered the more general discussion.

However, in the context of children's rights and citizenship we still think the gift discourse should be developed a little further. Religious tendencies to talk about the child as gift are both wise and beautiful. But it is neither critical nor focused enough to address the most evident challenge: Many children lack human rights and are not fully recognized as citizens, both in Western and in non-Western societies. So the question is: Can religions make any contribution to this current complicated situation? We think there is a need for a paradigm shift, which can be expressed in one sentence. Religions should change from talking about the child as gift to a new discourse on the other child as gift. The challenge for everyone, both religions and human rights movements, is to develop both an awareness and a practice for the otherness of children. It is part of a global obligation to do this, but this book addresses first of all the responsibilities of religions.

This is the important context, which has to be designed, for the initiation of a new and late modern discussion regarding the religious contributions to children's citizenship.

The question is, then, can we expect contributions from religions to an improvement of children's rights and citizenship worldwide? The tendency in this book is interesting: All the authors agree. The answer is yes, religions still have important contributions to make. This is the first, unanimous tendency in this book. But there is one more, parallel answer, which is as important. Religions can contribute only if they focus on situated, social practice and take special notice of the intersubjective relations in their own practice. Religions do not contribute positively to children's rights if they continue to claim abstract principles regarding children.

2. Perspectives from Four Continents

The book is divided into four sections, addressing the question of religion's possible contribution to children's otherness and possible citizenship in late modern societies from different perspectives.

The introductory part of the book draws the general picture and connects it to the global struggle for children rights. *Irene Rizzini* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), the president of the global organization Childwatch International and her colleague, *Udi Mandel Butler*, take us into the shift from legal rights to participation. Being both an internationally acknowledged scholar and the leader of an important organization for children rights, Rizzini grapples with the paradigmatic shift mentioned above. The importance of children's rights is not reduced, but the shift has to do with how one realizes such rights. Legal rights have had their day, now the time has come to understand what children's participation and social practice mean. Social practice and involvement have innate values and must be analyzed in more detail. What kinds of social practice developing in religions have the potential to contribute to an increase in children's citizenship?

In the second section of the book, *Reports from the world religions*, three researchers comment on the situation in three world religions, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Even if these are different and competing religions, the authors have a surprisingly common interpretation when it comes to the challenges these religions meet in the context of children's right and dignity.

Marcia J. Bunge (Indiana, US) looks into some of the important narratives on children in Christianity. This is a tradition dominating the discourse regarding children and young people in the Western world, even today. But these narratives have to be read critically. It is false to stick to the one-sided interpretation of children as either victims, gifts, autonomous or whatever. Bunge opens up for a new Christian narrative on children, a narrative where one both learns from children and teaches them at the same time. Developing an interesting reflection on the Lutheran discussion of vocation, Marcia J. Bunge challenges Christianity to understand that the children who call us are diverse, complex and intersubjective living persons.

Alfons H. Teipen (Furman, US) opens an important discussion on children in Islam. Traditionally the Islamic approach to children tends to be thought of as a rather patriarchal attitude. Children have to obey their parents and are not expected to develop any kind of independent position in either family or society. Teipen admits that this more "conservative" interpretation of Islam undoubtedly exists and plays an important role in current Islamic thought and practice as well. Even more interesting, then, is the existence of the more liberal and "modern" Islamic interpretation of children.

Usha S. Nayar (Mumbai, India) introduces an Indian-Hindu discussion of the impact of spirituality on childhood. Being a social psychologist, Nayar

also goes into the impact of modernity on traditional Indian-Hindu traditions and values. So not even Hindu traditions can ignore the influence of late modern discourses. Therefore Hindu-Indian traditions will also have to take the context of late modernity into consideration when it interprets and practices what it means to stimulate children's participation. Participation is also a key concept in the Indian-Hindu context.

All in all, there are interesting common tendencies in all the three reports from the world religions. A book like this is not intended to give detailed and lengthy presentations of different aspects of the world religions. The important perspective in this book is that all three authors seem to find parallel approaches to the development of citizenship. All three presentations point to tendencies within their own religions, which re-introduce religions as contributors to the development of children's citizenship. The condition is, however, that religions develop potentialities within their own traditions. Religions are ambiguous and it is no longer religion in itself, which contributes to the recognition of children. To contribute religions have to focus on the potential within their own tradition, that is, potential aiming at the increase of participation, complexity and intersubjectivity. The ways these traditions care will be very different in the specific religions. But the important tendency is obvious. The new discussion of citizenship seems to come close to ongoing discussions in the world religions. Spirituality and religions can contribute to children's citizenship, but this requires the development of certain traditions and certain practices on the one hand and the decrease of other traditions and practices on the other hand.

The third section of the book discusses this tendency in more detail with cases from different traditions within Christianity. The four authors come from three continents and evidently belong to different confessions within Christianity. Still, they all share the same passion for situated participation as a key factor in the development of children's citizenship. The important contribution of religions is to create life worlds, situations, practices where the experience of participation, belonging and relationality is substantially present.

Annemie Dillen (Leuven, Belgium) recognizes the development towards the increase and expansion of children's rights. In this way children are given positions as citizens in a society even if they do not have the right to vote. The problem, however, is that the concrete child and the specific relations they live in, fall out of this general perspective. For Dillen this lack of concrete relationality in childhood studies remains a critical question. Coming from an explicitly Catholic position, she therefore suggests that religion should take the responsibility to develop practices of concrete relationalities. In this way the Catholic religion still has a contribution to make to children's rights and citizenship.

John Wall (New Jersey, US) opens a discussion parallel to Dillen's, but this time more from the point of view of ethics and philosophy. The children rights movement took the Kantian and Enlightenment position as its point of departure. By this it opened the way to modernity and its strong impact on the position of children in contemporary society. But the challenge still remains: There are millions of children who do not participate in the rights which they morally deserve. Wall's way out of this dilemma is to turn to postmodern ethics and philosophy. Here there is a more generous recognition of otherness and difference. It is no longer such, that a child has to be one of us to receive full citizenship and the moral demand to be a subject in society. For Wall postmodernity addresses otherness in a fruitful and promising way. It is in this discourse he hopes to introduce in the language of Christian religion. In Christianity the demand coming from the other child must be met by a theology of incarnation and love.

The Mexican researchers *Yolanda Corona* and *Carlos Perez* (Mexico City, Mexico) bring us into an ethnographic case of how religions contribute to children's participation and belonging as "citizens". Indigenous people in certain parts of Mexico have struggled for years to receive their legal rights. Important traits in this struggle are the close interrelationship between cultural and social belonging on the one hand, and the social impact of religious ceremonies on the other hand. Corona/Perez leave no doubt that children's participation in religious rituals makes a substantial contribution to a stronger child belonging in society. Religion is in no way only a private matter in this material. The ethnography of Corona/Perez shows a religion with impact for the construction of society. Participation is a key to the increase of "belonging" for young people.

Marta Maria Espeseth (Oslo, Norway) presents an analysis of her experience as a teacher with responsibility for multi-handicapped, autistic children. Taking her point of departure in some moving narratives where specific children relate to their way of expressing emotions and relationality to the external world, Espeseth then uses these narratives to develop a phenomenological interpretation. Using especially the phenomenological discourse of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Espeseth shows that an interpretation based on embodied intersubjectivity opens up for an alternative, far more "positive" understanding of the subjectivity of the autistic child. If one only approaches the child's seemingly lack of language and communication, one tends to look at the child as an object. Taking notice of the sense-based intersubjectivity already between the child and her teacher gives a totally other picture. On this background, Espeseth advises religions to take analysis like her own more into consideration. The introduction of phenomenology into religion will contribute to the recognition of children who often lack any kind of recognition or sense of belonging.

In the fourth and concluding section of the book three researchers discuss the impact of Christianity in a more explicitly theological way. Within the context of this book, the intention behind this part is to get a little further into the theologies required for the development of citizenship. The analysis so far has shown a potential (section two) for world religions to contribute to citizenship and a potential within the new ethical wave of intersubjectivity and participation to be introduced in the discourses of religion. In the last section of the book theologians discuss different theological perspectives to be taken into consideration if religions, and especially the Christian religion, are to be able to contribute to children's citizenship.

Jone Salomonsen (Oslo, Norway) presents an analysis of the Norwegian Lutheran ritual of confirmation. In the pietistic tradition of Norway, both theologians and lay people often give a very negative account of the family parties connected to the religious confirmation rite. Salomonsen, however, gives an alternative interpretation. The social side of confirmation is not something outside the religious; it is an important part of religion. The dualistic interpretation, the "real" inner experience on the one hand, and the external family party on the other hand must be reconnected. It is in this interrelatedness of inside and outside that the experience of belonging is born. Religions that contribute to this anti-dualistic interpretation of life develop spirituality. This is an interpretation which leads to a reflection where religion convincingly contributes to the belonging part of citizenship.

Trygve Wyller (Oslo, Norway) comments the position of the French theologian Jean Vanier and his explicitly religious discourse on the child as gift. Vanier has developed a practice with a global response. In many parts of the world there are L'Arche communities where multi-handicapped children and grown-ups live together with persons with no visual handicaps. In this context Vanier talk about the child as a gift. In his article Wyller refers to the current philosophical discussion on gift and givenness. Taking phenomenology as the basis he concludes that a better way of developing the gift discourse would be to say that children do not owe us anything at all. This lack of indebtedness might be a better way to express the otherness of the child. It is this otherness that religions have to address if they really want to contribute to children's citizenship and rights.

John M. Hull (Birmingham, England) takes up a final discussion of what it could mean, positively, to name the child as gift. From a Christian, theological point of view, this has to be connected to Creation. A gift participates in the created world. So the only way to talk convincingly about the gift in the context of Christian religion is to use the language of creation. Everyone participates in creation. So therefore everyone is given. The final question of Hull is, therefore: How are we to give if the child is given? We think this is the question where the other child remains our common demand. We have to

give in such a way that the other child is seen as given, comes into the religious focus. Then, we think, religions impact on children's citizenship can be reflected and approved.

3. Acknowledgments

Besides the different perspectives and efforts trying to address a new relationship between religions and the movements for children's citizenship, participation and rights, there is one more interesting tendency in this book: The contributors come from four continents. This is an interesting tendency showing that the discussion about otherness, participation and children is no longer a local one or a discussion restricted to some parts of the world. The paradigmatic discussion in this field is global and must be so. The cases, narratives and empirical studies must, of course, be local and concrete. But the option for the other child is more than local.

The authors of this book all participated in a session focusing on spirituality and children in a huge Childhood conference, which took place in the summer of 2005 at the University of Oslo, Norway. 2005 was the centennial for the Norwegian nation's independence from Sweden. To celebrate and to reflect an organizing committee at the University of Oslo and the NGO Childwatch International hosted the Childhoods 2005 conference. Thousands of people gathered in Oslo for a few nice summer days.

One of the sessions concentrated on spirituality and religions in the context of children's rights. It seemed to have been a stimulating experience for most of the session's participants, to have been in a context where researchers from all different countries and traditions seemed to concentrate on one thing: How to develop a religious language where the otherness of the child is respected and given dignity? So the idea came up to make a book out of the session. But there is always a long road to walk from the session to the book.

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